

WILDERNESS: WEEK TWO

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

SCRIPTURE:

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Mark 9:2-9

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

John 1:1-5 "the prologue"

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

WILDERNESS: WEEK TWO

For further Reflection:

"Because **true belonging** only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves... our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance... "[... Belonging is] not something we achieve or accomplish with others; it's something we carry in our heart.... Belonging to ourselves means being called to stand alone—to brave the wilderness of uncertainty, vulnerability, and criticism. And with the world feeling like a political and ideological combat zone, this is remarkably tough. We seem to have forgotten that even when we're utterly alone, we're connected to one another by something greater than group membership, politics, and ideology—that we're connected by love and the human spirit. No matter how separated we are by what we think and believe, we are part of the same spiritual story." -p.32

Belonging so fully to yourself that you're willing to stand alone **is** a wilderness—an untamed, unpredictable place of solitude and searching. It is a place as dangerous as it is breathtaking, a place as sought after as it is feared. The wilderness can often feel unholy because we can't control it, or what people think about our choice of whether to venture into that vastness or not. But it turns out to be the place of true belonging, and it's the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand... The special courage it takes to experience true belonging is.. about **becoming** the wilderness. It's about breaking down the walls, abandoning our ideological bunkers, and living from our wild heart rather than our weary hurt.... We're going to need to intentionally be with people who are different from us... We're going to have to learn how to listen, have hard conversations, look for joy, share pain, and be more curious than defensive, all while seeking moments of togetherness." -p.36-7

"Seven elements of trust emerged from the data...

Boundaries -You respect my boundaries, and when you're not clear about what's okay and not okay, you ask. You're willing to say no.

Reliability—You do what you'll say you do. This means staying aware of your competencies and limitations so you don't overpromise and are able to deliver on commitments and balance competing priorities.

Accountability—You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends.

Vault—You don't share information or experiences that are not yours to share...

Integrity—You choose courage over comfort. You choose what is right over what is fun, fast, or easy. And you choose to practice your values rather than simply professing them.

Nonjudgment—I can ask for what I need, and you can ask for what you need. We can talk about how we feel without judgment.

Generosity—You extend the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words, and actions of others."

-p.38

"Every single creature—the teen mother nursing her child, every one of the twenty thousand species of butterflies, an immigrant living in fear, a blade of grass, you reading this book—all are 'in Christ' ... [Without an understanding of this] shared 'big story', we all retreat into private individualism... [the] primary example [of which is] the way we continue to pollute and ravage planet earth, the very thing we all stand on and live from. Science now appears to love and respect physicality more than most religion does! "No wonder science and business have taken over as the major explainers of meaning for the vast majority of people today (even many who still go to church). We Christians did not take this world seriously, I am afraid, because our notion of God or salvation [narrowed so that it] didn't include or honor the physical universe. And now, I am afraid, the world does not take us seriously." (Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, pp.44, 46)

Instead of saying that God came into the world through Jesus, maybe it would be better to say that Jesus came **out of** an already Christ-soaked world. This is no visitation from **another** world. God's presence is revelation—quite literally a revealing or an uncovering—from **within** this world. When we breathe in the fresh air, swim in the sea, walk in a forest, touch the soil with our bare feet, and interact with animals and other humans, we are solidly connected to the first Incarnation." – Richard Rohr and Patrick Boland, *TUC study guide*.

Anything that draws you out of yourself in a positive way—for all practical purposes—is operating as God for you at that moment. How else can the journey begin? How else are you drawn forward, now not by idle

