

# In the Wilderness

SARAH STEWART · TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2016

by Rev. [Sarah Stewart](#)

I'm starting this sermon with some hard truths. I'm going to share some things that have happened in Massachusetts schools since Donald Trump became our nation's president-elect. Think of this as a kind of content warning: I have to start my sermon this morning with the truth of where we are, with the reality of what the wilderness we find ourselves in looks like. In this time and this place, it's not the unforgiving desert, or lack of food, or fleeing from the Pharaoh's army. It looks like this:

Two students from Babson College drove around the campus of Wellesley College, which is women-only and is Secretary Clinton's alma mater, "jeering at African American students and shouting...Make America Great Again." In a rural Worcester County town, an African American teenage girl was presented with a Trump sign by her white male classmates who wore Make America Great Again hats. A white fourth-grader at Flagg Street School yelled to his immigrant classmate, "Go home, I don't like tan people." A white liberal teenager in Groton returned to her locker to find a swastika drawn on paper stuck there. The wilderness looks like the vandalism of African American-owned businesses and property; it looks like verbal and physical attacks against people wearing head scarves and people with brown skin; it looks like children spouting their parents' bigotry. We know there are people who voted for Trump despite his rhetoric against women, people of color, Muslims and people with disabilities. We know not everyone who voted for him carries that hate in their hearts. We know many of his voters would condemn these actions. And he may yet be a different president than he was as a candidate. Yet he did run on a platform of bigotry, and since his election we find bigots emboldened and our deepest values threatened. We find ourselves in a place people of faith have been before: we are in the wilderness.

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\*\*\*\*\* When we, as people of faith, think of the wilderness, we think of the Israelites who fled Egypt. Their story has something to say to us. In the wilderness, they remembered who they were and whose they were, and built the community that could reach the promised land. You know the story. The Israelites have been slaves in the land of Egypt. A leader rises up from among them and demands of Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" The people rise in the night, carrying only what they need, no time even for the bread to rise. They flee—and at the last moment Pharaoh's army pursues them, drowning behind them

in the Red Sea as the Israelites enter into the desert. The desert. The desert the Israelites had not necessarily planned for when they signed up for the journey to the Promised Land. For 40 years—which is shorthand for “longer than we can even remember”—the people wandered in the wilderness. In the desert, they found themselves at the foot of the holy mountain, Moses gone up to talk to God, and they began to murmur and complain. “Maybe we had it better in the good old days! Not everyone was free, but everyone was fed! Now we don’t know where we are—out here in the wilderness looking for a way forward. Where’s that Promised Land we were supposed to find?” In that moment Moses came down the mountain with the law. He reminded the Israelites who they were and what God they belonged to. In our wilderness, we must remember who we are and whose we are. As a nation, we are a community of diverse races and cultures. We are many ethnicities. Some of us immigrated this year and some of our ancestors immigrated three hundred years ago. Some of us have American Indian ancestry rooted in this earth. We are men and women and trans together. We are many faiths together, living into the promise of freedom of worship even as Christianity’s majority becomes smaller. We are people of all physical abilities together. We are middle class and working class and wealthy and poor together. All of us make America. We must remember and celebrate who we are. In the wilderness we must remember whose we are. The Israelites in the wilderness have been called forward by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. “You will be my people and I will be your God.” Today we do not have a pillar of cloud or fire in front of us, reminding us of the values that claim us. But our deepest values and highest calling are still there, before us, reminding us of whose we are and who we are called to be. We are not excused from our values because a bigot wins the presidency. Now more than ever we must keep before our eyes our commitments to love, equity and justice. We must feel in our hearts the deep calling to our best selves in community. It is only when the people know whose they are and what they are committed to that they can move toward to promised land.

