

## **All Who Wander Are Not Lost**

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-14

Nan Adams preached this sermon February 21, 2010, the First Sunday of Lent, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Pensacola, FL.

The evangelist Tony Campolo has a story about a black Baptist church in Philadelphia that annually celebrates Student Recognition Day. Once, after a few students had spoken, the pastor strode to the pulpit and started his sermon in a rather abrupt way: "Young people," he said, "you may not think you're going to die, but you are. One of these days, they'll take you to the cemetery, drop you in a hole, throw some dirt on your face and go back to the church and eat potato salad."<sup>1</sup>

We'll call this the "potato salad promise" – the promise that, quite simply, all of us are going to die. Absolutely, guaranteed. But we have a choice in our response to this promise. We can live dying or we can die living.

I could end the sermon right there. Leave us to reflect individually on this choice of response – to live dying or to die living. Ultimately, indeed, the response is a personal one. But note that the "potato salad promise" is made in the context of a family of faith. Note that there will be a group of people to attend such a ritual of burial and a luncheon afterward. We have gathered in community to uphold one another in our lives and in our deaths along the way. And this is significant for a Presbyterian observation of Lent. Hopefully, as we travel through Lent, we will be led to very individual reflection – a richer, deeper awareness of our relationship with God and with one another. But that's not where we start.

We start this first Sunday of Lent at the eastern edge of the river Jordan where the whole people of God have arrived and gathered, eagerly, anxiously waiting for the word to move into the land of promise – the land promised to Israel's ancestors. But first, have a seat, says Moses. We've got a long recitation – words, words, words (how Presbyterian is that!?) – not only to listen to, but to take into our hearts and minds before we will enter the land of promise *together*. We started out as individuals, spent forty years in the wilderness, in essence learning to be a community, and now we'll be reminded of this history of wandering. And then, as we are being prepared to receive God's covenant Law, we will be reminded *why* we're doing it this way.

Remember? God asks just a few things of the people as Israel's necessary response to its covenant relationship to God – to love God, to learn the commandments, and to teach this love and Law to all future generations. That doesn't sound so difficult, until we realize the people of God have had 40 years of trial and error to practice these few things without much success. If anything, though, this fledgling group of God's people has learned that they have a much better chance of keeping their side of the covenant when they do it *together* – as a community of faith.

We need one another, my friends! The foundational core of our faith is that we need one another in all our diversity to have a chance of getting it – of understanding and living into the image of God we were created to be.

So let us this first Sunday of Lent *together* reflect on living and dying.

Our Scripture lesson from the gospel of Luke today is the classic Lenten story. It is the paradigm for wandering through the wilderness of our own lives as we struggle to live into the people we were created to be. The work of Lent is repentance – a word often laden with hell-fire and damnation

baggage, but it really isn't such a bad word for us Presbyterians. Repentance means to examine ourselves carefully enough to figure out what it is we need to keep, what it is we need to get rid of, and what it is we need to turn around so God can be fully present in our lives. And we are invited to do this individually each Lent, yet, I say again, in the context of the whole community doing it at the same time.

We shouldn't be surprised that wilderness is a major theme in Scripture. Moses is sent into the wilderness in order to prepare for leading the Israelites out of slavery. These Israelites then must traverse the wilderness for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. Elijah in the Old Testament and John the Baptist in the New Testament are prophets nurtured in the wilderness before they proclaim the word of the Lord for the people of God. And today's lectionary passage is the story of Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, led into the wilderness by that very Spirit.

When we take a look at these Biblical stories of the wilderness, there's no doubting that the wilderness is a place of barrenness and deprivation. It can be a place of great suffering, of shatteredness, of feeling that our whole world has been turned upside down and inside out. And why on earth would anyone voluntarily go through such an ordeal? And yet, the church asks us to "practice going into the wilderness" once every year.

I'm afraid that for most of us the wilderness will first come to us without a choice. To paraphrase a popular expression: Wilderness happens.

My first dramatic wilderness experience happened when I was 18 years old. I had left the protected comforts of little Gulf Breeze eager to venture into the grand and glorious University of Florida. I'll never forget my first day of class freshman year. The class was Calculus 101. I strode across campus confident and ready for life, even ready for Calculus. I had already taken the class in high school and gotten an A. This was just review, a way of easing into the rigors of university life. I walked into the classroom and found that it was an auditorium with 720 students in the class. An ant-sized professor was standing beside an enormous overhead-projected screen covered with formulas I had never laid eyes on. It was all I could do to keep from failing, let alone make an A, so overwhelmed was I by the sheer scale and pace of it all. That was wilderness enough.

Slowly but surely I began to get a handle on this experience. The wisest thing I did was to find my way to a "home" of sorts. There was a campus ministry sponsored by the Presbyterian Church and the Disciples of Christ church located just across the street from the campus' main entrance. That became home. It was an actual building with an indoor basketball court, a place to watch TV (none of us had our own TVs in our dorm rooms or apartments – Gasp!), rooms in which to study and take naps, even Bible study and worship were held every Sunday night. We were encouraged to attend an area church Sunday mornings as well but frankly, I often didn't. This was enough. It was here that I re-grouped, got my bearings and began to get hold of my wilderness.

