

Today is Palm Sunday. It is the day commemorating Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, historically the most sacred time of year for Christians. We begin this Holy Week with the shouts of "Hosanna" and end with the shouts of "Crucify Him" that lead us to dead silence, waiting for the jubilant shouts of "Hallelujah" for the new beginning on Easter Sunday. On this beginning day of Holy Week, we have wilderness time as a time of new beginnings.

Wilderness times are temporary. They are not permanent. Wilderness time always comes to an end and is always followed by a new beginning. The good news of our Christian faith is that the wilderness is never the final destination, and hope is alive even in that desolate territory.

Wilderness times generally mark the end of one phase and the beginning of a new phase of our lives. Jesus' lonely and challenging time of testing in the Judean wilderness gave way to a new beginning—the beginning of His public ministry. It prepared Him to enter Jerusalem humbly to begin His passion journey to the Cross. The time Jesus spent in the wilderness strengthened Him to endure the shouts of "Hosanna" on Palm Sunday that were changed to the shouts of "Crucify Him!" within a week. These many phases of wilderness always end on Easter for all followers of Jesus Christ to begin a new life in Christ.

New beginnings stand at the heart of the gospel message of Jesus Christ. No matter who we are or what we've done, no matter if the wilderness is of our own making, God is present in the wilderness with us and can lead us through it and out of it. When we find ourselves in the wilderness of sin, guilt, and separation from God and from others, there is a way out of the wilderness and a new beginning. God provides that way in Christ.

The Apostle Paul was an expert in new beginnings. He knew well the spiritual territory we call "the wilderness" because he spent a great deal of time there! Paul also knew the power of being made new and set free from the wilderness of a broken relationship with God and with others.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that no matter who we are or what we have done, there is always another chance for a new beginning. "In Christ," Paul wrote, "we are new creations: 'Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!'" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Jesus told the story of a man who had two sons. One day the younger of the two went to his father and, in so many words, said, "I wish you were dead." He asked for his inheritance—not appropriate since his father was very much alive! The father gave his younger son his share of the inheritance, and the son ran away to a distant country, where he squandered it all. All that money his father had worked hard to earn and set aside for his son was just thrown away, satisfying the son's every whim, desire and trying to buy friends. It was awful!

It didn't take him long to blow his inheritance, and he found himself homeless and hungry. This young boy found himself doing the unthinkable. He wound up feeding pigs and was so hungry he even wanted to eat the pig slop. He was in the wilderness! When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!" (Luke 15:17 NIV). So, he decided to go home and beg his father for forgiveness. As he approached the familiar place that once had been his home, his father saw him. His father was so overjoyed and excited that he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.

Jesus taught us with this story that God is like that loving father. If we are in the wilderness, feeling separated from God—and perhaps we even ran into that wilderness ourselves—it may be difficult to believe, but God is like that father in the story and will run to meet us and welcome us home with open arms, ready to give us a new beginning.

Ultimately, the wilderness never has the last word! But, what about the greatest wilderness? What about death? The good news of our faith is that even the wilderness of death comes to pass. In Christ, Paul observed, "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54). The good news of our faith is that even out of the wilderness of suffering and death, and even out of the wilderness of the death of someone we love, there is a new beginning. Death is swallowed up in victory through Jesus Christ. Death never has the final word.

When Jesus was on the Cross, He was in the darkest wilderness of His life. Jesus was nailed to that Cross to die as a criminal, yet with no sin. As Jesus hung there,

the life draining from Him, He experienced the rejection, the anguish, and the loneliness of the darkest wilderness. Jesus cried out, quoting Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But, we know that the Cross was not the end. We, who will walk the wilderness way with Christ through this Holy Week of services, know what we celebrate next Sunday. We know that death will never have the final word. We know that the wilderness "comes to pass." Amen.