

Prelude: Just a Closer Walk with Thee**[Ester Funk]****Gathering thoughts:****[Doug Schulz]**

Welcome to our first worship service in the season of Lent, which Christians observe on the Sundays leading up to Easter Week. Our theme for this year's Lent series is "Wilderness Calls to Deep Faith".

The season of Lent typically invites followers of Jesus to consider "giving up" for these few weeks something of what we take for granted, such as some things that are almost luxuries in our lives. It's a time of "fasting". People talk about avoiding chocolate, or coffee, or alcohol, or even tobacco. Some say they'll watch less sports, or news, and use the time to read good books, or maybe even pray more. You could say Lent is about fasting from less important things to practice more beneficial and spiritually long-lasting things.

The idea of Lent season is to focus more on the life of Jesus, on his path of suffering, on the fact that his journey of sharing love and truth in life led to his untimely execution - death on the cross as a criminal. Lent is therefore not generally seen as an occasion for celebration, but more as a period of deep contemplation. It could be regarded as a willingness to enter the wilderness before God gives renewed life at Easter.

However, at Grace this year, we are choosing to consider that we have actually been in a wilderness - created by the pandemic COVID-19 – for a year already! So, though we enter the Lent period with full regard to this difficult time in the life of Jesus leading up to his betrayal and death, we are going to be looking for the ways that the joy and hope of faith can be renewed within, and can get us through, the hardest times. Wilderness calls to deep faith!

Ester Funk is our pianist today. Songs are prepared by Annie Schulz for the Grace Singers. We thank Ted Kopp for serving as our sound and recording technician. Beth Woelk is on a week of 'staycation' so I will be leading the service with help from Annie, as well as Pam Pauls, for some readings.

Our Call to Worship and Opening Prayer are taken from the new Mennonite *Voices Together* hymnbook. The first Scripture reading is the first ten verses of Psalm 25. As Annie and Pam read, consider the idea of walking the wilderness journey with Jesus. What might Jesus have been thinking in those critical weeks that led up to his final hours of life? What are you thinking as we begin Lent season this year?

Call to Worship:**[Annie Schulz]**

The dust that shapes the journey,
the cross that guides it,
the color that surrounds it,

the light that fades through it,
the Word that foretells it,
the wilderness that invites it –
this is Lent,
and into its wilderness
God calls us.
Come, friends,
Christ is heading for Jerusalem.

Prayer:

A wilderness beckons us;
a desert, a barren place,
yet a place of blessing and discovery.
Jesus, steady companion,
accompany us as we enter
the hurtful places,
the frightening places,
the dangerous places deep within us.
Jesus, our wild and well-traveled guide,
lead us into this emptiness,
where all will fall away,
and we will have nothing but you.
Walk with us through the valley
of the shadow of death,
where we shall be raised
and drink of deep springs. AMEN.

Scripture:

Psalm 25:1-10

[Pam Pauls]

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
2 O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

suffered from shameful defeat
in an inescapable battle of life.
Some of us feel like going on
and others of us feel like giving up.
But to you we come just as we are.
Whether we are winners or losers,
we know that you love us one and all.

Greatest of the Greatest, you know
just how much we can bear.
We all come to commune with you:

The tireless champion;
The tired loser;
The retired forgotten ones;
We all come to be consistently
corrected and comforted by you.
We come counting our lost.
We come confronting our crises.
We come as citizens of cities controlled by crime.
We come chilled by the cold of cowardice.

Great God Almighty:
Commune with us conscience clean.
Caress us with the cradle of compassion.
Consecrate us with outrageous convictions.
Control us with Christlike concerns.

Great Physician Powerful:
Pardon us with the conscience of peace.
Place us in paths of productivity.

Practice the perfection of healing
upon those who are physically,
emotionally, or spiritually sick.

This is our humble plea,
we present in the precious Name
of the prince of peace, Jesus Christ,
our priceless priest. Amen.

