

What is Wilderness? by Evelyn Sommers, CSJ

There are times when a word or phrase haunts me. This word may appear on the cover of a book, is part of an article in a magazine, or may come as a desire or longing. Since last February such a word for me was *wilderness*. Looking for a book to pray with during Lent, I noticed one on the Desert Mothers. As I read the titles of the chapters, I realized that it would be easy for me to change the word desert to wilderness. It became clear to me that the desert mothers, the AMMAS, could be guides for my Lenten journey. Soon another book entitled *Wisdom of the Wilderness* attracted my attention from a book store window. The introduction of this book told of solo experiences of being in the wilderness and how those experiences became a teacher. An article in an outdoor magazine brought the thoughts of the past months together. The article asked the question what is *Wilderness*? That question became the question I asked myself over and over before my retreat at Christ in the Wilderness. When my time of retreat arrived, I knew that God and I would sit with this question. I began thinking about the landscapes on Earth where wilderness is found – the sandy wasteland of the desert mothers, the wooded forests, mountains, wide open seas as well as retreat hermitages for the soul to find its natural homeland. Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha, the Irish Monks who wandered the ocean in open boats, Dakota medicine men and women, Elijah the prophet, all found God's presence through a desert/wilderness sojourn. The wilderness for all of these women and men is a place to be alone with God and self, to reverence the beauty of creation, to listen to the wisdom of silence and solitude, to become vulnerable. Being somewhat satisfied with the answer to my question of many months, I was able for now to put it aside. The silence and solitude encouraged me to put my mind at rest and to begin paying attention and listen to the stillness which surrounded me. It was during this time of being with, I sensed that God was now alluring me into another kind of wilderness – that of the soul. One night I woke up after only a few hours of sleep and decided to sit on the deck of the hermitage. I gazed up at the stars naming a few of the constellations. Soon however, the silent beauty of the stars filled my soul with awe. The divine Presence became so real I could almost touch it. To simply be with that Presence was prayer without words. After a while I looked to the spaces between the stars where another wilderness was discovered. This wilderness invited me to expand my horizons, my way of looking at life, to explore my creativity, my inner dreams, to enter into the mystery of God. On the deck that night, being with the stars, the answer to how shall I be in the wilderness was answered. The wilderness taught me to simply be not only with my prayer but with my way of life. To live in awe, reverence, and trust, to take time for silence, and to be willing to be surprised by God's Presence. To simply be. As I was walking my dog this morning, I noticed that most of the trees have lost their leaves. In their stark beauty, they are in a state of to simply be. The tree seemed to stand in the silent growth of wilderness. What a wonderful reminder for me of my retreat, and to continue living and being a sojourner in the wilderness. John Muir once said, "I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in." ~John Muir, 1913, in L.M. Wolfe, ed., *John Muir, John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, 1938.