



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

Calm in the Wilderness

The Reverend Lawrence W. Farris

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The Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Exodus 13, 17-22 and Matthew 6:25-33

When our children turned fourteen, I invited each of them to pick any place in the United States that they would like to go on a trip with dear old dad. My thought was to create a combination rite of passage, father-child bonding experience before they were utterly lost to the throes of adolescence, that marvelous time in life when many youth can think of few moments more off-putting or embarrassing than being seen in public with their parents. Our son Jordan had long heard tales of a trip I had taken with some college friends to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota – a trip marked by portages in driving rain and the worst wind storm I’ve ever encountered as well as some very good fishing – and decided that he and dad should go on a wilderness canoe trip together. Since I’d not done such a trip in 25 years, I swallowed hard and said, “Great.” And away we went.

And we had a splendid time. Well, except that on the first day I swallowed a whopper of a mosquito who managed to bite me in the vocal chords which promptly swelled up terrifically. I was frantically trying to decide if the best thing to do with my last breaths would be to instruct Jordan on how to do an emergency tracheotomy when, mercifully, I slowly started to be able to breathe again. And then there was the minor detail that our outfitter neglected to pack any bread for us. You might be surprised how good peanut butter spread between two pieces of past-its-prime cheese can be. Oh, and we did have that one day of pouring rain which also entailed a mile-long, uphill portage into a lake renowned for its pike fishing. Cold and wet, we set up camp in the pitch dark as wolves began to howl nearby. Jordan was excited by all this, and just before turning in that night, he said, “Gee, Dad, you know what? Nobody in the whole world has any idea where we are. Well, good night.” And with that, he rolled over and was immediately asleep.

Confronted with this realization of our isolation in the wilderness, I found sleep just a bit hard to come by that night. We were out there. I mean, way out there. And Jordan was right. No one knew where we were. Except for the wolves. A pillar of fire, it occurred to me, would be a very handy item just then since our miserable campfire had long since been drowned. Part of me wanted to break camp just as early as possible the next morning and paddle heck bent for leather back to the nearest place even slightly resembling civilization. We didn’t do that, I’m glad to say, and had several more wonderful, memory making days. And maybe someday we’ll even get to go back.

Wilderness. I’d wager most of us have ambiguous feelings about being out in the wilderness. Oh, the beauty may enchant and renew us for a while. Fresh air, sunshine, leave the watch and Blackberry at

home, and all that. But being out there alone for any length of time leads to feelings of insecurity, of vulnerability, of loneliness, of anxiety, even fear. And when the darkness falls, when the rain falls, wilderness becomes less and less appealing. We like security, predictability, a social network to support us, and knowing where the next coffee shop is, to say nothing of the next hot shower and hot meal.

Wilderness. A place about which we have mixed feelings at best, and also the very place where God leads the people of Israel as they head out of slavery in Egypt. They are led out into the wilderness. They're headed to the land promised to Abraham long before, and there's shorter, direct road to the Promised Land; the coast road along the Mediterranean is pretty much a straight shot from Egypt to Palestine, from that day to this. But no, that's not what God thinks best. God leads them the roundabout way to the Promised Land, the long way through the wilderness.

The reason given is that the people, even though they're battle equipped, might find fighting their way up the coast even more distasteful than slavery, and therefore decide to give up this whole liberation adventure and head back to their Egyptian masters. God doesn't want to risk the people choosing the painful security of slavery when confronted with the unpredictability of freedom.

But more than that, it will turn out if we follow the story of the Exodus, that while we find wilderness a scary, disorienting place to be, wilderness often provides the very best opportunity for God to demonstrate the true nature of divine trustworthiness. In the wilderness, the people of God must depend upon God, for the alternatives and distractions are few. And again and again on this journey, God will prove trustworthy, bringing the people manna and quails and water, and finally, a life giving law to help them structure their common life, religious and social. And so, using rather dramatic visual aids, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, God leads the people on a long, round about, wilderness journey to the promised land.

