

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday February 18 2024**

The First Sunday in Lent

**Solemn Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Preston Gonzalez-Grissom, *Assistant for Children and Family Ministries*

*on*

Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

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## **“Learning to See the Wilderness”**

I come to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good Morning beloved church. I am Father Preston.

Gonzalez-Grissom and I am the new Assistant Priest for Children and Family Ministry.

There are many ways I could introduce myself, but I’d like to start with telling you some of the people who have made me who I am.

I am the son of Kerry and Taylor. I am the grandson of a preschool teacher, an accountant, a judge, and a beer truck delivery driver.

And I have been more blessed by wonderful mentors than I deserve.

One of those mentors was my seminary professor and priest.

She was diagnosed with cancer during my time as a student and she boldly shared her stories about navigating the wilderness of a difficult diagnosis and the uncertainty of her future.

She helped me understand what it meant to live in the midst of “the Dark Night of the Soul.”

This phrase “Dark Night of the Soul” was coined by Saint John of the Cross and it is often misunderstood.

Many think of it as a time of sadness or depression or even when you cannot feel God’s presence.

But the “Dark Night of the Soul” is when you cannot see in front of you, you do not know what is coming next.

In the Bible, this experience is exemplified, most acutely ...by the Wilderness.

John the Baptist, who makes an appearance in our Gospel reading, lives his entire adult life in the Wilderness, in the desert, unsure when Jesus will appear.

In our OT reading Noah and his family emerge from the arc after months of not knowing when the rain will stop.

The Wilderness is where we find ourselves when we do not know what will happen next and we feel out of control. Do you know what this is like? Of course you do.

We all have seasons in our lives that remind us, we are not as in control as we thought.

We live in a fallacy that says if we are well-educated enough, if we have enough money, if we are moral enough, if we make all the right choices we can be in complete control of our lives.

Of course, many of us, myself included, have a lot of control of what happens next. But, sooner or later, the Wilderness comes for us all. It is part of being human.

“We do not know if the school we want to attend will accept our application.

We do not know that our health will hold up.

We do not know what our children’s lives will look like in the future.

Whether we will be remembered, or if the work we do will fade into history.’

The truth is, no matter how hard we push against it, we all must face the future we do not know, and often cannot control.

**At one point or another, it will be our turn to enter the Wilderness.**

And luckily for us, our Lectionary readings know this, and they give us at least (2) two things to do in the Wilderness.

**The first is they tell us we must LEARN TO SEE**

A fundamental work in the Christian Life is Learning to See—to perceive what God is doing in the world. In the story of Noah,

God says 7 times - so that we will not miss it - that He will give Noah and all other creatures of the world a visible symbol of His promises, a rainbow.

That when they see it they will remember, no matter how hard the rain has been falling, there is this beautifully displayed collision of light.

Our NT passage mentions the sacrament of baptism because the Sacrament of Baptism is a visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus goes through His own baptism, and the gospel writer John says “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a Dove.” We must learn to see.

This past Wednesday, was Ash Wednesday, the day of Lent, where we had ashes smudged on our forehead in the form of a cross as a visible reminder that we are not always in control.

**And we do not know what is next.**

And though we live in a world trying to hide the fact that we will die,  
There will come a day.

**Ash Wednesday, and all of Lent really, We train our eyes to learn to see in the Wilderness**

**In the midst of this Wilderness, we are not just encouraged to learn to see, but to See where our lives WITHIN THE STORY OF GOD.**

In the story of Noah God makes a covenant, a promise to Noah, but it is really a promise to the entire world. The Covenant God makes is with “Noah, his descendants, and every living creature on earth.”

God is saying, I am not giving up on my Creation. No matter how wicked you become, no matter how hopeless the world seems to be, I will not give up on you.

The story God is telling includes us but it is also bigger than us.

And the Rainbow is given as this sign, and (energy & fast) interestingly in the Hebrew, there is no word for Rainbow, as such, the word is “Bow” and in “Bow and Arrow.”

So, if the rainbow is actually a bow, which way would the arrow be pointing? Up.

Ancient readers would see this more clearly, but there it is.

The rainbow given to “Noah, his descendants, and every living creature” is a sign that even though you may find yourself in the Wilderness, your future, no matter how difficult, is ultimately NOT one of destruction.

**The arrow is NOT pointing at you.**

It has been thrust into Jesus’ side and the waters which could overwhelm us

**Are now poured out of His body** and they have become for us the water of life.

That is our Story.

That we may find ourselves in the Wilderness, unsure of the next chapter, but positively certain of the Ending.

My dear professor’s story did not go the way we hoped.

At her funeral, I found myself on the left side of the pew in a church filled with fellow mourners. After the last song, “He will raise us up on the last day” we stream out of the chapel and as I am walking to my car I look up and see ...a rainbow.

The moment was almost too clique if it were not true. \_\_\_\_\_

I looked over to my right and I locked eyes with my dear professor’s husband, now a widower. And he looks at me and cried out, “Do you see that? She loved rainbows!” \_\_\_\_\_

and at that moment I remembered a phrase she once said, “In the Christian tradition a life is not ended, it is changed.”

Friends, one day the Wilderness will be remade and the tears which now blur our ability to see, will be wiped away and we will see Him face to face.

Beloved, you have so many stories to tell, some of those take place in the Wilderness, and I’m so glad we now get to carry them together. Thanks be to God.