

A Wilderness of Torment, or Sanctuary in the Wilderness?

Matthew 4: 1-11

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Wilderness. A wild place. A place humans have not domesticated or civilized. A place humans have not brought under control. Wilderness, the haunt of Satan.

For people who believe Satan is a disembodied spiritual being, a nasty, malevolent, evil spiritual being, wilderness is Satan's home turf. Wilderness is wild, out of control, and Satan himself is obsessed with being wild, out of control. To revisit Tom Waits from a few weeks ago, Satan hates to be down in the hole or on a leash. Satan wants to be off the leash. Set loose without constraint. Deregulated. Lawless. And in the wild places, the out of control places, that's exactly what Satan is, wild and out of control.

At the very same time that Satan is obsessed with remaining out of control, Satan is obsessed with being in control of people's lives. Satan seeks to possess, manipulate and control people. Sometimes Satan possess people by taking over their bodies. Sometimes Satan controls people through political and economic oppression. Sometimes Satan manipulates people by tempting them and seducing them.

Again, wilderness, wild places, are the ideal places for Satan to possess, control and manipulate people. The wild places, the places where humans have no control, are the places humans are most vulnerable. In the wild places, Satan, out of the hole, off the leash, is free to torment people without mercy.

For those of us who don't literally believe in Satan as a disembodied malevolent spirit, the mythical figure of Satan is nevertheless instructive. The mythical figure of Satan represents nasty and malevolent power seeking to deregulate itself, to unleash itself without constraint, to possess, control and manipulate other people, to torment the vulnerable. Yes, the mythical figure of Satan is instructive. We can see this type of malevolent power at work today in our own nation.

Wilderness may be Satan's haunt, but let's not forget that wilderness is also a place where God's prophets go for sanctuary. When malevolent authorities—those who possess, control and manipulate people—try to capture God's prophets to bring them under control or kill them, the prophets slip off into wilderness. Sometimes in the midst of great stress and anxiety, God's prophets retreat to wilderness to clear the official propaganda from their minds, to rest their bodies, to allow their souls to recuperate, to discern their next move.

God's prophets disappear into wilderness precisely because wild places are out of control. The king does not control the wilderness. The police and the army do not control the wilderness. The mighty Empire, which controls all the cities and towns, does not control the wilderness. The wilderness is where the prophet goes for sanctuary from the oppressive political, economic and religious forces that permeate human civilization, from those who seek unchecked power, from those who torment the vulnerable.

So, depending on the situation, wilderness can either be a place where people suffer torment, or a place where people find sanctuary from torment.

I think we can see by now that wilderness is not only a geographical space, more profoundly, wilderness is an existential space. People *experience* wilderness. Even in the midst of civilization, in a thriving city like Austin, Texas, people experience wilderness in their

personal lives. Sometimes as hostility directed against them. Sometimes as sanctuary provided to them.

If people suddenly find they have little or no control over what's happening around them and to them, they can experience themselves in wilderness where they are highly vulnerable. Where they are exposed to hostile forces, forces out to get them, forces tormenting their lives without mercy.

Will those in control suddenly show up and take me away? Will those in control take away my mother, my father, my son, my daughter? Will we lose everything we have here? Will we survive?

This is wilderness of torment. People in Austin are living this wilderness of torment right now. I'm talking of course about the people who fear that ICE will show up at their door, or at work, or pull them over while driving, or grab them while getting off the bus, or walking down the street, or going to school, or leaving church, or shopping, or reporting a crime, or hanging out with friends, or sleeping in their bed. This is wilderness of torment.

A question for us to ask ourselves is this: is it possible for us to help transform this wilderness of torment into a sanctuary in the wilderness?

For people tormented by the fear that those in control are committed to removing them from the world they know, is it possible for us to help provide sanctuary from that torment? Sanctuary that helps protect them from the oppressive forces unleashed against them? Sanctuary where they can clear their heads, rest their bodies and souls, and discern their next move? Sanctuary that the king, the police, the army, and ICE do not control?

"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carrying a heavy burden," Jesus said. Come to me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. Come to me, and you will find rest for your souls.

In this passage from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus offers himself as a sanctuary to others in need. Offers himself, *personally*. Come to me.

It is also made clear in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus intends those who follow him, those who live according to his *Way*, to provide sanctuary to those in need.

I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me water. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was a prisoner and you visited me. Jesus himself identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the prisoner. The tormented. And Jesus tells those who have adopted his way of life that when they care for the least, when they provide sanctuary to the tormented, they provide sanctuary to him.

As David reminded us this morning with the poem, *The New Colossus*, this Christ-like sentiment of opening our hearts, our minds, our hands and our doors to the outsider seeped into our national consciousness and heritage. Many like to see the United States of America as a sanctuary for the poor, the tired, the refugee, the exiled, the immigrant, the people seeking to better their lives, and even more so, the lives of their children.

But not everybody in the United States of America sees our nation this way. Some want to close the doors and close their hands, which I fear reflects a closing of hearts and minds. We get Executive Orders to ban refugees who have fled for their lives. To build a giant wall to keep poor people out, many of them Central American children fleeing for their lives. To raid cities, capture undocumented immigrants, and kick them out of the country as quickly as possible.

These Executive Orders are driving people into a wilderness of torment.

Again, the question for us is this: can we help transform this wilderness of torment into a sanctuary in the wilderness? Can we help create a place where vulnerable people are protected from hostile forces? A safe place where people can rest, regroup, and decide what to do next? A

place where they feel welcome and supported.

The answer is yes, we can.

Bill Beardall has told us how we can help create such a sanctuary right here in Austin by working with the Texas Here To Stay coalition. After worship, we're going to learn what we can do from the Austin Sanctuary Network.

The answer is yes, we can help turn the wilderness of torment into a sanctuary in the wilderness. There are things we can do to support and protect undocumented immigrants. I pray that God will move us to do what we can. And to quote John Pavlovitz again, I pray that we will be "the compassion and the goodness and the love that we so need" at this time to heal our nation.