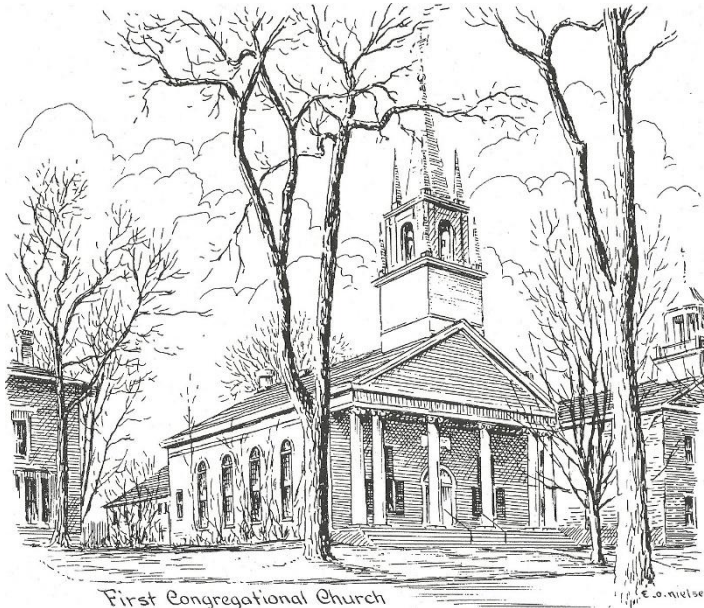


First Congregational Church
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
An Open and Affirming Church



We welcome you to the First Congregational Church of Wiscasset.

VISION: We are on a journey to reflect God's love, embracing diversity and affirming the dignity and worth of all.

MISSION: Together we strive to praise God, grow in faith, cultivate love, spread joy, care for all people and God's creation, promote peace, and do justice.

February 22, 2026

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, MESOM SUNDAY

We welcome all to our worship service, whether present in the sanctuary, joining us on streaming video, or watching our service in the future.

Spiritual Contemplation Quote for the week: “Nothing great is ever achieved without much enduring.” —*Saint Catherine of Siena*

PRELUDE *Prelude Fugue (Bach)* & *Crown Hymn*

RINGING OF THE BELL

WELCOME and ANNOUNCEMENTS

* CALL TO WORSHIP

L: We say together:

P: If you're splashing in streams of abundance, we welcome you – share your joy. If you're parched in a desert wasteland,

L: we welcome you – share your doubts. If you're relaxing in the light of contentment, we welcome you – share your peace.

P: If you're stumbling on a road of suffering, we welcome you – share your pain.

L: We pray together:

P: God of water, earth, light and brokenness we welcome you, as you welcome us.

* OPENING HYMN

'Guide Me O Great Jehovah'

No. 102

INVOCATION TO PRAYER

God of feasting and fasting, mountaintop and desert, you gather us together by your Holy Spirit. May we follow Jesus into the wilderness, feeding on your living bread and tasting your water of life. We come hungry and thirsty for more of you, God. Amen.

Congregational Lenten Response “Wilderness Grumbling”: Written by Bob Hartman, used with permission.

L: Forty days after their escape from Egypt, the people of Israel were hungry. So they went to Moses and Aaron and complained.

P: People of Israel replied : Meat pots in the morning, white bread, wheat and rye. We ate our fill in Egypt, but now we're going to die! So Moses went to God

and told God what the people had said (as if God didn't know already!)and this is how God replied.

L: "Heaven's bread" at daybreak I'll provide, "Quail Surprise" at dusk. I'll send enough for just one day to teach my people trust. There was an exception, of course. On the sixth day, the people had to collect two days' worth of the food God sent, so they didn't have to do it on the Sabbath. So Moses and Aaron went back to the people, who were still complaining:

P: People of Israel replied- Meat pots in the morning, white bread, wheat and rye. We ate our fill in Egypt, but now we're going to die! In response to which, Moses and Aaron had a moan of their own!

L: Moses & Aaron said: We've had it with your moaning. We find it rather odd that you complain to us instead of grumbling to God. Just as Aaron said it, the glory of God appeared in a cloud above the wilderness. God spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard my people's grumbling, so this is what I shall do:

P: "Heaven's bread" at daybreak I'll provide, "Quail Surprise" at dusk. I'll send enough for just one day to teach my people trust. Sure enough, quail arrived and covered the camp that evening. Then, sure enough, when the people of Israel woke the next day, they found flaky stuff all over the ground, fine as frost.

L: Even though they did not know exactly what it was, they ate it, and they were no longer hungry. As a result, the moaning of the people...

