

WILDERNESS: WEEK ONE

Everywhere and Nowhere | True Belonging | High Lonesome |
Move In Closer | Speak Truth. Kindly. | Hold Hands. With
Strangers | Strong. Soft. Wild.

SCRIPTURE:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." - Mark 1:9-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.
-Matthew 4:1-11

THE
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH, UCC
Lent 2024

How-to:

1. Find **six-seven times to meet** with your group between February 18 and April 6. Groups should be no fewer than 2(!) and no more than 10 people. If you choose to meet 6 times, combine weeks 1 and 2.
2. Each week, Elissa will pass out a handout with questions and quotes related to that week's sermon, to be used as the starting point for your group discussion. **Do not feel limited to them.** Feel free to bring your own material to supplement.
3. **Resist the urge** to focus on "what you will get" from this small group. Instead, ask yourself how you can contribute to this group, and what God is going to do through you because of this new community.
4. **Keep in mind** that healthy small groups will develop with an **investment** of time and a collection of shared experiences, and will flourish where there is trust and grace. Earn each other's trust by keeping **confidential** the personal details people share. Extend grace and respect to one another when you disagree on theology or on another topic. It will happen, and that's okay. As business leadership author Stephen R. Covey wrote, "Strength lies in differences, not in similarities."
5. **Pray.** Open with a check-in (a high/low from the week and/or an experience of God), so you bring all of yourselves to the meeting. Close with prayer requests for the week, that you might hold one another in prayer

For further Reflection:

"You are only free when you realize you belong no place—you belong every place—no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great.

-Maya Angelou

"Not belonging in our families is still one of the most dangerous hurts. That's because it has the power to break our heart, our spirit, and our sense of self-worth. It broke all three for me. And when those things break, there are only three outcomes, something I've borne witness to in my life and in my work:

- 1. You live in constant pain and seek relief by numbing it and/or inflicting it on others*
- 2. You deny your pain, and your denial ensures that you pass it on to those around you and down to your children; or*
- 3. You find the courage to own the pain and develop a level of empathy and compassion for yourself and others that allows you to spot hurt in the world in a unique way.*

I certainly tried the first two. Only through sheer grace did I make my way to the third.

-p.14, Braving the Wilderness

"I now understood the vulnerability and courage of standing on your own, [but] I still couldn't shake the underlying feeling of wanting to be a part of something. I wanted 'the squad'. He said, you have a squad, but it's small and not everyone in your squad is going to agree or do the same thing. But truthfully, you hate those kinds of squads anyway."

-p.27

"It wasn't that I swung from one extreme—finding value only in fitting—to another—finding value only in being different, defiant or contrarian. Those are two sides of the same coin. I was actually still craving belonging, and my decision to be on the outside of my profession kept me in almost constant anxiety and scarcity. The price of assimilating and doing what was expected of me would have cost too much.

-p.19

"You need to find a way to stop and bring yourself back here. This is a big deal. I don't want you to miss it." [...] After I looked around my room to make sure no one was watching the incredibly ridiculous thing I was about to do, I walked over to the desk in my room, sat down, and wrote myself a permission slip on a Post-it note from my computer bag. It simply said, 'Permission to be excited and goofy and to have fun.'" -p.20

FOR YOUR SELF-REFLECTION:

Start by reading chapter 1 in *Braving the Wilderness*. If you have not already, it will be helpful to listen to this week's sermon, available on the First Church Youtube page: <https://www.youtube.com/@FirstChurchBTV>.

1. Thinking about the scriptures above, how do you understand Jesus' 3 temptations? Are there equivalents in today's life?
2. What gives Jesus the strength to withstand his temptations?
3. If you have ever felt like you didn't belong somewhere important (church, school, home, etc.), which of the three outcomes (listed above) did you take?
4. When have you experienced challenge, suffering, or disappointment from which you thought you'd never recover, but through which you eventually made it and started to live life again?
 - a. What was it like to move on and see life from this new perspective? In what ways did this reorder of your world surprise you?
5. If you had to write yourself a permission slip to have your true self show up, what would it say?
 - a. How would the person who showed up be different?
 - b. What identities have you constructed that protect you from showing vulnerability or fear or shame to yourself and others? Reflect for a moment on the energy you expend in order to maintain these identities.

FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER:

Start by reading numbers 3-5 on the first page, and then begin by sharing what motivated you to join this group. For this week, instead of sharing an experience of God, share the first thing that comes to mind when you think about God. Go around the group and ask which question each person wants to make sure to discuss – then do it!

1. Discuss question one in the self-reflection section. What is the wilderness today?
2. When have you felt that you were in the wilderness? Where were you? What did it feel like? What gives you strength when you are in the wilderness?
3. Remember groups are formed by sharing, confidentiality, and vulnerability. With this in mind, talk about questions 4 and 5b.
4. "We all experience moments that, when left unspoken and unresolved, send us searching desperately for belonging and settling for fitting in." What is the difference between belonging and fitting in? How do they **feel** different?
5. Where do you feel you belong, most fully? Home? Church? A friend group?
 - a. Who is your *squad*? Do you have one? If so, how did/do you cultivate it?
6. Think about a moment you've been brave – maybe at work, maybe at home, or with a friend. What did you do? How did others respond? What did you learn?
7. Discuss, if you are willing, question three from the self-reflection question. Which of the three is your defense mechanism? Does it work?
 - a. Brown says "only through sheer grace did I make my way to the third." What's grace got to do with it?
8. Brown considers faith an essential part of her work, and an essential part of how we behave as human beings. How do you understand the relationship between faith and belonging?
 - a. What do this week's scriptures have to teach us about this question?
9. As a church, are there permission slips that we can encourage each other to write, and can we support each other in showing up in more courageous ways?
10. What does it mean to belong "everywhere and nowhere"?
 - a. Re:p.27 – how do you understand the strange dichotomy of being alone but still belonging? When/have you felt that?
 - b. Read together Maya Angelou's poem, "[Our Grandmothers](https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/our-grandmothers/)"? You can find it here: <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/our-grandmothers/> What does she mean when she says "I shall not be moved"?

What permission slip do we need to write for First Church?

Finish by sharing your joys and concerns with one another. Write them down if it will help you remember them. Pray over them for each other until your next gathering.

Closing Prayer (feel free to say your own!): Dear God, thank you for this time together, for the blessing of these relationships. Help us keep one another in mind this week, as well as the insights and the challenges of our conversation. In your name we pray, Amen.