

Biblical and Theological Background



Day 1: Wilderness Is

Psalm 139: 7-14

Wilderness is a broad term that evokes different images for different people. Some think about the images accompanying Bible stories, such as the Exodus or Jesus' temptation. Some think about the rural areas around them. Yet, wilderness experiences can take place beyond the woods or desert. The wilderness is a liminal space where we explore unknowns, face personal questions, or find ourselves growing with God. There can be growing pains in the wilderness. There can be fearful moments and complicated feelings to navigate. The wilderness is a place of epiphany: revealing what is and opening our eyes to what could be. Whether we are in a big city, a small town, or a remote camp, we can find ourselves in the wilderness.

The first day of camp is filled with statements that sound obvious, but are important or profound discoveries for others. We do our best not to say things like: "For those who are new..." or "Many of you already know...". We repeat some simple questions like "Where are you from?" We answer important questions like, "What time is dinner?" and "Where are the bathrooms?" This is a day of tropes and repetitions for those who spend a full summer at camp; and those for whom camp is a place of comfort and familiarity. What many take for granted can be profound for others.

"You are welcome here."

"You belong here."

"We will feed, shelter, and care for you."

Not every camper comes to camp with these assumptions about the world they live in.

"God loves you."

"We love you."

"You are not alone."

These statements challenge the paradigm many live in, possibly including our staff and leaders.

Psalm 139 proclaims a deep truth that seems so simple; yet meets us as a word of comfort, and a prophetic statement of awe and wonder.

"God made us and knows us."

"God is everywhere."

"God is with us."

The first day of camp should be lived with intentionality: learning names while we name God's presence in the obvious and unexpected places. The first day of camp should be lived with intentionality: welcoming those who already trust that they are welcome, those who will distrust the invitation, and those who question our sincerity.

The Psalms come out of a living, breathing community. They come from a people who have known division and sorrow. They come from a people who have looked for and found God in moments of comfort, celebration, and in the passing of wisdom from generation to generation. This community has also found God in times of struggle, grief, loss, and in the discovery of resilience.

Proclaiming God's presence in all times and all places seems like such a basic idea, until you are the one crying out, wondering if you are all alone. The poetry of the Psalms reminds us to state the obvious with joy, to see what is right in front of us and give thanks, and sing out a song of praise with thanksgiving, so that those who have not heard and have not seen might know that God is with them, that they are wonderfully made, and welcome in this space.

In this week of camp, we will explore the idea of "Wilderness" as a time and place of challenge and growth. We will explore the places that leave us fearful, hopeful, nostalgic, nervous, and excited about what God might be preparing us for next. We know that such experiences are unavoidable. Change will happen. Mistakes will be made. Lessons will be learned. Wisdom will be discovered. Stuff will go down. No matter what ours might look like, "wilderness" moments will happen. How profound and comforting it can be to know that, while the wilderness will be a reality, God will be with us all the way.



Day 2: Wilderness Awe

Job 12: 7-10 (NRSVUE)

Throughout the book of Job, our protagonist grapples with immense suffering and questions God's justice. Job 12:7-10 emerges from this context, where Job, despite his anguish, acknowledges the inherent wisdom of creation. While some interpret this passage as Job's sarcastic rebuke to his friends, it can also be seen as a liberating recognition of God's presence in all things.

This perspective aligns with the idea that camp this week, offers an opportunity to learn from all of creation. As Job suggests, the animals, birds, plants, and fish all reveal God's handiwork. This can inspire us to start each day with open hearts, ready to receive new experiences and wisdom, even from unexpected sources. The wilderness, like this camp, becomes a classroom where God may speak through the rustle of leaves, the songs of birds, or the laughter of fellow campers.

If we read the earlier chapters featuring Job's friends, we see that a closed heart cannot receive such wisdom. This time is a gift, but its value depends on our willingness to engage with it fully. An expectant heart opens us to the possibility of growth, deeper understanding of God, and self-discovery. We may even uncover the potential to do even greater things than we ever imagined, just as we hear throughout scripture.