P: People of Israel replied-Meat pots in the morning, white bread, wheat and rye. We ate our fill in Egypt, but now we're going to die! Then the frustration of Aaron and Moses who replied - We've had it with your moaning! We've had it with your moaning. We find it rather odd that you complain to us instead of grumbling to God.

L: Then the people were transformed by God's power and mercy into something they would never forget: "Heaven's bread" at daybreak, "Quail Surprise" at dusk. I'll send enough for just one day to teach my people to trust.

JOYS AND CONCERNS: After each Joy or Concern, Please respond:

Pastor: "God," Congregation: **"Hear our prayer."**

LIGHTING OF THE PEACE CANDLE

Global Mission Partner Prayer this week: China

LENTEN RESPONSE PRAYER

L: Sometimes we feel like we're walking through the wilderness:

P: Jesus we choose to walk with you.

L: When our spirits feel dry, help us trust in your Spirit:

P: Jesus we choose to walk with you.

L: Fasting seems difficult, prayers seem unanswered:

P: Jesus we choose to walk with you.

L: The world howls like wild animals all around us:

P: Jesus we choose to walk with you.

L: We can choose to worry, or to trust you to provide:

P: Jesus we choose to walk with you.

L: Temptation is everywhere, doubts can overwhelm us:

P: Jesus we choose to walk with you.

L: You know what it's like to walk through this desert:

P: Jesus we choose to walk with you.

L: You long to transform us with wilderness worship:

P: Jesus we choose to walk with you. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER

SILENT MOMENTS FOR PERSONAL PRAYER

LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

SCRIPTURE LESSON

Deuteronomy 8:1-5, 15-18 Mark 1:9-13

Liturgist: This is the Word of God. People: **Thanks be to God.**

* HYMN

Spirit of the Living God' (Sing Twice)

No.281

SERMON

'A Spirit Led Journey'

OFFERTORY PRAYER

OFFERTORY

I Heard the Voice of Jesus

Please join us for fellowship, coffee or tea, and refreshments in Fellowship Hall following worship.

Please take note of the colored paper prayer slips in the pew rack. These are for you to write a word or phrase of prayer or concerns. Fold it and place it in the offering plate. It will only be shared with Rev. John.

Happy February Birthday to Tom Beane, Laura Downing and Sally Howe

Help Yourself Shelf Wish List

* jarred spaghetti sauce * 1lb. white rice * drink mixes * canned chicken * tuna *
* cereal * SPAM * mayo * baked beans * toothpaste * dish soap * cat litter *

Youth Group Food/Pet Food Drive

The Youth Group is leading a food and pet food drive for the month of February. All donations will go to support our neighbors at the Help Yourself Shelf. Items can be brought in throughout the month and put in the box in Fellowship hall.

Shining the Light of Christ
FIRST
CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH
in the Heart of Wiscasset

Deut. 8:1-5,15-18 A Warning Not to Forget God in Prosperity

8 “The entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase and go in and occupy the land that the LORD PROMISED on oath to your ancestors.² Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.³ He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. ⁴ The clothes on your back did not wear out, and your feet did not swell these forty years. ⁵ Know, then, in your heart that, as a parent disciplines a child, so the LORD YOUR God disciplines you.

15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous[a] snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock. ¹⁶ He fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷ Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Mark 1:9-13 The Baptism of Jesus

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. ¹¹ And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved;[a] with you I am well pleased.”

This is the Word of God.

Thanks be to God.

New Revised Standard Version Updated Version

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Today, Sunday February 22, we are collecting an offering for Maine School of Ministry (MESOM). MESOM works with students practicing congregational leadership and those discovering a path to pastoral ministry.

Reminder: Rev. John is having a Lord's Prayer Lenten study on 2/25. He will be providing soup that evening, and the consensus is to begin dinner at 5:30, followed by the study. There is no book, no homework, no preparation- just bring yourself and join in conversation and reflection.

Coming Up This Week

Monday, February 23

Rev. John's Office Hours 9:00am – 12:00pm

Office Hours 9:30am – 1:30pm

Mah Jongg 3:00 – 5:30pm

Tuesday, February 24

Rev. John's Office Hours 9:00am – 12:00pm

Office Hours 9:30am – 1:30pm

Sheepscot Valley Chorus 7:00 – 9:00pm

Wednesday, February 25

Rev. John's Office Hours 9:00am – 12:00pm

Office Hours 10:00am – 2:00pm

Organ Society 9:30am

Feed Our Scholars packing 11:00am

Lord's Prayer Lenten Study 5:30pm

Sunday, March 1

Sunday Worship 10:00am-Communion given.