Hymn:

“Gather Your People”

[VT #304, B&C]

*Gather your people, merciful God,
gather the longing, the lost and unsure.
Gather your people, merciful God;
name us and claim us as yours.*

*Feed us and guide us, merciful God;
Light when the shadows of life cloud our view.
Feed us and guide us, merciful God,
People who hunger for you.*

Scripture:

Mark 1:9-15

[Pam Pauls]

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Reflection:

“Boulevard of the Beloved”

[Doug Schulz]

A few weeks ago I mentioned in my reflection how my mother used to call me awake by singing “Good morning, merry Sunshine! How did you wake so soon!” She did not have a great singing voice, but I remember that she always had a warm smile on her face for me. This was a blessing, a wonderful welcome to every day of life, even if, on Saturday mornings, it felt like she might spoil my day by listing chores I was supposed to do: dusting, floor-waxing, drying dishes, tidying up. What a rough life!

Nothing compared to what Jesus went through. Did you notice in the gospel text Pam read, that just after Jesus is blessed with baptism and hears the celebratory voice of God booming “You are my Beloved!”, God’s Spirit “drove him” into a wilderness area where he coexists with wild animals for forty days while the Devil taunts, tempts, and maybe terrorizes, him. What kind of “Beloved” is that? What sort of treatment is Jesus getting from his supposedly Loving Parent! And then, when Jesus finishes enduring this time of fears and frustration and fasting, he returns to his home area only to find that the man who baptized him, his own beloved cousin

John, has been arrested by the consummately cruel dictator Herod Antipas. Jesus, who is about to take his place as a prophetic preacher like John the Baptist, immediately can see that the road he is walking will be full of danger, maybe a one-lane narrow highway leading to a single inevitable destination: Death!

For us today, following the words and ways of Jesus in our world, some two thousand years later, means we need to acknowledge what is required when walking on what I'm calling "the Boulevard of the Beloved". The 40-day season of Lent – stretching from Ash Wednesday this past week to Palm Sunday five weeks from today - is designed, as I said earlier, to give us a more tangible idea about wilderness-walking with our Lord Jesus Christ. The theory is that by depriving ourselves of comforts that could distract us, we will develop a deeper spiritual vision of living in faithfulness to God. Wilderness calls to deep faith, we are claiming.

Let's examine the idea of "deep faith". Am I referring to actions, or attitudes? To behaviours, or beliefs? Well, both, obviously. In the life of faith, they are connected. But more to my point here, I am referring not to a pattern of behaviour nor to a confession of belief, but to a real experience of "belonging". When God says to Jesus at his baptism, with deep happiness in God's voice, so to speak, "You are my Beloved and I'm very pleased with you!" imagine the spiritual energy that must have ignited within Jesus. He needed that, of course, 'cause the next thing you know Jesus is sent trooping off into trackless wild territory!

But that's the point. Jesus goes into a trial period – at age 30, likely, surely it was not his first tough time in life, and certainly it was not his last. Jesus enters a wilderness time with God's words ringing in his ears: "Child, on this road you're taking, you have my full love! You belong to me, and I'll be right beside you and within you, no matter how much of a burden you'll need to bear on the barren boulevard ahead."

This is absolutely fantastic news for any of us. God is with me, God is within me, and God is pleased with me! I wonder: is that the message that brought you to faith in God in the first place? For many of us, our profession of faith might have been the result of a gradual journey way back in childhood or youth years or maybe in young adulthood, when we came to accept the messages we'd heard about Jesus in church and decided that our identity as a person belongs within the Jesus story, the Christian faith. For others of us, it could be we had a more dramatic awakening to our connection with God, and then made a very definite decision to surrender to God's grace and become a Christ-follower.

But it seems to me that so seldom is the sense of God's immediate presence a truly liberating force in people's lives. We come to God out of tradition. Or out of guilt, just happy for a feeling of forgiveness. Maybe it's a philosophically logical impression that makes us agree that "the idea of God explains everything." Or we embrace God as a warm spiritual essence, attracted to an awareness of a Love that can only emanate from the Highest Power.

All of those experiences of God are significant. But direct awareness of the love of God... ah! That's what we're talking about here. That is, I believe, what Jesus experienced when he heard that voice proclaiming his "Belovedness". And Jesus heard that voice more than once, we know. Last week's reflection by Laur Steven highlighted the time on the mount of Transfiguration when some of the disciples heard "that Voice" about Jesus. Do we realize that when Jesus himself said to his disciples as the last days of his life were approaching, that he would be with them always, and that he would send God's Spirit to be with them and within them always... do we realize that the heart of Jesus' message to his disciples was the Good News about God's kin-dom being a relationship within which each of us is beloved by God. I am beloved by God. You are beloved by God. Your brother or sister disciple is beloved by God. Your neighbour is beloved by God. The stranger across town (and 'across the tracks') is beloved by God. Your enemy is beloved by God!

