

“Into the Wilderness”

Matthew 4:1-11
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About twenty years ago, Carol Sheldon Shafer gave the Laity Sunday sermon. It was a memorable sermon. What I recall is her theme: Pray for Clarity. Clarity is the theme of this sermon on this first Sunday in Lent.

When I think of the wilderness, I think of it as the place to go when things have become confused, when the direction is no longer clear, when ambiguity reigns, when trusted sign posts are no longer trustworthy. In the wilderness, be it a literal, desert-like place, or be it a more symbolic, less-geographical retreat; a person often discovers a clarity that had been elusive. Sometimes a person knows full well he or she needs to get to the wilderness; sometimes a person needs to be led there.

Thus it is with the Gospel story this morning. Jesus has not yet found clarity for his life's mission. Though he has reached the age of thirty, he still wrestles with the purpose of his time on earth. So, the Spirit leads him out into the wilderness where he will wrestle with his doubts and his insecurities and his temptations, where he will wrestle with his sense of vocation, his calling. The Scripture says he was led by the Spirit. I take that to mean he was one of those who needed a little elbowing, who might not have known on his own that the wilderness would be the place to find the clarity he sought. The Spirit takes Jesus by the hand and says in effect, 'come along to the wilderness.' And, of course, it is there in the wilderness that he confronts his own demons and emerges with clarity about how he will use the balance of his life.

When my brother, David, was in high school, he had the male lead in the play, “Ah Wilderness” by Eugene O’Neill. I never saw the play, but I like the title! “Ah Wilderness” makes the wilderness sound somehow inviting, not a place to dread, but a place to imagine discovering something new about one’s self.

Thus, on February 5th, as Brian Hollister drove me through the snow storm that morning into Hartford, and as he dropped me off at the front door of St. Francis Hospital, I imagined the operating room and the surgeon and the recovery room, and I thought to myself, “so this is the wilderness.” I was one of those who had needed some serious elbowing. About 900 of you had been nudging me gently or not so gently, saying, ‘get ye to the wilderness of knee surgery.’ Now, one month later, I have emerged from that wilderness with all kinds of clarity. Let me share a bit of this clarity.

First and foremost, I am clear, more clear than ever before, that prayer makes a difference. We may not always know or be able to articulate what the difference is that prayer makes, but I can tell you I feel more spiritually connected to my church family knowing that so many people had brought my situation to God’s attention. I don’t know what God did, exactly, with all your prayers, I just know that your prayers mattered to me, encouraged me, helped to create an environment where healing could take place. I give high marks to the surgical team and the nurses and all the aids. But I also know that my mending of body and mind and spirit had something to do with your invoking the hand of God. I am no expert on this matter. I am not going to write a book on the power of prayer. But in the wilderness of knee-replacement, I have found some clarity on this matter!

Second, I am clear that a familiar face, a familiar human being makes a world of difference.

I'm a little foggy on the days and hours and sequence of events, but at some point, in my room on the 9th floor, there appeared Jane Blake, a South Church member who happens to be a nurse at that hospital. She had taught our children in church school. A preacher's daughter, she came in for a friendly visit. The instant I recognized her, I felt I was in the presence of an angel. Just being in the presence of somebody I knew gave me this overwhelming feeling that everything would be all right. It wasn't what she said or anything she read. It was her showing up, just being present.

In the wilderness, the landmarks are different. There are mirages on the horizon, optical illusions. The wind blows covering up your footprints so you can't retrace your steps to get out of the wilderness. It's a location of disorientation. So the face of a familiar human being becomes like an angel, a gift from God, an assurance of well-being. Hospitals and family lounges and operating rooms can be scary places. People wear masks and gowns and stethoscopes. The presence of a familiar face makes a world of difference. I am clear about that!

So, I wanted to give a shout out to our visitation ministry team. These are women and men who week to week, month to month show up in private homes and apartments and nursing homes and hospitals to offer a familiar presence, a Christ-presence. Sometimes they chat; sometimes they listen. But all the time, they are present.

At the close of the story of Jesus in the wilderness, it says, "...and suddenly, angels came and waited on him." I now understand what that means. People from the local church's visitation ministry team sought him out and located him in his wilderness and offered him the blessing of a familiar face.

When I awoke in the recovery room, a tall orthopedic assistant came over to my bed. He said, "I know you! You married me!"

He then took out his smart phone and showed the entire staff a photograph of him and his bride and me standing right here at the South Church altar. He was among the angels who visited me. I am clear as never before what a difference it makes to encounter a familiar face in the wilderness. If you have a chance to be that familiar face to another, be that face!

Lastly, I am clear about the convergence of science and faith. Somehow, in our culture there is a message that wants to keep these two separate, that wants to make us choose between the two: science or faith. I am clear that this is a false dualism. One need not be a creationist or an evolutionist; one need not ignore the contributions of science while standing on the promises of God. I regret that this dualism is promoted by certain sectors of the culture. Scientists and theologians are really kissing cousins.

As I walked or limped through the wilderness of knee replacement surgery; alas, I found myself supported on one side by the physical therapist chanting the rules to recovery, and on the other side by Rabbi Marantz chanting an ancient psalm. The registered nurse supplied the pain meds and Rev. Miller provided the prayers. The surgeon worked with the titanium, the massage therapist worked with my tears. The convergence of science and faith is a beautiful thing to behold. I am a witness to that convergence. I have found clarity of that truth while wondering the hallways of the ninth floor wilderness.

Jesus emerged from the forty days in the wilderness clear about his purpose, clear about his ministry, clear about to whom his life belonged. This is my prayer for all of us as we begin this Lenten journey; that we would emerge from the wilderness forty days hence with the same clarity: clear about our purpose in life, clear about our ministry, clear about to whom our lives belong. Come with me into the wilderness, in the greatest of hope. Amen.