Coffee Hour in Fellowship Hall following Worship

Worship Team Meeting Following Coffee Hour

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Music Director: Joel Pierce
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A Spirit Led Journey 2/22 FCCW Rev. John Hogue Deut 8:1-5; 15-18 Mark 1:9-13

A Spirit-led journey reminds me of a very spiritual experience many of us have had here in Maine... trying to find a place “just a little off the main road.” You know how this goes. Someone gives you directions like:

“Turn left where the old bait shack used to be — not the new one, the old one — then go past the tree that looks like a moose, and if you hit the ocean, you’ve gone too far.” Your GPS? Completely confused. “Recalculating... praying for you... good luck.”

Before long, you’re driving deeper into the woods thinking: Well, this is how every mystery show starts. You start wondering:

- “Do people actually live out here?”
- “Will I ever see cell service again?”
- “Is this still a road or just a suggestion?”

Then — just when you think you’re lost — you find a beautiful harbor view or the perfect lobster shack or in the western mountains a wonderful maple house setting and say: “Okay... the journey was worth it.”

Beloved, that’s a lot like a Spirit-led life.

God sometimes leads us down roads we wouldn’t choose, through wilderness we didn’t plan, into places where we feel uncertain.....but somehow, God knows exactly where we’re going —even when we don’t. That’s exactly what our scriptures today show us:

God leads people on journeys that feel confusing, challenging, even wild — yet those journeys are where faith grows. Yet unlike Maine directions... **God never forgets where the bait shack used to be.**

Would you agree with me that life has both mountaintop moments and desert days? There are times when you feel on top of the world, and others when it feels like you’re just stumbling through the dust. There are times when you feel well fed, comfortable and surrounded by loved ones, and others where you’re hungry, thirsty, lonely and tired. In our relationship with God, we have moments when we feel very close to God - perhaps at Pilgrim Lodge, a worship event, enjoying your coffee in the morning, on a retreat or a holiday. Then we have other days when God seems far away, when we doubt God or struggle with temptations. If you feel like that, you are

not alone. Everyone has these ups and downs, these mountaintop moments and desert days. Our Lent series is going to help us **journey** with Jesus through the desert wilderness.

Today I want to highlight three things about our wilderness experiences.

1) Wilderness is not a sign of God's absence. The people of Israel experienced a huge mountaintop moment. They were led out of slavery in Egypt and then God parted the Red Sea, allowing them to pass. They celebrated this by singing a joyful worship song, dancing and playing percussion instruments (Ex. 15). They were on top of the world.

Yet very quickly they reach a desert or wilderness called Shur, where there is no fresh water. Here their joy turns to grumbling, their worship turns to distrust. They immediately doubt that God is with them. They start to long for their days in Egypt, and complain that they are going to die. Yet in both the deserts of Shur and Sin, God provides for them: with fresh water and with Manna bread and quail meat.

Our passage from Deuteronomy shows us the reason why all this happened: When we experience the struggles of the wilderness we should not see them as punishments from God, or signs that God is uncaring or non-existent. Instead we should see that the wilderness is an opportunity for God to test our hearts. Do we really trust in God, or do we trust in our own abilities?

2) We are led by the Spirit into the wilderness

Jesus begins his ministry with a very similar pattern to the people of Israel. He passes through the waters - not the Red Sea, but the waters of baptism in the Jordan river. Again, this is a mountaintop experience, where the Spirit descends and the voice of his Father speaks words of affirmation and devotion: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mk. 1:11). We might expect that after this high-point Jesus would launch into his ministry of preaching and demonstrating the Kingdom of God. Yet this is not what happens. Like Israel before him Jesus goes from the waters to the wilderness, from spiritual feasting to the struggle of fasting, from affirmation to loneliness and temptation. "At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness." (Mark 1:12)

Have you experienced that? Moments where you thought God was calling you, sending you, empowering you, followed by setbacks or disappointments? Times of refreshing followed by periods of dryness? **If so, take heart that you are following in the footsteps of Jesus. Wilderness is often a place that the Spirit of God leads us to.**

3) Wilderness is a place of worship and transformation

Ultimately, God leads us into the wilderness so that we might learn to worship. He says to Pharaoh through Moses: “Let my people go that they may worship me in the wilderness.” (Exodus 7:16) Worship in the wilderness might look quite different to worship on the mountaintop. It is great to have joyful hymns and songs, to celebrate with banners and colors and people. But wilderness worship is often about taking away rather than adding more. It might involve aspects of worship such as fasting, or solitude, or simplicity. It might turn us towards silence, or lament, or giving things away. **Better yet, let us give away ripples of kindness and compassion around us.**

Imagine in your mind, you are walking towards Jesus, and Jesus is reaching out his arms to embrace you. However, as you look down your arms are full of stuff. What is it that your arms are full of - the things that you rely on for your worship and your life? Are they full of musical instruments; full of computers or books; full of food and drinks; full of work and activity; full of relationships and family? None of these are bad things, in fact they are gifts of God. But God knows that for us to grow in him we might need to start putting down some of these things we’re carrying.