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\*\*\*\*\* The Israelites knew what it was to wander in the wilderness. So did the early community of Jesus’ followers. In the name of love, these groups of people gathered together to resist empire when empire was a spiritual wilderness for them. Jesus of Nazareth had a ministry of healing and challenge to the powers of empire. He preached that people could have a direct relationship with a sustaining force of love, and did not need the power structures or oppression of their day. He preached that the power of the Roman Empire was nothing before the love of God. He preached a radical equality

between women and men, between rich and poor, between welcomed-in and outcast. He taught and healed in the face of an empire which emphasized ethnic divisions, expanded through vicious taxation, and tortured or killed political dissidents. After Jesus' death, his followers began to branch out into the Greek community, so that Paul of Tarsus wrote to the Galatians: there is no Jew or Greek, there is no slave or free, there is no male and female, for all are one. And the empire came down just as hard on Jesus' communities as they had on Jesus himself. The letter we heard today was written by Paul to Jesus' followers in Philippi when Paul himself was in prison—the prison he would die in at the hands of the empire. And he writes to his people: remember who you are. “Have the same love.” “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others...” Paul was saying, Be together in love to resist the empire. Do not think of yourself as better than others, but of others as better than yourself. In another letter he wrote, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Be united in love to resist hate. Remember who you are and whose you are. Fear not, for I am with you. These are the lessons of the wilderness.

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\*\*\*\*\* Liberal religion is further into the wilderness than we had thought. I was going to preach this sermon about the work we still had to do, the work of the wilderness, regardless of who won the election. But now we know that the wilderness is vaster than we thought. The divides in our country are greater than ever, since many of our fellow Americans see this place not as the wilderness at all, but as the promised land. The winning side would tempt us with the opportunity to think ourselves better than some other Americans who have less power than we do. Our values tell us differently. We who have privilege must remember the experiences of those who do not. If we have money, we must understand what it is like to have none. If we are white, we must listen to the experiences of people of color. Dare to say that Black Lives Matter. If we are citizens, we must hear the cries of the undocumented immigrant. If we are far from our nation's wars, we must comfort the refugee. If we are temporarily able-bodied, we must see our world from the point of view of a disabled person. If we are men, we must believe our sisters' stories of harassment and abuse. If we are straight, we must trust our LGBT siblings. If we are human, we must care for the earth and take the part of her creatures. If we are privileged, we must listen first and talk later; be willing to follow as much as to lead; to start with the gesture of a safety pin or a social media post and follow up with solidarity in public and risking our privilege for the sake of all who have less than we do. When

you are in the wilderness, you look around to make common cause with the others who are there with you. You let yourself be welcomed by those who have been here a long time. Together, we can reach the promised land.

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\*\*\*\*\* There's one last thing about the wilderness. You think that everything will be healed once you get to the promised land. The Israelites could not wait to arrive in Canaan. Jesus' communities could not wait to escape persecution. Yet the stories tell us that Israel entered into Canaan by slaughtering their enemies, and the early church escaped persecution by becoming the empire it had despised. The promised land can just as easily become the wilderness for someone else. Even worse, we can trick ourselves into thinking that a puddle in the desert is a flowing spring, or a cactus an orchard, or a thorny shade a palace. We can wall off the "better" part of the wilderness as if to say we are better because we have claimed this for our own, or because within it we think we can find ideological purity. We can settle for a lifetime in the wilderness because we refuse to work across difference to get to the real promised land which is still ahead of us. We can build walls around our square of desert because we stubbornly believe that there is some group of people who don't belong. We will only reach the promised land, the true land flowing with milk and honey, when we realize that God's love runs through every person. We will only get to the peaceable reign of love when we know in our hearts that what befalls any one of us will befall us all. America is changing. Its future is more diverse in every way, yet more challenging to people at the economic margins and more uncertain for our global environment. What it means to be an American will change: it will be less Christian, less white, and younger; yet income inequality may continue to grow and disaster may be harder to recover from. America will become different; it may yet become better. We are all out here together. Together, we follow the pillar of our highest values and know the love of the holy in our hearts, the love that calls us and knows us and beckons us as one people and will not let us go. Amen.

Sources Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version McGuinness, Dylan and Olivia Quintana. "Babson apologizes to Wellesley College over offensive Trump backers." *The Boston Globe*. 11 Nov. 2016. Accessed 12 Nov. 2016.

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