

Into the wilderness

Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tested by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near." Mark 1:9-14

Last Monday we snowshoed through our own "wilderness." We noticed all the fresh tracks of coyotes/brush wolves, deer, fox, rabbits, squirrels. It was quiet except for one crow that seemed to be announcing our presence. In the winter we discover that the coyotes, deer and wild turkeys come right up to the house. We rarely see them but we do hear them and, in winter, their footprints show us the pathways they use. Sometimes people see our home in the bush as remote and lonely. It never feels lonely. Animal companions enliven our neighbourhood.

A few years ago, in Pangnirtung, Nunavut, we travelled by snowmobile and kamotik to the floe edge where ice meets the open ocean. People go to the floe edge because it is rich with animal life. We watched a pod of humpbacked whales too numerous to count breaching off-shore. There were seals and walrus and polar bears. You might expect that, close to the arctic circle with only ice, snow and sky for landscape, the place would seem bleak, empty. But it doesn't. It feels full of life.

I first learned this about wilderness when I worked at a fisheries research camp in Northern Quebec

Our aboriginal guides were completely at home in the bush, leading us where there were no paths or landmarks that we could see. I began to experience the first nations understanding that everything is full of Spirit - the rocks and rivers, trees and animals - all have their own distinctive Sacred identity and the wilderness feels energetic and lively.

There are a lot of different feelings and thoughts that wilderness experiences pull out of us: our vulnerability and fragility make room for fear. But then we notice the liveliness of the wilderness. We become aware of animal companions who share the wilderness. There may even be a sense of being cared for by angels as the fear dissolves into awe. Finally, we begin to recognize the Sacred inhabiting everything. It is as if a river of God flows through everything that is and we're part of all of it.

Was this what drew Jesus out into the wilderness beyond the Jordan River following his baptism? In the wilderness he confronted his insecurities and fears, his temptations to grandiosity, to being self sufficient and holding power. We read that "he was with the wild animals." At that time, there were still lions and bears in the region. Being "with" sounds like the kind of communing we have with our deer and foxes and the brush wolves we hear at night. Did he experience that Sacred connection?

When John baptized him in the Jordan River, Jesus learned that he was God's child and that God loved him and was pleased with him. He carried that knowledge into the wilderness with him and knew that God's angels were taking care of him. We all have times when we desperately need to feel loved and cared for and safe. We sometimes find ourselves wanting our partners to help us feel that way. As children we needed our parents to affirm us, love and protect us. Because we are human and imperfect, as partners, as parents, as friends, we never get it completely right. So we live with our wounds and our longing. We all need angels to attend to us. Following his wilderness experience, Jesus began his work: "proclaiming the good news of God."

What is the good news of God? It is that we are all children of the one God. God is with us. God loves us. We will be tempted and sometimes we will be afraid and feel small and weak. But God is in us and around us and God's angels are ready to attend to us too if we let them.

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