

Into the Wilderness

Reflections Prior to Beginning my Renewal Leave
Pastor Steve

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. – Matthew 4:1

Right after Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan river, Matthew's Gospel says, "A voice from heaven said, 'This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" The very next verse says "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Wow. How interesting and peculiar is that? The same Spirit that descended upon Jesus like a dove "alighting on him" just as he came up from the Jordan waters then led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. In Mark's telling, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.

There is something about God's people in scripture and the wilderness. Whether it is the Israelites wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years or Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness, the wilderness seems to be a place where God's people are shaped and formed, a place where they come to a deeper sense of who they are and who they are called to be.

Next Sunday, June 18, we will be invited to remember our baptism, to hear God's Spirit say of each of us "This is my child, a beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Those who have never been baptized are invited to anticipate and consider the baptism that awaits them. All are welcome. The church will commission me for my renewal leave and I will commission the church for its time of renewal too. Then, might we be led – or even driven – by the Spirit into the wilderness... to be tempted by the devil? How might we be shaped and formed? How might we come to a deeper sense of who we are and who we are called to be? What temptations might we encounter?

Shortly after the 11:00 service on June 18, I will be going into the wilderness. Literally, I will be flying out to Seattle, Washington and then transported to the Grunewald Guild, a retreat center in the Wenatchee National Forest (grunewaldguild.com). I'll spend a week in the wilderness. Spiritually, I anticipate my entire leave as a kind of wilderness. Other than the 5 years when I was in college, I have never been away from the church where I am a member or where I am serving. I'm not sure what this will be like.

I anticipate that I will be tempted to become busy in some sort of project during my leave. Since projects involve creativity, are often a source of joy and satisfaction, and can even help others, I tend to believe they are good. But, I also tend to believe that turning stones into bread and feeding the hungry (one of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness) would be good. Is consuming yourself in projects and busyness a temptation for you?

Several opportunities for the congregation and the community have been planned during this time of leave. All of these opportunities are intended to help people experience Sabbath renewal. A brochure describing these opportunities will soon be ready for you to take and to share. I hope you and some of your friends and neighbors will participate in one or more of these opportunities.

Above all, I pray that each of us will create time for Sabbath, time to rest, time to reflect on who we are, whose we are and who we are called to be. I pray that our temptations will be met with discernment, prayer, clarity and resolve and that we, like Jesus in the wilderness, will be attended by angels. I pray that we will all be further shaped and formed into our baptismal identity. Please pray for me, as I will be praying for you.