

I am sure most of you know who Alan Alda is. He is best known for his portrayal of Captain Benjamin Franklin “Hawkeye” Pierce, the fictional lead character in the MASH television series. I have always loved Alda’s wit and sense of humor, not only in his portrayal of “Hawkeye,” but also in real life. In addition to acting, Alda is an author and he has written a couple of books which are insightful and even inspirational. One thing he mentions is rather interesting in light of today’s gospel reading. Alda says, “You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. What you’ll discover will be wonderful. What you’ll discover is yourself.” I am intrigued by that statement because going into the wilderness **does** mean moving beyond our self-imposed comfort zones. And, such an experience **does** take us to a deeper understanding of self.

In today’s gospel reading, we find **Jesus** driven or pushed into the wilderness. The gospel writer tells us Jesus has just been baptized by John, an experience in which he saw the sky violently split open and God’s Spirit descend upon him in the form of a gentle dove. He has just heard God’s voice say to him, “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love. You are the pride of my life.” Then, **immediately** following this experience the same Spirit that descended upon him as a gentle dove, turns into a dive

bomber or mac truck and **pushes** Jesus out into the wild. We are not given any hint or clue that Jesus chose to do this of his own volition. The writer of Mark's gospel makes it clear that Jesus was forcefully driven or pushed into the wilderness by the Spirit, something outside of himself.

The Judean wilderness is a barren place without much vegetation, and the terrain is very rocky. With hills that are somewhat like small mountains, the land is quite treacherous and it is easy to get lost. There are wild beasts and everything else one finds in the desert – heat that burns the skin and thirst that makes one's mouth get so dry your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth. The wilderness is **not** a safe place. So, as Jesus was pushed into the wild, he faced the barrenness of the tricky terrain, the beating sun, the wolves and wild beasts, and without a doubt he faced a certain solitude. We can probably surmise that, like most of us, when he faced solitude he faced his own inner voices.

Mark tells us that, having been driven into the wilderness, Jesus was tempted or tested by Satan. Jesus did not **chose** to go into the wilderness **and** he did not **chose** to be tempted. Beyond this, Mark simply does not give us many details about Jesus' forty day experience. Unlike the other gospels, we are not given any scripted arguments between Jesus and Satan and no details about hunger for food or power. All we are told is that

Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, was tempted by Satan, was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him. Yes, the angels took care of him. God's presence was there for him and with him throughout that forty day experience, just as God had been with the Israelites every day of their forty year desert journey in the wilderness. And, as we begin **our** forty day Lenten journey, we remember Jesus' experience and we are given the promise that God is with us as we face our own challenges in the wilderness experiences of life.

The wilderness or the desert is not only a physical, geographical place. It is also a spiritual place where we find multiple spots to engage in self-examination, struggle and repentance. And, the wilderness is not a place where **we** eagerly volunteer to go. Quite frankly, **we** do not choose to experience times of temptation or struggle. We do not go out actively seeking such situations or hardships. Now, I do **not** for one minute believe that God **causes** us to experience hardship or suffering in life. I do **not** believe that God causes us any kind of misery to teach us a lesson or punish us in any way. That is not the kind of loving God Jesus proclaims. However, just as God was present to Jesus during those trying forty days, God is present to us in all of our challenges in life, those times when a marriage comes to an end, those times when we find our children

struggling, those times when a loved one dies, those times when we or a loved one struggles with addiction, those times when we lose a job, those times of hardship when we cannot sense a glimmer of hope, those times when our experience seems **void** of the presence of God. God is there, present to us in all of the struggles and temptations we face, in all of the chaos and pain. And, God is at work in the depth of those experiences, transforming them, bringing order out of chaos and bringing forth newness and life.

As we intentionally take time for reflection and repentance during this Lenten season, we **begin** in the wilderness. Lent can be a time to take stock in our lives, and to really begin to come clean about those things that tempt us. The wilderness is a place where we can let go of all pretense and allow ourselves to be honest and vulnerable. This wilderness experience can allow us to take a real look at the way we try to hide our pain, take a look at the perfectionism that plagues us, the competitive nature that drives us, and the brokenness that shapes our entire being. This wilderness experience can be a place where we find the freedom to confess the messiness of our lives. And, the truth of the matter is, the wilderness experience is not just a Lenten experience. Whether we like it or not, the wilderness is **the** place where we live out our lives.

I might be referencing MASH a bit much this morning and this may seem rather trite. However, those of you who watched the show might remember one episode where Father Mulcahy, the unit's priest, tried to talk with a wounded soldier who had been severely traumatized by what he witnessed on the front lines of the war. When this soldier finds out Father Mulcahy had not once even been close to where the fighting was taking place, he decides they just cannot talk. The soldier had no interest in hearing the pious platitudes of a person who had not been on the front lines and, consequently, could not relate to him and had no idea what he was talking about. Later in the episode, after Mulcahy **does** come under enemy fire and is forced to perform an emergency medical procedure on a different soldier even as shells are exploding all around him, the first soldier welcomes Father Mulcahy after all. Now they have a common frame of reference, now they can talk. And, now Mulcahy gets it.

In the person of Jesus, God has entered the front lines of human existence. In the person of Jesus, God has entered into the wilderness of **our** lives and engaged the sharp, jagged edges of this broken world. God **does** walk with us through all of life, all of our experiences in the wild.

This morning, we began this service giving thanks for baptism. In baptism, God has made us God's very own. God delights in us, messiness

and all and says to each one of us, “You are my child, you are marked by my love, and you are the pride of my life.” We have been given identity and status as we have been made God’s very own. And, as Jesus walks with each one of us through our own wilderness experiences, through the front lines of our lives, we discover more deeply our God-given identity that is all gift.

Alan Alda’s words **do** ring true. What you will discover in the wilderness **will** be wonderful. What you will discover is your true self, a child of God, deeply loved by the God of all creation.