

Lent 1B Feb. 18, 2018

Getting Through the Wilderness

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In August of 2007, tenured Computer Science professor, husband and father of 3 young children Randy Pausch was driven into the wilderness when his doctor told him the painful cancer treatment he had undergone earlier that year had failed to have any effect on the pancreatic cancer rapidly growing inside him. He had multiple tumors that were inoperable, and his doctor guessed Randy had only about 4 months left to live. He was 47 years old. He was one of the most prestigious professors at Carnegie Mellon University in one of the most cutting-edge areas of technology and was working with some of the biggest movers and shakers in both business and entertainment industries. He was by all estimations at the very top of his game. And even though he otherwise felt good, his doctor told him he was going to die in 4 months.

Understandably, this hit Randy hard. Incredibly hard. He was suddenly where he didn't want to be, and it was not only an uncomfortable place, it was a devastating place. You might say spiritually it was a wilderness or a desert like place. Maybe you know what it is like to be in a place like that; a place that is hostile, that feels lonely, that offers very little in the way of comfort, a place Porter Taylor, the Bishop of Western North Carolina describes as an "in-between" place, a place where you don't yet know what you have gotten into, the place you find yourself when you start a new job a new relationship or have just lost a job or a house, or a spouse or a friend. Or when you or someone you love is told you only have a few months to live, like Randy Pausch, who at what should have been the best time in his life suddenly had to face his own mortality and he didn't have a lot of time to do so.

One of the opportunities that helped Randy come to understand his spiritual wilderness was he was invited to give a lecture at Carnegie Mellon, for a special lecture series called "the Last Lecture" where professors could choose any topic to lecture on as if this was the last lecture they would ever give. After a long process of discerning whether or not he should accept this invitation, one his wife was not supportive of because of the little time he had left, he eventually convinced her he needed to give this lecture, not just because it would be a way for his children (who were 6, 4 and 2 when he died) to see their father in his element, and not just because it would be fun, or prove he could still do it, but because it allowed him to accept what the wilderness offers. In the words of a character from Rodrigo Garcia's thought provoking movie *The Last Days in the Desert*, "the wilderness gives you the opportunity to see yourself for who you really are."

And that is what Randy did as he prepared for his Last Lecture, called *Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams*. In his one hour long lecture he talked about who he is, what made him that way, how that influenced his life choices, and more importantly, how knowing who he is helped him face what he called the “brick walls” that told him no, and how he handled the temptations that would have led him away from his dreams. His lecture was recorded and put on YouTube and instantly went viral. You can still watch it. Later he co-authored a book by the same title that served as further reflection on who he is. It all stemmed, he said, from his parents, who loved and supported him even if they didn’t always give him everything he wanted but did give the starting place of knowing he was loved. So, when he found himself in the wilderness he wasn’t morose, he didn’t blame anyone, instead wrote “we can’t change the hand we’re dealt, but we can decide how we are going to play that hand.” And he set about making sure he lived the rest of his life to make sure it continued to reflect who he knew himself to be and to prepare his family as best he could for their life without him.

I thought of Randy, his Last Lecture and of how impressed I am with how he dealt with his time in the wilderness, because none of us, no matter who we are, from the prestigious to the underappreciated, all find ourselves in the spiritual wilderness at some time in our lives. There is no escaping it. We heard in our Gospel this morning that even Jesus, God’s Son, was not spared time in the wilderness.

Unlike the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, the author of Mark doesn’t give us a dialogue between Jesus and Satan, so in this Gospel we don’t know what specific temptations Jesus faced, and maybe that is okay. Maybe the specific temptations can distract us from Mark’s larger, more sweeping imagery in today’s Gospel that started with Jesus’ baptism. Once again, we read that dramatic scene where Jesus came up out of the water as the Spirit came down upon him, violently tearing open the heavens to do so. In one fell swoop, it seems, the Spirit then drove Jesus into the wilderness. Pay attention to that little detail, because it is different in Luke or Matthew where the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, however, in Mark the Spirit *drove*, the author used a much more forceful word in the original language. Which could indicate Jesus didn’t have a choice, like many of us who have ever found ourselves in the wilderness.