The liberation found in Job 12:7-10 lies in its invitation to move beyond human-centric perspectives and recognize God's presence in all of creation. This holistic view celebrates the beauty and interconnectedness of the universe, including ourselves. By embracing this mindset, we not only deepen our relationship with God but also unlock the potential for profound personal and spiritual transformation.

Many know Job through the opening narrative with a more skit-friendly scene where God is being challenged

about the true goodness of Job, who stands in as a representative for those people who praise God out of their comfort and privilege. Through Job, we learn about the importance of faith and humility amid suffering. Varied translations and interpretations have often led us to misunderstand this text. The Hebrew text has often translated "satan" as ha-satan, which means "the adversary." It is not a name. The same term is used throughout the Hebrew Bible to describe those who stand in opposition, including those who do it in the name of God. Often, it is a "good-guy" in the story, standing up to those causing harm.

While this might be helpful information for those who get questions about the full story of Job from well-informed campers, it can also exemplify how we often squeeze scripture into our understanding. We take what was written in the context of a community and make it fit a personal narrative that is more familiar and allows us to separate our personal faith journey from the neighbors and friends around us. Job is a text that begins with a metaphorical reflection on privilege and suffering, moves into a conversation among friends on blame and the nature of God, then has the creation itself reminding us that God is God and we are not.

When we forget that the Earth is a gift from God and start seeing it as something to possess, control, or fight over, it becomes harder to listen and learn lessons from those same lands and creatures. The power of creation is not in who controls it, but the ways it sustains and cares for all who call it home. The power of creation is not in subduing it, but standing in awe of the beauty and strength around us, recognizing God in the midst of it all.

We don't have to be in the forest or desert to experience such awe of God. We don't have to escape the city lights to find wilderness moments that inspire. When the sunrise reflects off the glass of an office tower, we can be moved by God's creation. When we see pollinator boxes on top of a building and the bees who call it home buzzing around the flowerpots that decorate an apartment's tiny patio, we can be inspired. When the technology we hold in our hands introduces us to natural wonders of the Earth, and we find ourselves contemplating our place in this vast world, we have entered a "wilderness" moment.

Some campers will come to the physical space of camp as "natural inhabitants." Others will feel like they are an "invasive species." Some campers will hear about where another lives and feel like it is as foreign as

another country or planet. Help campers find the awe and wonder that moves them beyond the initial “othering” that comes from exploring unknown people and places. If they need help, encourage them to look to the animals who will teach them, the birds who will tell them, and the fish who will inform them that this is God’s creation and in this place, we can experience and express all the joy and wonder that life brings. .



Day 3: Wilderness Leads

Exodus 13:17-22

Our community will teach and shape us. Our shared meals, intentional times for rest and play, pausing for prayer, and gathering for worship each make an impact, and the schedule itself becomes a ritual and expresses our priorities. When we change our schedule, it says something about how we live as a community.

In our scripture, the Israelites have just escaped Egypt, where they were living as an enslaved population. Moses rises as a leader along with his brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam. Creation plays an important role throughout Moses’ story. His personal call includes the “character” of the burning bush. Each sign or plague that Moses warned Pharaoh about featured something in nature. It was as if creation itself was rebelling against the inhumane act of slavery. The role of creation continues as God’s people look for a way out of Egypt and across a literal wilderness. Today’s story from Exodus continues to show us how God speaks through creation to guide God’s people. Not just individuals, but entire communities.

The pillar of cloud in the story seems consistent across translations. Some will notice a difference in the nighttime guide. Fire and lightning are both used by various translators. The root word is old, and Hebrew is not always as specific as we would like,

so either translation is accurate. In a practical sense, lightning from the sky often sparks fires on the ground. It would not be a stretch to think people made the connection, and the words would be connected or even interchangeable. Fire before it hits the ground, and fire that is still flashing around in the sky -- makes sense. Does it matter for this day and this theme? Probably not, but a curiosity itch that doesn’t get scratched can be a distraction, so this is an easy question to answer if it comes up for campers. It also might be a great time to talk about storms and how thunder and lightning can help us know how far away a storm is, and that in some ways work as an early warning system for creatures in a storm’s path.