The Boulevard of the Beloved is the road we are on, in relationship with the God who is with us, who is within us, and who is pleased with us. Over and over again, in my own journey of faith, tempted as I am with my somewhat philosophical mind to be satisfied with the contemplation of complex theological ideas and the practice of symbolic representations of faith-life through worship experiences... over and over again I need to be reminded that the real religion of the Jesus I claim to believe in is a personal encounter with God lived out in the personal relationships I build with others... from closest family members through extended family, church connections, neighbourhood encounters, and my perspectives I practice toward those I tend to see as dangerous or completely daft – my enemies. And in my personal encounter with the God who walks with me on the Boulevard of the Beloved I am to find all that I need in order to love another person as I love myself. All that I need to be the hands and feet of Jesus in my world.

This is not a cake-walk! This is not a stroll in the park! This is not a logical line-dance! It's a rough path, trying to be consistent in not only realizing how much God loves me deeply and completely at all times, even my worst times, but also in making real that love of God to others through my attitudes and actions in the world. How successful am I, really, in walking that path extremely well? Well, I falter, fail, and fall often enough. And so do you, I suspect. But here's the Good News: God is with me. God is within me. God is pleased to be in relationship with me.

That's the religion of Jesus. That's the road he took, believing this truth. That's the message he proclaimed. That's what he invited his followers to embrace. To practice. To trust. To share. To take as their only true security on the road of life. And, ultimately, on the road of death. Jesus walked his path from his baptism toward his awful execution only three years later with one clear message in mind: Belovedness is the nature of the human experience with the divine. Complete being-

at-home-and-safe-with-God is the energy that keeps one going, on even the most difficult pathways in life. Being loved is the attraction for remaining faithful to God, the motivation for getting up again when our faith has fallen, and the foundation for trusting in our ultimate destiny in God when life comes to an end. Being loved, we come into existence. Being loved, we live out our days, whether we recognize or acknowledge that love or not. Being loved, we pass again into the ever-after when our time comes. Being loved, we're beloved!

I grew up being told by my well-meaning Mennonite mother, who woke me up with singing about the image of Merry Sunshine even on days of rainstorms or blizzards in Saskatchewan... grew up being told that I needed to try hard to please Jesus every day. Mom meant well, but she missed the message of the sunshine! My daily need, your daily need, as Jesus taught, is to realize God is pleased with me because, as one mother reportedly daily exclaimed to her children: "God don't make no trash!" God's voice to us announces and assures, day by day, that we are, with Jesus, beloved. And our life is a path where we can experience love as we look for it everywhere, and as we share it, no matter how we are feeling, everywhere. That's how we all can have a share in walking the Boulevard of the Beloved.

As worship planners and preachers here at Grace, we sometimes use resources that come from a magazine called Leader. In the issue that is offering guidance for planning our Lenten services, this statement inspired me for this reflection today: "Our identity is fundamentally rooted in the God who created us, loves us, and calls to us." A simple statement really. But so helpful.

This Lent season, daily celebrate that your life is given by God. Contemplate that God's love is with you, and always has been. It's around you, behind you, in front of you, above you, beneath you... most importantly, within you. And, being confident of that, recognize God's voice calling. Calling us to trust the depth of that love in each age and stage of life. And calling us to share the breadth of that love, wherever we can, as God's Spirit leads us to do so.

We have entered the season of Lent. It's a profound time. A beautiful time with truths to celebrate. But also a difficult time, because it does track the steps of our Friend Jesus toward his final days and his awful end. Oh, yes, there is Easter coming. But it's a ways away. Now we walk humbly on a hard path, even though we do confess it is a God-given boulevard. A good way. The way of eternal life.

I close by repeating the opening prayer, taken from the hymnbook *Voices Together*:

A wilderness beckons us;
a desert, a barren place,
yet a place of blessing and discovery.
Jesus, steady companion,
accompany us as we enter