Lent and wilderness is about laying down some of these things until we have empty hands. Hands held out ready to receive from God, to be embraced by God. Some of us may feel we have had wilderness thrust upon us. You might be going through a desert time right now as many folks in America are experiencing. God is with us, God never wants to see you suffer but God is passionate to see you trust in God and learn to worship in the wilderness. God in simplicity will prepare us for whatever lies ahead. Israel was transformed through her wilderness worship. We can be too.

Consider two of the many saints who have been transformed by the wilderness experience: Anthony the Great. Anthony lived from (251–356 AD), often called the father of Christian monasticism, literally went into the desert wilderness.

- After his parents died, Anthony heard Jesus’ words in church: “Sell what you have... and follow me.”
- He gave away his wealth and went into the Egyptian desert.
- There he faced intense loneliness, temptation, fear, and spiritual struggle.
- Instead of breaking him, the wilderness deepened his faith and clarity.
- People began seeking him out for wisdom, healing, and spiritual guidance.

- His life sparked the entire Christian monastic movement — thousands pursued lives of prayer and service because of his witness.

What feels like abandonment can become preparation. The wilderness became his calling.

Harriet Tubman. She described her leadership of enslaved people to freedom as being directed by the Holy Spirit.

- Born into slavery, she escaped alone.
- She later returned repeatedly to dangerous territory to lead others to freedom.
- She navigated forests, swamps, and wilderness routes of the Underground Railroad.
- Tubman spoke openly about visions, dreams, and divine guidance directing her decisions.
- She led about 70 people to freedom and never lost a single passenger.

The wilderness was not just physical terrain — it was fear, danger, and uncertainty — yet it became a pathway for liberation.

There's something about Maine that teaches you respect for the journey.

You don't just arrive at places here — you travel winding roads, face changing weather, and sometimes wonder if your GPS has given up and gone home. In Maine, the journey shapes you. And scripture tells us the same is true with God.

Today's texts remind us of a deep spiritual truth:

God leads us not only into blessing — but also into wilderness. The wilderness is where faith grows. **The Wilderness Is Not Punishment — It's Formation**

God provided manna — daily bread they could not store or control.

They had to trust God every morning. Wilderness living teaches dependence.

Then we turn to Jesus in Mark's Gospel. Immediately after his baptism — after hearing, "You are my beloved Son" — the Spirit drives him into the wilderness.

Notice this:

- The Spirit leads him there.
- The wilderness follows affirmation.
- Testing follows a calling.

Even Jesus walks the Spirit-led wilderness path.

If we're honest with each other, we prefer smooth sailing.

We want:

- faith without struggle,
- growth without discomfort,

- resurrection without wilderness.

However, God shapes people the way Maine shapes its coastline through pressure, wind, and persistence. God forms resilient faith.

A lobsterman off the coast of Maine once shared a story with a pastor friend of mine. He had been fishing for decades. One morning, thick fog rolled in so heavily he couldn't see beyond the bow of his boat. His GPS malfunctioned. The radio crackled. He was disoriented. For hours he drifted slowly, resisting panic. Instead of rushing blindly, he did what older fishermen taught him:

He listened. He cut the engine. He watched the tide. He listened for the bell buoy. He felt the wind direction. Eventually he found his bearings and made it safely to harbor.

Later he said: "The fog didn't teach me anything new — it made me trust what I already knew." That's wilderness faith.

The fog reveals whether we trust the Guide. And he added something profound: "You never learn the sea on calm days."

Beloved, you never learn deep trust in easy seasons.

God Provides in the Wilderness

The wilderness strips away illusions of self-sufficiency. It teaches:

- gratitude over entitlement
- dependence over control
- trust over anxiety

In Maine terms — wilderness faith knows you don't control the ocean, but you can trust the One who holds it.

Jesus Shows Us How to Walk the Journey In Mark, Jesus faces temptation:

- hunger
- isolation
- testing

Yet God provides.