Today is a great day to think about other ways we navigate creation. From “wayfinders” on the Pacific Ocean or “pathfinders” in the Appalachian Mountains, we inherit wisdom from those who explored the world before us and help listen to creation as we now navigate it. What signs does the creation give us for knowing where we are, finding our way to new places, or making our way “home”?

There is also a more personal layer to today’s theme that invites us to reflect on our personal journey and bring our experience to the “wilderness” metaphor. Some of these might be scary memories. Some might even be traumatic. Be tender as you invite campers to share, and be mindful of your own past experiences. When were you leaving behind something you knew on the way to something new? Was it a painful leaving or a liberating experience? Maybe both? Was your wilderness chosen, or thrust upon you (not truly a choice, but it didn’t just happen by chance)? What times have you faced a question, challenge, or new reality? What places have brought you face to face with something different or made you look at yourself in a mirror?

These questions about “wilderness” are not just for individuals. Cultural identities are often forged by wilderness experiences. Geographic regions have identities forged by things that happened there and how the people adapted and grew from them. Spiritual communities have stories of perseverance that offer resilience in the face of such challenges, and today’s scripture is one example.

Invite your campers to reflect and use camp as a wilderness—a place to explore, learn, change, and

grow. Invite your campers to reflect on their own experiences and share about a wilderness they have traveled, or those they still feel like they are living in. Maybe it is that in between-time when bodies change, but they are not sure who they are becoming. Maybe families have moved or changed dramatically. Maybe they had a dream that was dashed. Maybe they are just preparing to enter a wilderness that comes with being a year older, and are standing on the edge of a new unknown. Invite your campers to share, but don't push. Assure them of God's presence and invite them to look for reminders. It gets hard to find God when the chaos starts swirling. It's easier to spot the signs around us when we are practicing and expecting to see them.



Day 4: Wilderness Frightens

Matthew 14:22-30

Some stuff is just scary. It doesn't matter how much time you spend with snakes or spiders. It doesn't matter how much time you spend in the dark or climbing up high. Some things are simply scary to us and can be even more so to others. Still, fear has its uses. Fear is an instinctual response. Fear can keep us alive. Other times, it does not seem very logical. Either way, fear happens.

In today's story, Peter is scared of the wind. Before we start to tease Peter too much, he "saw the strong wind." Maybe it was the waves. Maybe it was the sea spray that stung as it blew against his face. Maybe small cyclones were forming. We are all good at imagining how scary something could be. We have plenty of images from disaster movies to inspire our imaginations. Still, Peter had some good/legitimate reasons to be afraid. He had just been in a boat, and scared of what they all thought was a ghost. Before

that, they had been battling the wind for a while. The wind was not new. They had already survived a potential poltergeist, and Peter had just stepped out of the boat to try walking on water. With all the evidence in front of him and all that he had already overcome, you might think Peter would fare a little better. Walking on water didn't scare him, but the wind that he knew was swirling did? It's strange what gets us.

Comfort is something we value in our society. We like a comfy couch. We like a padded seat. We like the temperature in the room to be consistent. We like the bugs to stay where they belong, which is far from us, even if we are outside. Sometimes we work so hard to stay comfortable that we keep ourselves from growing. Avoiding challenges doesn't allow us to build the confidence we find in overcoming those challenges. That doesn't mean we need to go out looking for trouble to overcome. That doesn't mean we need to invent problems to solve. We shouldn't hide from the reality around us. We should battle the strong headwinds in our lives, and when we have gotten familiar with that challenge, we might find ourselves stepping out and trying to walk on water.

Peter didn't start with walking on water, and it wasn't what made him start sinking. Peter was fine facing the winds with his friends, working as a crew on the boat. He was so courageous in that situation that he was able to bounce back from thinking they saw a ghost, to hop out of the boat when Jesus appeared. But once alone - once stepping out on his own, those same winds whirled around him and fear cycled through his brain. Once alone, Peter finds himself sinking.