beliefs, but by inner aliveness? God needs something to seduce you out of yourself, so God uses three things in particular: goodness, truth and beauty. All three have the capacity to draw us into an experience of union. You cannot think your way into this kind of radiant, expansive seeing. You must be caught in a relationship of love and awe now and then, and it often comes slowly, through osmosis, imitation, resonance, contemplation, and mirroring. The Christ is always given freely, tossed like a baton from the other side. Our only part in the process is to reach out and catch it every now and then. ... [Sacred] Presence is never self-generated, but always a gift from another, and faith is always relational at its core. Divine seeing cannot be done alone, but only...subject to subject.... It can happen in a physical gesture, a quiet word or smile, a meal shared with someone we care for, where we are suddenly enlivened by a force larger than the two of us. It is so important to taste, touch, and trust such moments. Words and ...rituals get in the way at this point. All you can really do is return such Presence with your own presence. Nothing to believe here at all. Just learn to trust and draw forth your own deepest experience, and you will know the Christ all day every day...because you are already fully accepted and fully accepting." Rohr, TUC, 52-3

FOR YOUR SELF-REFLECTION:

Start by reading chapter 2 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 scripture above, how do you understand the transfiguration? What happened? Have you ever felt profoundly connected to past, present and future? Where? Why?
2. Why did the voice tell Peter, James and John to listen to Jesus? Who else do we often listen to?
3. Of the seven elements of trust – BRAVING – which are hardest for you? If someone were to violate one of the seven, which one would bother you the most? Which ones do you feel are most key?
 - a. How can you work on developing those elements within your closest relationships?
 - b. Which of these seven are the hardest in your relationship with yourself?
4. Rohr and Brown are speaking of the same type of experience, from different perspectives. Which is easier for you to understand? Why?

FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER!:

Start by reading numbers 3-5 on the first page, and then 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. Thinking about Elissa's sermon, and her time with her grandmother at the cemetery, can you think of a similar experience in your own life? A place where you know you fully belong – not just as yourself, but as part of something wholly larger than we can describe?
2. Think of a time when you were 'drawn out of yourself' and into the sacred whole. What was it about that moment that brought a deep resonance to your soul?
3. Where are there opportunities for you to listen to people whose experiences and perspectives are different from yours? Are you taking advantage of them? Why or why not?
4. Does it change anything for you that in the Eastern Orthodox church, salvation is understood as 'divinization'? How might divinization, salvation, lead to true belonging – the kind both Rohr and Brown are speaking of?
5. BRAVING (the seven elements of trust) is a powerful wilderness checklist because it allows us to talk is a vulnerable and courageous process.
 - a. What language of trust, faith, and belonging do we use at First Church?
 - b. How does self-trust show up as a prerequisite of courageous behavior?
 - c. How does faith inform your self-trust?
6. Rohr writes that "a merely personal God becomes tribal and sentimental, and a merely universal God never leaves the realm of abstract theory and philosophical principles... To be loved by Jesus enlarges our heart capacity, to be loved by the Christ enlarges our *mental* capacity. We need both." (19).
 - a. How do you understand the Word, or Christ in the prologue of John?
 - b. Rohr differentiates the person of Jesus—the physical union of full humanity and full divinity—with the Christ—the presence of God in all things from the beginning. Which aspect of the

¹ Some of these questions come from study guides created by Brown and Rohr themselves.

Incarnation do you most resonate with – the personal or the universal? Which helps you to be courageous? Why?

7. What keeps you from belonging fully to yourself? To God?
8. What parts of yourself are you still trying to silence instead of own? What does Jesus, or Christ, have to say about this?
9. Rohr writes that "our circles of belonging tend to either expand or constrict as life goes on... If we are inherently skeptical and suspicious, the focus narrows. If we are hopeful and trusting, the focus continues to expand," (51).
 - a. Would others characterize you as someone whose circles of belonging are expanding or constricting as your life goes on?
10. Quoting Joseph Campbell, Brown writes, "if you can see your path laid out in front of you step by step, you know it's not your path. Your own path you make with ever step you take. That's why it's your path."
 - a. Do you tend to follow well-worn paths? Can you discern the next steps? How does that make you feel?
 - b. Think of a time when you didn't know the next step? How did that feel like the wilderness? Did you belong to yourself in that moment, or to others? How did/might faith help?
11. Does Church (universal, and at First) reward belonging or fitting in?
 - a. What could you do to help create a culture of belonging?

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.