But the Spirit didn’t drive Jesus into the wilderness until after God had given Jesus exactly what he would need there, the very thing that would help him handle those temptations of Satan: the thing God gave Jesus was the words God spoke: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

The message God had for Jesus was brief; God doesn't seem to be a God of many words in the New Testament. And this brief message is about identity; about who Jesus is: God's Son, the Beloved. And that God is pleased with Jesus, even though Jesus hadn't done much yet, remember this happened before Jesus called any disciples, preached or told parables, or healed anyone. Before God pushed Jesus into the wilderness, God spoke words of identity and love. Maybe so that Jesus would know the difference between the voice of God and the voices of doubt, fear, anxiety, anger, despair, and any other ways Satan might have spoken to him. So that, no matter what temptations or trails Satan put Jesus through, Jesus would be able to test those temptations and trails against the words of God. Maybe that is how he could, as Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber has preached, understand and show not just *who* Jesus is but *whose* Jesus is. Jesus is God's Son, not Satan's son, not your son, nor mine. He is God's. And that is the good news we need to hear, whether we are in the wilderness or not.

Today we heard about Jesus' time in the wilderness because it is the first Sunday in the 40-day season of Lent, a time the church gives us to be in a sort of wilderness time. Although not nearly as severe a wilderness as what Randy Pausch faced, or we might face when we lose a job, but a suggested wilderness that started on Wednesday with the reminder that we too, will die one day. Lent is not meant to frighten us as much as it hopes to give that that wilderness opportunity to see ourselves for who we really are, and whose we really are.

When we were baptized, the belief is we were baptized not just into a group of people, we were baptized into Jesus' own death and resurrection. Through that baptism we are forever connected to Jesus, forever apart of Jesus, and he apart of us. Which means those words of love God spoke when the heavens were torn open are just as much for us as they are for Jesus: You, yes you, are God's Child, You are God's Daughter, You are God's Son, You are the Beloved, and With You God is Well Pleased.

Even if your parents didn't love you enough. Even if you lost your job. Even if you aren't making the amount of money you want to make. Even if you are retired. Even if you have not realized your childhood dreams. Even if you are diagnosed with a disease or illness. Even if you didn't get the grade you wanted on a test or paper. Even if your spouse is gone. Even if you are divorced. Even if you are struggling with debt. You and I are God's Beloved child, and we don't have to listen to the voices of self-doubt that try to convince us we aren't good enough. We don't have to believe the voice that says anger is justification for making someone else hurt because we are hurting. We don't have to believe the voice of despair that says it's too late or what we do won't matter. We don't have to listen to the voice of fear that says they are out to get us. We don't have to

listen to the voice of loneliness that tells us we are better than others. Because those voices aren't the voice of God. Please listen to me, God's beloved, those voices are out there, I know they are everywhere, but we don't have to listen to them, because they are not the voice of God. They don't own us. They don't have power over us. And they won't be any use in the wilderness, whether it is the wilderness of Lent or the kind Randy Pausch faced, because they don't help us see ourselves for who we really are. Randy had to deal with those other voices a lot, but maybe because of his brief time left, he chose not to listen to them and listened to the voice of the Love instead. That doesn't mean he ignored his disease, far from it. But he did live more intentionally, and although he never said it, by reading his book and watching his lecture, it is easy to tell *whose* he is. Even in the wilderness where he outlived his prognosis by 8 months.

Which is perhaps a good place to start our time in Lent, to be reminded not just of who we are, but whose we are. We are God's beloved. Being God's beloved won't make the wilderness times any easier but does give us everything we need to face temptations and potential dangers. When we remember we are God's beloved, things that could be seen as a danger, like the wild animals we heard about in today's Gospel, can be seen more clearly for what they really are: fellow living things that might need a little care or understanding or respect as they keep us company. That is the transformative possibility that can really happen when we live our belovedness instead of listening to the other voices desperate to influence what we do and say.

Wherever you go this week, and what ever you do, God's beloved, I pray you remember whose you are, and let that knowledge empower you to let others see the love of God that is longing to shine through you. And also remember, God's beloved, that your neighbor is God's beloved too.