The wilderness is never empty of God's presence.

You may feel alone —but God is working, strengthening, preparing.

We all walk wilderness seasons:

- uncertainty about the future
- church transitions and questions
- illness or loss
- cultural change

- spiritual dryness
- No compassion for the poor, struggling working class

Here is the hope of today's message:

The wilderness is not where God leaves you.

It is where God meets you.

- Israel found provision.
- Jesus found strength.
- We find transformation.

The same Spirit still leads, sustains, and restores.

Life with God is not always a cruise ship in Casco Bay on a sunny afternoon or sitting on the rock ledge on Blue Mountain. Sometimes it's a small boat in heavy fog, listening for the bell buoy, trusting the tide, moving slowly forward. But the harbor is real. The Guide, God, is faithful and the journey changes us.

A lifelong Mainer named Earl, to protect his identity, decided he needed a "spiritual retreat."

Now in Maine, this usually means one of three things:

- going into the woods,
- getting lost in the woods, or
- pretending you meant to get lost in the woods.

Earl chose all three.

He told his pastor, "I'm heading into the wilderness to listen for the Holy Spirit."

His pastor nodded wisely and said, "Bring extra socks."

The Wilderness Experience

Earl packed what he considered essential spiritual equipment:

- a Bible
- a thermos of coffee strong enough to wake the dead
- two whoopie pies
- and absolutely no map (because "the Spirit will guide").

Three hours later, the Spirit apparently guided him straight into a bog.

Boot stuck. Pride wounded. Mosquitoes rejoicing.

Standing knee-deep in mud, Earl prayed his most honest prayer ever:

"Lord... if this is transformation, I'd prefer a different method."

Exhausted, he wandered until he reached a rocky shore where an old lobster trap had washed up. He sat on it, defeated, wet, and slightly chewed by nature.

That's when something shifted. The wind quieted. The waves slowed.

A deep stillness settled over him.

And in that silence came a gentle realization:

- He couldn't control the wilderness.
- He couldn't force clarity.
- He couldn't muscle his way to God like fixing an outboard motor.

He later described it simply: "I felt held... like God was saying, 'Sit down, Earl. I've been talking the whole time.'"

And in Maine especially — God often speaks after you sit down, stop talking, and admit you should've brought a map.

Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah

1. Guide me, O thou great Je - ho - vah, pil - grim through this
 2. O - pen now the crys - tal foun - tain, whence the heal - ing
 3. When I tread the verge of Jor - dan, bid my anx - ious

bar - ren land; I am weak, but thou art might - y; hold me with thy
 stream doth flow; let the fire and cloud - y pil - lar lead me all my
 fears sub - side; lead me on through death's de - struc - tion, land me safe on

power - ful hand. Bread of heav - en, bread of heav - en,
 jour - ney through. Strong de - liv - erer, strong de - liv - erer,
 Ca - naan's side. Songs of prais - es, songs of prais - es,

feed me till I want no more; feed me till I want no more.
 be thou still my strength and shield; be thou still my strength and shield.
 I will ev - er give to thee; I will ev - er give to thee.

WORDS: William Williams, 1745; st. 1, tr. Peter Williams, 1771; sts. 2,3, tr. William Williams, 1772, alt.
 MUSIC: John Hughes, 1907

Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart 224

1. Spir - it of God, de - scend up - on my heart;
 2. I ask no dream, no proph - et ec - sta - sies,
 3. Hast thou not bid us love thee, our true Light?
 4. Teach me to feel that thou art al - ways nigh;
 5. Teach me to love thee as thine an - gels love,

warm it with hope, through all its puls - es move;
 no sud - den rend - ing of the veil of clay,
 All, all thine own: soul, heart, and strength, and mind;
 teach me the strug - gles of the soul to bear:
 one ho - ly pas - sion fill - ing all my frame;

stoop to my weak - ness, might - y as thou art,
 no an - gel vis - it - ant, no o - pening skies,
 I see thy cross, my bea - con in the night;
 to check the ris - ing doubt, the reb - el sigh;
 the bap - tism of the heaven - de - scend - ed Dove.

and make me love thee as I ought to love.
 but take the dim - ness of my soul a - way.
 O let me seek thee, and O let me find!
 teach me the pa - tience of un - an - swered prayer.
 My heart an al - tar, and thy love the flame.

WORDS: George Croly, 1867, alt.
 MUSIC: Frederick C. Atkinson, 1870

MORECAMBE
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Croly was an Irish literary figure also noted for conservative preaching in his London retirement.