I'm sure you already see the analogy to the present circumstance of this congregation. You've been without an installed senior pastor for some months. And when that happens in a congregation, folks start to get anxious. Where's the consistency in the pulpit? Where are we going in our mission work? What about all the plans we've been considering? What's the future going to hold for us? And why, oh why, do we Presbyterians have to take so long to get ourselves together and call a new pastor? Why must we go this long, roundabout way through the wilderness of an extended transition with an interim pastor before we reach the Promised Land of a new, installed senior pastor? Why can't we just take the short cut, the quick route and get on with our congregational life? Truth be told, we are not all that fond of wilderness times with their uncertainty and unpredictability. We don't do so well with anxiety, and the wilderness makes us anxious. We are after all, doers, folks who like to get on with things, who like to make our "to do" lists and check items off. God may have all the time in the world and know where the road leads, but we don't.

As a minister of word and sacrament, I am to be the bearer of the good news of the gospel of Christ. But as an interim pastor, I am, in a way, something of a symbol of the bad news that it will be a while before an installed pastor is with you again. Let's all take a deep breath. It's going to be okay. Your session is still here to lead the congregation in its mission, its worship, its education, its fellowship and care programs. And the session has delineated several specific tasks that it expects me to be quite intentional in pursuing. Among these are working with the Self-Study Committee to help insure a thorough look at our history and our present identity, and to help us discern God's call to our future ministry. As well, I am to lead the staff, and already I have found this a privilege. And I am to do some teaching, which I

love, and support evangelism and stewardship efforts. I appreciate the clarity of session's vision of my task.

Of course, to do this work, I have to get acquainted with what is a complex and active church. I want to listen to your stories of what has come before and what you long for in the future. I will pray for you, and have begun to do so already as I come to the sanctuary each morning for prayer and include one page of the church directory in my intercessions, and I will seek to ground the work of the staff and the session in prayer. A good friend of mine describes the work of interims this way: to love, listen, learn, lead, and leave. And to that good list, I would add "to laugh" as I believe good humor and even playfulness essential to any endeavor worth doing.

Some aspects of congregational life change not at all in the interim period. Our calling as God's people does not change. As Jesus puts it so well and succinctly in our lesson from Matthew: Seek first the kingdom of God. That is always our calling, no matter the circumstance – come interim pastor, economic turmoil, personal upheaval, all manner of new and often distracting technology, still we are first to seek God's kingdom. I imagine some of you have read the Mitford novels by Jan Karon, about a small and quirky town in North Carolina. Father Tim, the local Episcopal priest there, begins each day with this prayer, "Let me be a blessing to someone today." Might our continuing faithfulness to God's kingdom begin with just those words each day? "Let me be a blessing to someone today."

Those of us who grew up with the Westminster Catechism recall that our chief purpose in life is to glorify and enjoy God forever. And that does not change in this interim season. We glorify God by our worship and service. And I pray the worship here will ever serve precisely that purpose, Sunday by Sunday. And our service is set out plainly by the prophet Micah: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. Those are tasks we pursue within these walls in our dealings with one another. And those are the tasks we embrace as soon as we step outside this beautiful and beloved sanctuary. The will of God is no mystery, and we need repent of every evasion of it we are tempted by, especially that of going on hold during the interim period.

And we are to enjoy God. That doesn't sound very Presbyterian at all. Which is precisely the reason we so need to hear that calling clearly. God is good, all the time. God is good, all the time. And it is fine, my beloved in Christ, to enjoy that which is good and of God. And so, in our prayer and in our worship, we praise God for every sign of that goodness --for beauty and children and sunrises and forgiveness and learning, an infinity of gifts. We are called, no commanded, to rejoice and be glad in this and every day. Let us be faithful.

What is important to recall in that story of God's leading of the people by a roundabout, wilderness way is that God does, in fact, provide a way forward, from that day to this. In every circumstance, every trial, every wilderness, God does provide a way. Not always an easy way. Rarely our way, if we were in charge. A way that will be marked by stones and hills and days of rain. But always a way, the right way, the best way for our own spiritual growth and well being. That is our conviction and faith. We are led. Pillars of cloud and fire will appear to us to comfort and guide us. And they are not of our creation; they are the gift of God.