



40 days in the wilderness

By Mary Minette, ELCA director for environmental education and advocacy

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil."

-- Luke 4:1-2

The 40 days of Lent echo the 40 days that Christ spent in the wilderness, fasting and resisting sinful temptations. I've often wondered why his struggle with temptation took place in wilderness, rather than in a city or town, where most of us would assume some presence of wickedness. I tend to associate wilderness with God's presence, rather than the presence of evil personified.

The passage in Luke where Christ goes to the wilderness and confronts Satan was the Gospel for the first Sunday in Lent this year, and it got me thinking about the presence of the Holy Spirit and of sin in wild places. Luke presents the wilderness as a blank and perhaps frightening place — outside of human civilization — ideal for a struggle between the elemental forces of good and evil. But Scripture also teaches us that God is revealed in wild places: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord ... then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together ..." (Isaiah 40:3-5).

Our modern (and Western) sense of wilderness — given to us by thinkers like John Muir and activists like Theodore Roosevelt — sees wild places not as empty and threatening but rather as places to preserve and cherish, where the

outside of the complications of industrial society. But in Christ's time, wilderness was probably a little scary — not only a place of solitude and the work of God, but also a place where civilization ended and the unknown began.

But I think that there are still those among us who feel this threatening sense of the unknown when confronted with wilderness; those among us who see wilderness this way may be less inclined to value it, and more inclined to want to “tame” it, to impose the trappings of modern western civilization on it, to exploit its resources, than to cherish it and leave it in its natural state.

In the wilderness, the spirit may lead and contemplation is possible, but even as we go to experience God, we bring our sin and human folly with us. In the homily he delivered at the inauguration of his ministry as pope on March 19, Francis named this danger and exhorted “all men and women of goodwill” to guard against it: “let us be ‘protectors’ of creation, protectors of God’s plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment. Let us not allow omens of destruction and death to accompany the advance of this world! But to be ‘protectors,’ we also have to keep watch over ourselves! Let us not forget that hatred, envy and pride defile our lives!”

Questions about wilderness and our role as “protectors” take real and relevant form when examining a current situation in the Bristol Bay region of Alaska. The state contains millions of acres of wilderness, but even in a state with abundant wild places, the area around Bristol Bay is unique. Home to the largest wild runs of sockeye salmon in the world, it provides sustenance for bears, for native Alaskan fishermen, for fishing boats from places as close by as Seattle and from as far away as Russia and Japan. Bristol Bay boasts not only a wilderness of solace and beauty, but also of sustenance and survival.

The mountains surrounding the bay also hold what may be one of the world's largest deposits of gold, and that treasure trove now threatens the future of the region. Two multinational companies are proposing to build a mine near the headwaters of three rivers that feed into Bristol Bay. The proposed open pit mine would cover an area up to two miles wide and 1,700 feet deep and would use toxic chemicals to extract the gold ore, generating tons of tailings and other waste. The mine’s waste dumpsites would need to be maintained in perpetuity in order to prevent toxic leaks into the watershed. The mining companies maintain that their operations will not risk the health of Bristol Bay and the creatures and people that depend upon it. In addition to the toxic risk of the mine operations, the multi-year mining process would bring thousands of new residents to what is now a very sparsely populated region, necessitate building many miles of roads and other infrastructure, and will alter permanently the face of this wild and

Does our human desire for gold and other resources found in Bristol Bay trump its value as a place where God's creation is present and thriving? Do we risk losing a pathway to the Holy Spirit when we lose places like Bristol Bay? How does Pope Francis' homily, exhorting us to value and protect creation, to resist death and destruction in the name of progress, affect your thinking about the proposed Pebble Mine?

If we lose the wild places of this world, will we lose opportunities to both find spirit and wrestle with our sin? According to Luke, Jesus returned from his time in the wilderness "filled with the power of the Spirit." As we turn from our thoughtful time in the wilderness of Lent and the sorrow of Good Friday to the joy of Easter, may we find a similar infusion of the Spirit.

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