Even though Jesus is right there, Peter calls for help, crying out, "rescue me!" Fear is not rational. Literally, it comes from the instinctual portion of our brain. In an emergency, our instinct operates first. Emotions follow, then logic brings up the rear. It's difficult when we think we are operating logically, maybe even a little in our feelings, and out of nowhere, the alarms go off and we are in fight or flight mode as fear tries to take over.

Campers will each come with their personal fears. Campers will each come with their own experiences and stories of bravery, even if they don't give themselves enough credit. Invite them to share and listen with respect. Remind them that even the bravest of us can be afraid. Assure them that fear is a normal human reaction and even plays a role in keeping us safe. Also, remind them that fear can be overcome.

Trying new things can be scary. Facing complicated emotions can be scary. Looking back on the past can be scary. Walking to a bathroom at night with strange-sounding frogs and crazy bright stars can be scary when you are not used to it. Sleeping in a cabin full of other people can be scary when you are not used to it. Changing clothes, fixing hair, and taking swim tests might have been scary on Day 1, but if something triggers those insecurities, they can be suddenly just as frightening on Day 4. Fear will happen but we don't have to let it have the final say.

We can bravely cry out to others to give us a hand. We can humbly name our fears and work on becoming less triggered by trying to figure out what they are protecting us from or reminding us about. We can practice facing challenges with others, recognizing that we are not alone. We can also remember that God is with us, even when a time, place, or experience triggers our fears. When the hairs raise on our arms and necks, when our vision narrows, when our breath shortens, and when we feel a trembling deep within—we can reach out to God, cry out to God's people, and look to the creation around us for reminders that we are never alone. Those worries may never completely leave us, but we never have to face them alone.



Day 5: Wilderness Unites

Esther 4:12-17

One line often remembered from Esther is, “For such a time as this”. Mordecai’s passionate plea is often quoted when encouraging people to step up and lead, to face a challenge, or to use their privilege for good. What often gets missed is that Esther did not step up alone. She hears him. She takes a pause, then responds. Esther asks that the people fast and pray with her in solidarity and support. The custom of fasting might seem strange

to some of us, but many religious communities still practice fasting today. The specific practice isn’t what’s most important, though. She could have asked them to all stay awake and not sleep. She could have asked them all to give up showers. She could have asked them all to light a candle and wear an advocacy ribbon. What matters is that she did not face a time, “such as this” alone.

The setting of Esther seems like an accessible story to our world. Between history, fantasy fiction, and renaissance faires, we have plenty of stories about kings and queens. Most of these stories have multiple factions fighting for power, with good guys and bad guys. However, Esther has another layer to it. The antisemitism experienced by the Jewish people is an important part of the story. Haman, who is plotting against Mordecai and the rest of the Jewish community, is not the only one with negative feelings towards God’s people.

Historically, this story is set in a particular context. The Kingdom of Israel has already been divided, the Northern Kingdom (and its capital in Samaria) has fallen, and then the Southern Kingdom of Judah falls, the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed. At this point, the leaders, the wealthiest people, artists, teachers, and the priests are taken into exile in Babylon. After Persia defeated Babylon, the Jewish people were allowed to go home, but many families had put down roots and started new lives. Many young people only knew Jerusalem through the stories of their elders.

It is in this post-exile world that Esther hears the queen has been exiled, and that the king will be holding a pageant to select a new queen. Then she finds herself moving into the palace. Esther is an immigrant girl, replacing a queen who was exiled for overstepping. Supporting her is Mordecai, a relative who is clearly a leader within the Jewish community and a good citizen. He unearths a plot against the king and is celebrated for it, but the king’s top advisor, Haman, is not a fan. Haman says it is because Mordecai won’t bow to him like the other citizens, but Haman doesn’t ask to have Mordecai killed—he looks to eliminate all the Jewish people. While the context might be particular, the antisemitism is not unique to this time or place. Oppression of others due to their ethnicity, culture, color of their skin, gender, or beliefs is not new.

