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February 27, 2022

Seeing in the Wilderness

Luke 7:24-35

“What did you all go out into the wilderness to see?”

Jesus asks this of the crowd in today’s passage, but there is no better question for us here today—mere days away from embarking on *our* Lenten journey into the wilderness.

*“What then did you go out to see? A person dressed in luxurious robes?
. . . A prophet?”*

A curious question on *this* day, the Sunday in which the Revised Common Lectionary would have us celebrating Christ’s Transfiguration—when Jesus’ “clothes became dazzling white” and suddenly the great prophets Moses and Elijah appear with him “in glory” (Luke 9:29-31).

Dr. Wilda Gafney, the scholar who selected our readings for today, is having a bit of fun with us, I think.

Instead of a person dressed in luxurious robes, or even a Jesus dressed in dazzling white—instead of the prophets Moses or Elijah—what we get is John the Baptist: a crazed messenger—more than a prophet, in fact—dressed in camel’s hair and a bit “touched” by the wilderness.

John is, of course, the one who baptizes Jesus just before the Spirit drives *him* into the wilderness too. But not before the voice of God voice

affirms Christ as God's Son, an affirmation that would be echoed in the story of . . . The Transfiguration.

We could spend a lot of time unraveling the intertextual allusions Gafney has woven together here, but I think if we take just *one* thing away from her scriptural selections today, it's Christ's opening question:

"What did you all go out into the wilderness to see?"

You see, not unlike John and Jesus, we too are a people ready to be touched by the wilderness again. Reframed as we look *forward* to our Lenten journey, the question is even more helpful: What *will* we go out into the wilderness to see?

Not unlike at his baptism or the Transfiguration, in today's text Christ is affirmed as Wisdom's Son, the Son of Woman, who was driven by the Spirit Herself into the desert, and he beckons us to follow him there just as he does each Lenten season.

This alternative Gafney provides to the traditional Transfiguration reading is a bit like looking into a funhouse mirror. Though the features of the text are similar, the image is a bit distorted from what we're used to seeing.

The Women's Lectionary, then, sends us into the Lenten season a little disoriented. Our first steps into the wilderness this year will not follow along the familiar, well-trodden path. We may stumble into the desert this season rather than walk sure-footed.

But perhaps that is the very gift this reading offers to us, an opportunity to revisit and even re-tradition our Lenten posture. For while we can

trust the Spirit that drives us into the wilderness, we can also be sure that we will not emerge from it the same. Gafney reminds us that the wilderness can be a disorienting place.

And it has the possibility of transforming more than just our liturgical imaginations. It may even reshape our understanding of the gospel itself.

You see, Gafney is a *womanist* scholar, a Black woman doing God-talk. You may recall that the Women's Lectionary begins with the story of Hagar in the wilderness. This is no accident.

Hagar is in many ways the patron saint of womanist theologians. The story of this enslaved woman's survival in the desert and encounter with God is a rich source of inspiration for Black women doing God-talk.

For what did Hagar go out into the wilderness to see? But God *Godself*—and she survives directly facing the divine. She even *names* God in their mutual encounter.

Putting Hagar's experience in conversation with their own, womanist theologians have countered Black male theologians' emphasis on *liberation* with a focus on *survival* or *quality of life*, rooting their hope in the revolutionary struggle of the everyday.

As implied by the title of Delores Williams's seminal *Sisters in the Wilderness*, womanist God-talk is a challenge to traditional theology. It is God-speak from the perspective of those in the literal and figurative wildernesses of our world—those like Hagar. And like Jesus too.

Womanist theology is not just a challenge to Black (male) theology but also to the very notion of salvation most familiar to the church today, the idea that *Jesus died for our sins*.

You see, Black women like Williams and others have rejected the idea that Jesus “stands in” for our sins on the cross, as that would make the violence inflicted there an expression of God’s will. This idea, Williams asserts, has led to society’s comfort with suffering as a divinely ordained state of being, especially for those who “stand in” as a surrogate for others.

And that is a burden that falls disproportionately on Black women, who have been expected to bear the violence of this society’s crosses in silent, almost sacred submission.

Williams goes so far as to say that “There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross . . . As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred” (Williams, 167).

But why speak of the cross now, here, when we’ve yet to be marked for Lent? Why challenge its salvific power in our theology today, before we’ve even made it to the edge of the wilderness?

Isn’t it a bit like we’re staring into a funhouse mirror?

So let’s ground ourselves again in the question Christ asks us today: What *will* we go out into the wilderness to see?

We will see John the Baptist, but not in luxurious robes. We will see Jesus, but not in clothes of dazzling white. Nonetheless, we will see them, the children of Wisdom, driven by the Spirit herself.

We will see Hagar, surviving, encountering the divine, naming God.

We will see womanists like Wilda Gafney wrestling our faith away from the death-dealing powers of misogyny, queerphobia, white supremacy, ecocide, and many others. We will see them translating Christian scripture and making claims on the Christian tradition *for the sake of life*. Reminding us who we were supposed to be all along.

And we will see Delores Williams proclaiming the good news of our salvation, re-traditioning our approach to redemption. Listen carefully to what she has to say:

“Jesus . . . does not conquer sin through death on the cross. Rather, Jesus conquers the sin of temptation **in the wilderness** . . . by resistance – by resisting the temptation to value the material over the spiritual . . . by resisting death . . . by resisting the greedy urge of monopolistic ownership . . . Jesus therefore conquered sin in life, not in death. In the wilderness he refused to allow evil forces to defile the balanced relation between the material and the spiritual, between life and death, between power and the exertion of it” (Williams, 166).

So what *will* we go out into the wilderness to see? Our salvation.

These voices crying out to us from the deserted places of our society, beckoning us there, are inviting us to reconsider our relationship to the wilderness altogether.

Lent is not a place for languishing, friends. It's a place for listening.

And if we listen to our sisters in the wilderness, to these children of Wisdom, we hear that in Lent we are not called to mimic death. We are called to actively resist it.

In Lent we are not called to pursue material gain but spiritual wholeness for all people.

In Lent we are not called to accumulate power but to live in radical solidarity with the powerless.

In Lent we locate our salvation in Jesus' living rather than his dying. We find our redemption not in his suffering but in his resistance to the death-dealing power of evil.

We do not cling to the violence that shed his blood but to his *ministerial vision* of life lived fully.

What *will* we go out into the wilderness to see?

A radically different way to live out our faith. A disorienting reordering of the world.

And maybe a little disorientation is just what we need today. Because I don't know about you but I'd rather stumble toward life than walk surely toward death.

May we be disoriented as we hear these all-too-familiar cries for war.

May we be disoriented by our society's comfort with the violence of poverty.

May we be disoriented as we read of the State's attacks against our queer children and youth.

I worry about the idea white liberals embrace that black women are going to save us. That is its own form of the surrogacy Williams denounces.

But I also worry that if we don't listen to our sisters in the wilderness that we will miss the salvation they're pointing us toward.

A world stripped of the fear-mongering, death-dealing, wealth-hoarding, power-grabbing work of Empire.

A world full of the death-resisting, healing-seeking, power-sharing, communal-flourishing, of God's Kin-dom.

Perhaps this is not a disorientation but a reorientation to Lent.

From asceticism to activism. From self-denial to solidarity. From penitence to resistance.

From hope rooted in the violence of this instrument of death to the everyday survival, the living of those in the wilderness.

This Lent may we sing of wilderness in a womanist key. We may just wander into another world altogether, the one envisioned at the heart of the gospel itself.

We may just go out into the wilderness to see our salvation is at hand.