

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Isaiah 43:19

*“I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.”*

On Thursday morning the first group of workcampers met to embark on a mission of service. After fueling-up with coffee and pastries for the body; and devotions for the soul, we left for our various destinations. A group of us of about ten to twelve people, drove to a place called Children in Need.

Our project for that morning was to sort through, fold and bag clothing, which later would be hung on racks, and I imagine laid on shelves, sort of like you would find in a store like Walmart or Target. The clothing was free for Washington County school age children in need, meeting certain criteria. As I walked through the halls to get to where we would be working, I noticed other items like shoes, books, bookbags, school supplies and health supplies. As we sorted through the clothing, I realized that they also accepted clothing for women, men, and babies.

When we arrived at the warehouse room where we would be sorting the clothes, we found ourselves standing before a mountain of bags of clothing, piled deep and wide. This unbelievable mountain of clothing was the source of our work. It was our wilderness to work through and sort through so others could be blessed with what they need. By noon time the person supervising us was amazed with how much we accomplished. Indeed, we did make a huge dent in the pile, but a huge mountain of bags of clothing remained. We wondered if the pile of clothes ever fully disappears.

The project was a wilderness experience for us as workcampers, but not nearly as difficult a wilderness venture as it is for those who will eventually benefit from our efforts to sort through nice clothes and nasty clothes people donated to the warehouse. I can only imagine that those who visit this place to get what they need find it a challenge to make ends meet so as to pay their bills and put food on their table. These families live with great anxiety and suffering

The wilderness for some of the children may be intensified because they come from broken families, live in less than desirable housing conditions or are even homeless, or maybe they live in fear because of abuse, or are neglected because their parents are addicted to alcohol or drugs; and so, maintaining their addictions take precedence over everything and anyone else.

The wilderness is not a fun place to be. The bible is plentiful with descriptions and stories of wilderness experiences. The wilderness in the Hebrew scriptures—the Old Testament—is a barren, arid and dry place, a void, and a place where no life grows or thrives – it is a place cut off from life; a place inhabited by monsters and demonic forces; a scary place; a place of chaos; a place of wandering and restlessness.

In today’s scripture verse read to us, the prophet Isaiah was speaking to the Israelites who fell, once again, because of their sin, into a difficult journey through a wilderness experience. They faced a life of oppression by their captors. They cried out to God for help. Isaiah told them that God heard their cries, just as he did long ago when they were slaves in Egypt. He told them a new exodus would take place through a new desert. He also spoke a strong message of hope,

saying, the past miracles of God were nothing compared to what God would do for his people in the future.

You may remember another bible story involving Jesus. He was led into the wilderness right before he was to begin his ministry. He spent 40 days there and he did not eat. While he was there, the devil tempted him three times, I suppose, in an attempt to make Jesus fall from God's graces or to discourage Jesus from beginning his ministry for God. It didn't work. Even in his tired and weakened state, he stood strong and did not submit to the devil's temptations.

This would most definitely not be the last wilderness experience for Jesus. Do you remember when his good friend Lazarus died? Jesus was greatly grieved, and he wept. Do you remember Jesus telling Peter that Peter would deny him three times? Can you imagine the pain within he felt in those moments, knowing his devoted friend and disciple would do such a thing? Do you remember that time in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus asked God to spare him from suffering and death? In the end, Jesus submitted to God's will. Then there was the wilderness of suffering and dying on the cross that he endured.

Jesus, our brother and Savior, understood even felt what it was like to go through the wilderness. These stories remind us that the wilderness is uncomfortable and soul-shaking. It is something that we all know or will know at some time in our lives. It can be dark, treacherous, thick, or barren. It can be a lonely place filled with unbearable pain, frustration—even hopelessness. The wilderness may be a time in one's life when one questions whether God cares or hears a person's cry for help. One may even wonder if there really is a God.

Yet there is hope. Hope is found as we make the journey through the wilderness. We can't go around it, over or under it. We cannot deny it. We must go through it; but the good news is that we do not need to go through it alone. The One who knows exactly what it is like to make the journey because he did it, is and will be with us. Holding on to him is taking hold of the promise that God will do something new in our lives. Like Jesus who experienced the resurrection, journeying through the wilderness leads us to a resurrection in our lives.

This past week as our workcampers served others, without expecting anything in return, just simply wanting to help others, they extended God's hand of promise to help others through their wilderness experiences. Maybe, as they served, they were reminded when others helped them through their wilderness times and were able to celebrate God's faithfulness once again to them. So, they were blessed. And so were those who they helped as they sorted clothes, painted, cleaned wheelchairs, did landscaping and housing maintenance, and all the other things that they did at their job sites. We have the same opportunity every day to share God's promise and God's hope that will help others persevere through their own journeys in the wilderness. We are called to help others get through the wilderness to the other side.

We are going to hear from a few of our workcampers now, who will share some of their own personal reflections.