Sometimes our own wilderness reminds us that others are struggling. We understand what it feels like to enter uncomfortable or even unforgiving spaces. We understand what it feels like to feel alone or like the weight of the world rests on our next decision. We look into the mirror and see the emotion visible in our eyes; and when we look at others, we recognize our own feelings in their eyes. We may each navigate different wildernesses, but know that we are not alone. Suddenly, we discover solidarity in our struggle. Suddenly we do not face “a time such as this” by ourselves. This can evoke courage and strength from us. It can also inspire compassion.

In our story, Esther does not rush headfirst into a confrontation. She pauses to wrestle with the possible consequences. She asks others to stand in solidarity with her. She asks for prayer. Then, Esther looks for a path forward. She speaks for herself and for her people. She speaks for justice and becomes an inspirational figure to her people for generations to come. Her vulnerability reminds us that there is power in naming our fears, asking for help, seeking guidance, and looking to God for support.

Wilderness experiences can be scary. Some are dangerous. Some are just a part of life. Knowing that we are not alone—having allies, mentors, guides, and companions can make all the difference. Listening to the wisdom of our ancestors and the experience of those around us can provide the tools we need to find our way through. Wilderness experiences can also shape us to become those guides and mentors. Those experiences can show us how to be better advocates and how to truly listen and show up for others. Some of us have a passion and a place where we want to make a difference. We plan and prepare. We pray and plot our next steps. Others of us don't even see how God is preparing us till we are thrust into the fray or find ourselves up to our eyeballs in waters that were rising so slowly we missed the coming flood. However, we find ourselves in the wilderness - whether we are there for the first time or circling back to guide another. God and God's people are with us, bound together for such a time as this.



Day 6: Wilderness Reveals

Luke 10: 25-37

The “Good Samaritan” may be the most well-known story in the New Testament. The term, “Good Samaritan,” is used in secular settings all the time to describe a person who helps another. This story could be easily explored through a simple lens of “do the right thing.” This message would be worth teaching, yet there are more layers to unpack and the history of this passage in our American context is worth exploring. Maybe the simpler the story, the more it has to tell us.

Let's start with the setting. An expert is testing Jesus. Is this a political adversary? Is this an arrogant young leader who wants to make a name for himself? Is this someone of privilege who feels exposed by Jesus' teaching? Whatever his motivation, he makes a public challenge to Jesus about what it takes to achieve eternal life. Jesus doesn't take the bait, and instead deflects. “What does the scripture say? What do you think it means?” The expert shows he is indeed an expert and can quote the text, but he doesn't say what it means. Jesus lets him off the hook and suggests he go and live that way. Instead of walking away or letting someone else ask a question, the guy keeps pushing. Luke says he wanted to “prove he was right” or as other translations word it, “justify himself.” Clearly this guy has an agenda. Who does he think his neighbor is? It would be nice to hear him admit it before Jesus tells such a profound story that the interrupting expert can do nothing more than fall in line. Whatever he thought, it seems to have been far afield from what Jesus was teaching.

The next layer is the story itself. To answer “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus uses some characters that the people would be familiar with. A priest is going down the road to Jericho and sees a man on the side of the road who has been beaten and left for dead. He may

have been dead. As a priest, he would fall under the Law as written in Leviticus and spelled out in Numbers. He would know he should not touch a dead body or have to go through a ritual of cleanliness that would take many days. He was clearly headed somewhere. He had things to do. How could he risk such a delay? The second traveler was a Levite, a descendant of Levi. This family line had been serving the temple in various ways since the early days of ritual life in the Jewish tradition. Levites were part of the spiritual community, but not to the degree of a priest. In Jesus' telling, people might have even expected to hear how the Levite was a good person compared to the privileged priesthood.

Instead, the Levite follows the same path as the priest and intentionally avoids the injured man and any delay in his travels. Next, we get a Samaritan. Samaria was once the capital of the Northern Kingdom, called Israel. We don't know if this Samaritan shared a genealogy with the Jewish community down south, or if his heritage was different. What we do know is that there were tensions between Jews and Samaritans, so his being the hero in the story was a surprise. Finally, we get an innkeeper, who we assume was Jewish based on the location. He takes over care for the wounded man from the Samaritan who vows to return.

