

## “On Getting One’s Bearings”

Luke 4:1-13

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February 14, 2016

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

I’ve learned there are two kinds of drivers: the ones who like to know route numbers and street names; and the ones who navigate instead by landmarks. As I began to craft this sermon, I realized that I am both kinds of driver rolled into one. When it’s a literal journey in the red truck, I watch for the route numbers. When it’s a spiritual journey, such as the journey through the wilderness of Lent, I look for familiar landmarks. I look for the servant’s towel. I look for the palm branches. I look for the cross. These are the landmarks that help me get my bearings.

Without the landmarks, one gets lost in the wilderness. Without the landmarks, I tend to go around in circles and never get anywhere. WITH the landmarks, I move with some confidence towards Easter’s dawn.

I look for the servant’s towel. This is my first landmark. In the spiritual wilderness, the temptation is to find the chair with the most comfortable seat, to assume someone on the wait staff will be by to take my order, to be in the seat of power and control. It’s when I catch a view of the servant’s towel that I find my bearings. The servant’s towel reminds me who I am and the role I’m called to play.

Central to my faith is the image of Jesus rising from the supper table, moving to the side board, finding the bowl of water, tying the towel around his waist, and washing the disciples’ feet. When I am washing someone’s feet, I have found my bearings.

When I'm lost in a literal wilderness, I seek the highest ground in order to gain my bearings. Lost in the spiritual wilderness, I seek a towel and someone whose feet are hot and dusty and aching. So, on this first Sunday in Lent, I wrap myself in this purple towel, a landmark along the road to Easter's dawn. It will help me get my bearings.

I look for palm branches. This is the second landmark. I associate palm branches with songs and shouts of praise, songs and shouts of "Hosanna!" songs and shouts of hope in the midst of fear. In the wilderness, the temptation is to succumb to fear, to fear mongering. It's when I catch a glimpse of palm branches that I get my bearings. Palm branches give me courage to face what must be faced.

The spiritual wilderness can be a scary place. When the writer of the Psalms reached that place, he wrote, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Our best novelists take us to the place of fear and reveal to us what we need to face our darkness. The Lakota prayer facing the four directions ends with everyone facing West. West is where the sun sets; where life comes to an end. The Lakota pray for bravery to face life's many endings. In the spiritual wilderness, we come to terms with all sorts of endings. Having done so, there is a mysterious abundance that fills our souls and makes us want to sing, or maybe shout some song of praise.

When I see the palm branches, I see that endings are but new beginnings in disguise. The palm branches equip me for facing West. They assure me that life is sacred; all of life: the sweet and the sour, the highs and the lows, the victories and the defeats. On Palm Sunday, we have two enormous palm trees up here in the chancel area. We have an abundance of palms! I like that because it is the landmark I count on. It's the landmark that assures me I've got something to sing about, something to shout about! The palm branches help me get my bearings.

I look for the Cross. This is the third landmark for the journey through Lent. The Cross forces me to reflect deeply on the question: what am I willing to die for? I know what Jesus was willing to die for. But what is it that I am willing to die for? I am inspired by anyone who has already gained clarity on this question. I am inspired by the Sandy Hook Elementary School principal who knew in an instant she would lay down her life for her children. I am inspired by soldiers who go into battle ready to die for values such as freedom. I am inspired by health workers who go to Africa to halt the spread of Ebola knowing it may cost them their lives.

What I know is that when I get clear about what I am willing to die for, that is when I truly begin to live. I believe Jesus came out of the wilderness after forty days knowing what he was prepared to die for. Knowing what he was prepared to die for also made it possible for him to be fully alive; alive to himself; alive to his neighbors; alive to his detractors; alive to anyone who needed to be loved, regardless of the cost.

In the wilderness, the temptation is to find the cheapest way out, the least costly form of discipleship. How can I follow Jesus and not have it cost me too much? Some refer to this as ‘cheap grace.’ But the Cross is that one landmark that puts us in touch with the real cost of discipleship.

You know I am a lover of film. So many movies have touched my soul and revealed to me aspects of humanity I could not have known otherwise. Movies like *Places in the Heart*, *Billy Eliot*, and *A Beautiful Mind* are so sacred to me that I own them and watch them every year. But the film that reveals the meaning of the Cross to me is not a movie at all. It is an episode called “The Patsy” from the General Electric Theater that aired in 1960. I was thirteen years old at that time.

“The Patsy” stars Sammy Davis Junior. He is a private in an army unit. He is the butt of every practical joke. His platoon mates come up with one joke after another and laugh at Sammy Davis as he realizes he has fallen for yet another of their schemes. He is so naïve it hurts. His longing for acceptance is so strong it hurts. So, one day, they have cooked up the ultimate practical joke. They have rigged a fake hand grenade. They plan to pretend to pull the pin and drop it in the midst of the gathered platoon. Then, of course, they’ll all laugh as Sammy Davis runs for cover. The moment arrives. The hand grenade is produced and the pin is pulled and the grenade is dropped. There is one second of extreme tension. Then, Sammy Davis Junior throws himself on top of the grenade crying out for his comrades to run for cover. No one moves. No one laughs. In an instant, everyone is changed.

**Everyone is changed because one person got real clear about what he was willing to die for.** In that episode we see a Christ figure. As a thirteen year old boy, it hadn’t really occurred to me that the Cross is all about love, sacrificial love, unconditional love. From that day on, I began to understand the Cross as the landmark I could truly trust in the wilderness.

I have been in and out of the wilderness over and over again. I am wise enough now to look for the landmarks that will guide me: the servant’s towel, the palms, and the Cross. With these landmarks in sight, I know I will arrive at the empty tomb on Easter morning. It’s only a forty days journey. You come, too. And we’ll remain, together, in the greatest of hope. Amen.