

## The Wilderness, VI

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and will lead her into the wilderness: and I will speak to her heart." (OS. 2:14)

I wish to conclude this series of sermons on the wilderness with 11 points that may be gleaned from Sacred Scripture.

1. God wants His beloved children to experience the wilderness. As St. Hosea the Prophet wrote speaking of the soul, "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and will lead her into the wilderness: and I will speak to her heart." Every time the soul experiences the feeling of being abandoned by God and left in a wilderness, should it persevere, a profound spiritual growth will result.

2. God's love for us is terrible. There is a terror in it – the mountains don't care. And His love is utterly different than the love of the world. In the Exodus, His love is expressed in the wilderness not in accord with the schedule of the Hebrews, and this enabled them to discover that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was not predictable. A predictable God you can control, which is one reason the Hebrews made an image of God like a calf. A little calf you can control. Calf's are predictable. The Hebrews then were forced to give up on that kind of God.

But at the same time as His love is terrible and unpredictable, it is also has a great content of mirth. And those who allow God to do His work in their lives and become saints, they too are unpredictable in their actions. God and the saints are dependable, but not predictable. For example, at the canonization trial of St. Philip Neri – who was quite unpredictable in his humor here on earth – the Devil's Advocate was striving for all he was worth trying to prevent the canonization. Then he had a dream – a vision really – of St. Philip smiling at him, then putting his thumbs in his ears and wobbling this tongue. The next day the priest testified that there was no need to continue, the prosecution rests; Fr. Philip Neri was a saint.

3. The wilderness is a place where salvation dawns; it begins like a seed in the ground though fulfilled in another place rich in water and life; a promised land. And we arrive in it in God's time, and on God's terms.

4. The wilderness can teach us to give up our illusion of a God that will make life easy for us, a God that will do what we want Him to do, a God of our own liking and making. And the cross is the principle means that helps us arrive at

that position. So take a good crucifix with you if you go into the wilderness. If God allowed His own Son to be stretched out on a piece of wood and left to hang there until He dies, then we cannot escape the reality and the destiny of the cross. But it is that same cross which sustains us in the wilderness and gives us hope, because as we gaze upon it and contemplate it, we see not just death and abandonment, but vindication, hope and salvation.

5. One of the things that needs to happen is to accept that fact that you are in a wilderness. Looking for some quick exit is not an option. Even being medivaced in the Teton wilderness was not much of an option sometimes, since we were often in places where a helicopter cannot land. .

6. God always takes care of His people in the wilderness. He will provide water from a rock and rain manna from heaven. Now it didn't take long for Israel to grow weary of the manna, and in the same way we too will tire of the struggle, perhaps become exasperated with the difficulty and tempted to murmur against God. So we need to recall that there is only one kind of food in the wilderness, and it is not sufficient for the long haul. The manna you receive will be designed to get you through the wilderness experience, so that you can arrive at the Promised Land.

7. If you remain in the wilderness, you eventually die. Leaving the counterfeit pleasures of Egypt is not enough. God brought His people out of bondage to bring them into the land of plenty, not to stay in the wilderness. (Deut. 6:23)

8. The wilderness has one goal above all: to sift us, reduce us, strip things down to Christ alone. The Hebrews took the golden vessels with them, but those must be lost. A golden vessel from the world might be good television shows. But those won't help you much to get to the promised land, no more than the golden vessels the Hebrews could not part with at first.

9. Considering in depth a life of a saint who was in the wilderness is also very instructive. Take St. Elias the prophet – he does a series of mighty acts of faith which put his life at risk, so he heads out into the wilderness. Immediately after making his first complaint to the Lord, he goes to sleep. He is exhausted from his battle with the false prophets and many fears which now plague him. But before God converses with Elias, He first attends to his needs – food, water and rest. God does not ignore the natural order, and neither should we. Some exercise, sleep, good food – if you can get these things – go a long way in the desert; these help us to face the inner journey.

St. Elias traveled into the wilderness for 40 days. That's a very symbolic number, and we can't help but think of the 40 days and nights of rain for Noah, or the 40 years in the desert for the Hebrews, or the 40 days of our Lord in the wilderness. One or two days are not enough in themselves. It is only in the depths of the pilgrimage that there is a confrontation with the truth of God that will change our lives and move us out of the desert into the land flowing with milk and honey.

Then he tells his story to God, about his pain, his anger, his fear, his self-pity. And he tells his story twice. God doesn't need to hear the story twice – He heard it just fine the first time. But sometimes we have to keep repeating it until a shift happens. And the Lord is tough enough to hear our anger and disappointment just as forcefully as we want to put it. We can imitate Him in a similar way, like a good friend who sometimes just listens and doesn't try to fix things, but instead offers encouragement.

St. Elias discovers that God is not in the fire or the earthquake or the rushing wind, but in the "silence." In the desert we will need to create moments when we are still before God. This needs to happen even if we have no expectation of God's presence, and do not want to pray or even cannot pray. The stillness enables us to settle down for a bit, and pay attention to what is happening in our lives.

10. St. John of the Cross wrote in his great work The Dark Night of the Soul – "Souls begin to enter into this dark night when God draws them out from being beginners." There are no crutches in the wilderness really; no activities in which to hide our true condition. The knowledge of God becomes intimate when there is no one else to turn to except Him.

11. The book of nature so well used by so many saints, is a book of the tremendous beauty and unfathomable majesty of God, and a mighty directive to the praise of the wisdom of God. And as is clear in the book of Job, only a fool does not understand this voice.