Fast forward to April 4, 1967, for another layer to this story. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached at the Riverside Church in New York City and stepped beyond issues of civil rights in America to condemn the Vietnam War and point to America's role in the violence of our world. King spoke about the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He affirms our need to be "Good Samaritans", but takes it a step further, saying that eventually we have to address the systems that leave people beaten and battered. He said:

One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

Just one year later, on April 3, 1968, on the night before his assassination, King preached the same text. He talked about driving down that same road with his wife and understanding how dangerous it could be. He talks about how easily one could be attacked. He suggests that those who traveled it would have been fearful and maybe even seen the man as potential bait for an

ambush. King reverses the question and instead of the first two asking, "What could happen to me if I stop?" he imagines the Samaritan asking, "What could happen to this person if I don't stop?"

The story of the Samaritan reveals our priorities. It reveals how we see others and how we see ourselves. It reveals what risks we are willing to take and those steps that we are not prepared to take. It reveals who has power and privilege, and the cost of not using them. It reveals the vulnerability of all people as well as the power and potential they possess.

As we explore the story at camp, we might assume the road is desolate and remote. If we read it sitting in a different location, our imagination might connect with a dirty alley in an urban setting or a long and dark road with no lights outside a small town. The nature of the road is not as important as the people who walk it and those abandoned along the sides. Who are these people in our communities? Who are we? How do we contribute to the suffering we see in their eyes? How has God prepared us to make a difference?



Day 7: Wilderness Awaits

Jeremiah 29:11-14

This is the last day of camp, and many people will be going home. In this context, Jeremiah's words serve as a benediction at the end of a sacred time. The irony is, Jeremiah was sharing these words with a community that had just been taken from their homes and sent away. He is writing to those who had just been sent into exile. This passage offers the people directions from God on how to make new lives in the new place they are living, while praying for a day when Babylon will be no more. They have watched the walls of Jerusalem fall, the Temple be destroyed, and been carted off to a

foreign city. God assures the people that they are loved and not forgotten.

Let's name the uncomfortable truth that many people will be going home to a place that is not as safe or supportive as camp. Some will be going back to difficult relationships and families. Some will be going back to neighborhoods that don't feel safe to them. Some will be starting new schools or facing the well-known struggles in a familiar one. Leaving camp might feel like being ripped from a safe place and carted into exile.

Other campers are going home to loving families and old routines. They are going back to the comfort and relaxation of Summer. Camp may have been a "wilderness" experience for them, or it might have just been a fun and affirming week they have not yet found the words to describe. Some might even be exhausted by the structure and constant community of camp and ready to turn their brains off, or just have some alone time. Others may be headed home, all wound up about making a change in the world. However they are going, they ARE going.

Jeremiah understands the concept of "wilderness" well. He is a youth serving in an adult role. He is a prophet speaking out to a king who does not want to listen. He is a captive of the king who keeps asking questions but still doesn't listen. He is kidnapped by friends before Jerusalem falls and taken into hiding in Egypt. All along the way, Jeremiah is not where he expected to be and is dealing with complicated realities. Yet, amid his struggles, he pens a letter to the exiles in Babylon, sharing this word of hope from God.

You don't have a lot of time to do deep-dive Bible study today, but you do have a chance to assure each camper that God has plans for them--plans for peace and not disaster. You can assure each camper that if they search for God with all their heart, they will find God. This passage is written using the word "you" a lot. It is singular in Hebrew, but it is the form used when Moses speaks to all of Israel. "You" is the word used when God is speaking to all of God's people. As the campers leave, use communal language, reminding them that God has plans for all of us that God will bless all others. Assure each camper that more wilderness experiences await them--await all of us. Remind them that God will meet them in each new place and each new setting. Remind them that God is with them and the wilderness of the world awaits.