

The Graceful Call and the Faithful Response  
Devotional by Laur Steven, Grace Mennonite Church, March 14, 2021  
(based on Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10)  
Theme: Wilderness Calls to Deep Faith

During the season of Lent many people give up or restrict something they normally do as a form of sacrifice to remind them of Jesus's sacrifice for us. Often it is something they love to eat or drink, like dessert or coffee, or something they like to do, like play video games or surf the internet or watch late night tv. I'd like to suggest that this time of the Covid pandemic has similarities to the Lenten season. We are all experiencing some sort of restriction of our usual lives, aren't we? We can't socialize as we normally would; you're *reading* this reflection rather than *hearing* it at church surrounded by friends; many of our regular activities and pastimes are restricted—many shops and recreational or entertainment facilities are closed; some of us have lost jobs; schools have operated online, with haphazard results; long-term care facilities have restricted access for visitors. Overall we are feeling hemmed in and bereft, as if our lives have shrunken. And, as in Lent we look forward to Easter, so during Covid we look forward to the dawn of a new day when the vaccines have been shared and the pandemic has passed. Last week Pastor Beth said that while Lent has 40 days, with our Covid restrictions we're now approaching 400 days.

The difference, you might say, is that the Lenten sacrifices are voluntary, whereas the Covid sacrifices are enforced. Yes, this is true. What I'd like us to reflect on, though, is that the enforced curtailing of our lives—a curtailment that is out of our control—places us more genuinely in a wilderness we must navigate, a wilderness where we have the pressing opportunity to respond in faith to the guidance of our gracious God.

Our theme for this season is “Wilderness Calls to Deep Faith”, and today I'll use the lectionary passages from Psalm 107 and Ephesians 2 to focus on the terms ‘wilderness’, ‘calls’, and ‘faith’. Psalm 107 is a hymn of thankfulness to God sung by those the Lord “redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.” The actions of redeeming and gathering in are familiar to us as those of Jesus the good shepherd, and imply that the people in trouble were sheep scattered in wilderness “lands” who needed guidance to come the centre of life. Some of the lost sheep “were sick through their sinful ways,” who couldn't eat, and who were nearing death due to

their iniquities. Here the psalmist is using the deep memory of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness to the very end of their own self-centred tethers before—often whiningly—returning to their faith in God. But they did return: “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress; he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.” Of course God sending out his word to heal and deliver the people reminds us again of Jesus, the word made flesh, sent into our wilderness world to illuminate the way home for us.

But God does not simply respond to us, coming at our beck and call. Actually the dynamic is the reverse. God is the everlasting call to us from the heart of life. The psalmist doesn’t neglect this. The passage opens with these familiar words: “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever,” and then it closes this way: “thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.” God is “steadfast”. God is love. God is always there, at the secure centre of life, loving us.

In the Ephesians 2 passage Paul frames things somewhat differently:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

Paul paints us a vivid picture of a wilderness as a fallen world, under the yoke of the “ruler of the power of the air,” who leads all of us astray through our passions and senses and very nature as children of wrath. Whew! At least for the psalmist, only “some” of the people were “sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction.” Here in Paul, disobedience, sin, and death envelop all of us; they seem to be our very nature. While I can see Paul’s point as a preacher—he’s setting up an irredeemable situation which our redeemer then addresses, which I’ll come back to—I do prefer to understand wilderness in a more nuanced way.

We are flesh and blood, passionate creatures who experience the physical world we are in through our senses. And we also experience each other, and God, through our senses. We are embodied. But while we are embodied, we are not entombed. We can transcend the physical self. Our reach can exceed our grasp because we are also spiritual beings. Remember the greatest commandment: “And

you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” And the second greatest? “Love your neighbour as yourself.” At the centre of our life are loving relationships. We are not alone. Yet because we are embodied beings, whose physical grasp ends with our fingertips, we can only transcend ourselves, reach beyond our grasp, by loving—which means trusting, having faith that the world, and other people, and God, are reaching out to us, calling us into relationship.

The wilderness we are in is not a fallen, depraved place. Rather it is the creation in which we can become most fully ourselves. That wilderness, though, just because we are embodied creatures, can be dangerous; we can get lost, or stumble and fall, or even be set upon by beasts, whether animal or human. In fearful anxiety we can hunker down and close ourselves off from the world around us, from those so nurturing relationships. Or we can even become beasts, pursuing selfish ends through the wilderness as, in Paul’s striking phrase, “children of wrath,” heedless of God or others, seeing the world and those in it as resources we can grasp to feed our needs and wants.

This is the point to return to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.

He goes on:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

God’s saving grace surrounds us, envelops us, enfolds us; it is a call God makes to us, even when we don’t respond, even when we are lost in the wilderness, even when we are dead in our trespasses. That call is prior to our response. God does not answer because we cry out. Our cry to God is our answer to God’s call. When we are at the end of our tether, our cry to God is evidence of our deep faith, our fundamental connection to the core of life which is a perennial wellspring of gracious gift.

But we are not usually at the end of our tether, are we? In closing let’s shift our perspective from this rather abstract discussion to the more tangible Covid wilderness we find ourselves enduring. As members of Grace Mennonite Church we are still in loving relationship, despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic.

In those words of Paul to the Ephesians that are favourites of mine, we “are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” Our pastoral network has been keeping in touch with all of us—albeit by phone or email or regular mail or distanced conversation on the front porch. Our worship and preaching teams and choruses have been putting together spiritually nourishing services which are shared in text, online, and on compact disc if need be. And your thoughts, comments, and compliments for music, or preaching, or prayer, are heard and appreciated. We continue to be in relationship; we continue to be the church, which as Pastor Beth reminded us last week, is more than the building. Of course our gestures as church cannot replace the missing hugs of family and friends, the freedom to travel or to receive travellers, nor can they sweep away that indisputable sense that our lives have shrunken. But they can and do offer a genuine connection to a spiritual reality that has its source in our Lord. They offer support and encouragement for your deep faith that your gracious, enfolding God is at work in our lives, that despite the constrained circumstances we are now in, we can look forward in hope to a transformed world.

Amen, and Alleluia!