

## Wilderness Way of the Cross

*Jesus humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

*-Philippians 2:8*

Overview: The great mystery of death and new life, radically revealed in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, also unfolds in countless ways every day in the life of Creation. Everywhere there is life in the natural world, there is death, and everywhere there is death, there is restoration and life coming out of death. The Wilderness Way of the Cross is a way of prayerfully engaging with the dying of creation, in solidarity with the suffering and death manifest in Jesus' own death.

In this practice, one or (ideally) more people walk a wild landscape, and find on the land places of dying that parallel the traditional 'Stations of the Cross' of Catholic devotion<sup>1</sup>. In this prayer, the suffering of Christ, the suffering of Creation, and our prayerful solidarity with the suffering of the world come together in a single act of worship. It is an ideal practice for Good Friday, the Fridays of Lent, or any other time of deliberate opening to the presence of God in suffering and loss.

Materials: A prayer book or written guide to the Stations of the Cross is helpful, though not absolutely necessary for this practice. At a minimum, a listing of the stations is needed (see below).

Time: One to two hours.

Set-up: Gather at a natural area with enough space to walk through and organically find all fourteen 'stations' on the land. This need not be a large area – an acre or two is sufficient. While this practice can be done alone, it is best done with a small group (two to seven) praying together.

Safety Issues: No great physical safety issues, beyond those normally associated with off-trail walking. Those sharing in this practice should be emotionally ready to enter into a space of grief and mourning.

At the beginning of the Wilderness Way of the Cross, take a few moments to pray to be present to this landscape, to the presence of Christ, and to the mystery of suffering and death in our world. Pray for eyes that see, and to be attentive to the spiritual truths revealed in the fabric of Creation.

Then, one member of the gathered group will announce the first station, 'Jesus is condemned to death.' This member then slowly leads the group walking across the landscape. While

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<sup>1</sup> The Stations of Cross are traditionally attributed to St. Francis of Assisi (1182 – 1226), who developed them to help people to experience a deeper sharing in the sufferings of Christ in prayer.

walking, this leader listens with their heart and looks across the landscape. When they find an aspect of Creation that resonates inwardly with their sense of the first station, they stop at this point. The group gathers for prayer, and the leader reads the opening prayer:

**Leader:** We adore you o Christ, and bless you

**All:** For by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

The leader then reads a prayer from the guide to the Stations, or prays a spontaneous prayer related to the station. After a period of silent prayer, another person in the group announces the second station, 'Jesus carries His cross', and walks across the landscape until they are drawn to a spot that resonates for them with the second station. They repeat the same sequence, moving across the land for each of the 14 stations.

### **The Stations:**

1. Jesus is condemned to death
2. Jesus carries His cross
3. Jesus falls for the first time
4. Jesus meets His mother, Mary
5. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross
6. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus
7. Jesus falls for the second time
8. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem
9. Jesus falls for the third time
10. Jesus is stripped of His clothes
11. Jesus is nailed to the cross
12. Jesus dies on the cross
13. Jesus is taken down from the cross
14. Jesus is placed in the tomb

Closing: At the end of the fourteenth station, pause for a few minutes to let the entire experience of the Way of the Cross settle within your heart. Pray to hold and bear all things with love, in solidarity with Christ and with Creation. If possible, try to keep a spacious and relatively quiet rhythm the rest of the day as you turn your attention to other activities.

Integration: This practice can help with the ability to perceive the suffering and death inherent to natural life on earth, and to see this suffering in light of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. After completing the Wilderness Way of the Cross, remain open to this same perception of suffering in Creation in your other interactions with the natural world.

Origin: My wife Lisa and I began this practice our first Good Friday together. We took a copy of a prayer guide to the Stations of the Cross and walked in nearby nature preserve. We silently walked until one of us was drawn to something on the landscape that tied in to the image of the first station, and read the prayers for this station and remained in silence at that place for a

few minutes. We continued in this way through the 14 stations, and we've done this practice each Good Friday since.

Going Deeper: If praying one of the stations and places on the landscape was particularly meaningful for you, return to this place repeatedly for extended times of prayer. Continue to meditate on this aspect of suffering within Creation, within the life of Christ, and within your own being.

There are many devotional guides to the Stations of the Cross, each with a slightly different reflection of the mystery of the Way of the Cross. You can try using several different guides, with each bringing to light a new aspect of this practice.