It was just after Christmas break that I experienced another wilderness. I had an early class that second semester and had gone down the dorm hall to the shared bathroom at about 6:30 in the morning. (Boy, I'm really showing my age here – shared bathrooms down the hall in a college dorm?) From the shower I could hear my suitemate calling for me. She said my father was on the phone. I couldn't imagine. It was 5:30 in the morning back home. I didn't bother to dry off. I slipped on my robe and hurried to the phone. "Nan," Dad said, "Jenni is dead."

Jenni Lawrence, my best friend since the fourth grade, had been killed in a drunk driving accident on Pensacola Beach. I remember crying out, "No, no, no" over and over again, sliding down the wall of the dorm hallway into my own puddle on the terrazzo floor. I laid my face against the floor, it was cold and hard, puddled with my tears. For all practical purposes, my world shattered into a million pieces.

It was through the amazing experience of being upheld by my new home at the Student Center and my old home of First Presbyterian Church in Pensacola that I stand before you today as a minister of the Word and Sacrament. That's a powerful assertion to make. But it's true. Though my personal world shattered, grief so overwhelming that I had no concept of how to get through it, my community of faith did not shatter. I watched my parents and their friends gather around Jenni's parents and literally not leave them alone for a year. I watched them, men and women, cry and grieve and rejoice and laugh. No one said, "If there's a God, why did this happen?" Not one of them. They said, "God is with us, his heart broken, crying too." And they held on *tighter* – to their faith and to each other and to me.

Wilderness, my friends, though barren and sorrowful and overwhelmingly uncomfortable at times, is not God-forsaken. Look at our text: Jesus began his wilderness experience filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and he *ended the wilderness experience filled with the power of the Holy Spirit*. He came through the experience of wilderness not depleted but full of spiritual power. Wilderness is a place where spiritual lessons are learned, where spiritual discipline is practiced, where we learn what to keep, what to get rid of, and what to turn around, where spiritual strength is given and garnered. It's where we find what is most meaningful in life, where we find what it means to take the "potato salad promise" seriously. It's a necessary part of the journey that strips away our comfortable pretense and allows awareness to break through. It's the way, eventually, that leads us to die living, rather than to live dying.

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Jesus was led into the wilderness so that he might see the temptations that barrage us human beings all along our journey. His is a wilderness of a different kind perhaps than sudden and overwhelming grief, but no less painful, no less life-shattering, no less daunting as he comes face-to-face with three challenging temptations thrust upon him by no less than evil personified.

The first temptation is to take care of his own cravings, his own needs even. "Come on Jesus, you're starving! Feed yourself! A small miracle is nothing to you! God probably won't even notice that the little stone has become bread. You'll feel so much better once you've eaten."

This first temptation might come to us in a slightly different form, such as, "Why not become my own authority and act according to my own pleasure?" Hmmmm. Evading responsibility for the needs of others. Assuming material goods will fill our yearnings, our deepest needs.

Jesus responds, "We do not live by bread alone, but by God's teachings." We do not live by bread alone. We do not live by things, even legitimate things that sustain life, alone.

The second temptation is to satisfy his calling, his vocation – "Everyone will come to you, Jesus – you will be king of the world – just say the word – show me you can control the nations. Why wait for everyone to notice you're king? Just show `em and they'll all believe!"

Our form of temptation might look like this: "Why stay with God when other gods (other sources of meaning) seem attractive as well?" Denying the call of God and our responsibility to that call. Putting our trust in our own competence, our own independence, our own wealth, our own intellect, our own bootstraps.

Jesus responds, "We are to worship and serve the Lord, and nothing else."

The third temptation is to fulfill the people's hopes –"Come on Jesus, be what they want you to be! Show them how competent you are by being protected by God!"

This temptation might look like this: "Why not assert yourself, your ideas, your beliefs over others, especially when you're sure you are right?" Do things to prove that God is on your side. Believe that wealth, prosperity, good health even is a sign of God's favor and privilege on you and therefore grants you superior knowledge and say over the lives of others.

Jesus responds, "We are not to force God to do our will."

Temptations are awfully sneaky sometimes. And usually in times of great grief we are not in much condition, at least initially, to take a look at these kinds of temptation. But it is only when we are vulnerable to God that our eyes can be open enough to see the temptations for what they are. Entering into the wilderness of Lent is a desire to be vulnerable to God, to be willing to have our eyes opened and to name the temptations we have avoided seeing, to correct the poor choices we have made, to face with others the difficult tasks of healing and living more fully into God's kingdom.

Wander, wander, wander, my friends. I can't promise that God will only give you what you can handle. Mercifully that is often true. But even if it is not, I can promise that God will not forsake you and, to the best of our human and grace-filled ability, neither will this family of faith. We've come together as a family of faith, we've grown in knowledge and wisdom, we've held each other up in good times and bad, and by God's Spirit of grace we will continue to do so – through the "wilderness practice" season of Lent, or the life-shattering wildernesses that inevitably come to all of us, unexpected and unbidden.

All who wander, my friends, are not lost. We *must* wander so that we may know the pure joy of being found, of being whole, of being made in the image of One who died and was raised from the dead. O, wander, wander, wander my friends! The pure joy of Easter eagerly awaits you.

Amen.

## NOTES

1. This story is taken from a sermon entitled "The Potato Salad Promise" by Susan R. Andrews, Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church, Bethesda, MD, printed in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Volume IX, Number 4, March 1998, pp. 8-9.