

WILDERNESS JOURNEY, CONTINUED

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Second Sunday in Lent

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Genesis 12:1-4

Well, I don't know about you, but the world feels a little too chaotic to me these days. And the one thing that keeps me grounded through it all, is returning here, week after week, and practicing community, deep community, rooted in history, in tradition, in Wisdom, in Love. And, even though we are facing some major changes in our common life, and a little bit of that chaos that may creep in here, this community is not going anywhere.

As we have been reminded often, over the last 42 years, we are members of a community established in 1743, in the Reformed tradition of Christianity that stretches back through one holy catholic apostolic church to Jesus and back into Judaism and the desert and that ancient promise to Abraham, Sara and Hagar that they would be blessed and become a blessing to all people. Those are pretty deep roots. And just in case we needed a little reminder, the very start of that very story is in our lectionary today, from Genesis, chapter 12 (1-4a):

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house (in other words, everything you've ever known and trusted and loved) go to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... to all the families of the earth... So Abram went.

Abraham's story—and ours—actually begins a little bit earlier, in Genesis 1, right at the beginning of the beginning of that great mythic hymn to the goodness of creation. There we are told that, in the beginning, there was already this "formless void" -- a feeble translation of the best Hebrew word ever, *tohuwabohu*, which manages to suggest both empty *and* chaotic. Creation begins when the Spirit, breath of the Holy One, sweeps over the chaos. So, according to this tale, our very existence emerges from God's creative interaction with that first primal *tohuwabohu*. Chaos, breath, light.

And let us never forget: it is good, it is good, it is all good, at least according to the refrain of this great creation hymn. Until the human one gets made--in the image and the likeness of the Holy--then it is very good. And of course, by chapter 3, chaos is back, right in and through human being. Alienation, betrayal, violence, murder, corruption, and towering pride—right alongside that inborn capacity for goodness—right from the start—that's pretty much Genesis 3-11. Which brings us to our story today, and God's invitation to Abraham to set out on an unimaginable journey armed only with trust in God's promise and presence, and a radical vision of universal kinship.

This Abram story is also the prequel for last week's stories, where we had Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, and Moses wandering the desert for forty long tumultuous years with a ragtag band of misfits. All three of these journeys begins with an invitation from the Spirit, is inspired by the promise of God's presence, and each requires full surrender of control, certainty, and so many other beloved things. In each case, the

wilderness turns out to be a place of not just struggle and temptation, but also surprise, discovery, new life, and unimaginable abundance.

All of this was already on my mind last week, when I got a call from an editor with PBS Newshour, who is doing research on LGBT youth in West Virginia. She was intrigued by this report that came out recently claiming that our state has the highest per capita proportion of transgender youth in the nation. And she is exploring the resources available to support what has become one of our nation's most vulnerable populations. As she talked with people all over, she said, SPC kept coming up.

Honestly, I am still processing what was revealed in our profound 40 minute conversation. It had never occurred to me before that our efforts at *choosing welcome* could be considered a kind of a resource. But as we talked about what LGBT youth might actually be looking for, I said that at least for the young people that I have encountered, its things like community, acceptance, and love, that matter most. And it turns out, those are things we also value most, and offer in abundance. How did you all ever get to this place? she asked me. Well, I said, stuff came up, and we dealt with it. Ordination bans. Differing interpretations of scripture and tradition and what it means to human, conflicting views on life and marriage, vastly different personal experiences and theological perspectives. Stuff came up. And we were blessed with leadership wise and skillful enough to insist that we wrestle with each hard thing. So we have talked, disagreed, studied, prayed and talked some more over a very long number of years... and it began to occur to me how much this has been a kind of wilderness journey all along, especially in our ongoing efforts to figure out just what it means, in practice, to "choose welcome". It has shaped us, this journey, into a community deeply committed to the way of radical hospitality. How important is that to your people, she asked me. You know, I said, I think its kind of everything. Its not just a thing we do or words we say, its who we are. Not that we always get it right, but it is the vision that forms our communal identity. Universal kinship.

And you know, this shows up in so many different ways. In our study of race and racism this year, and the extraordinary commitment so very many people have made to this in depth, revelatory, sometimes painful exploration. In our work on refugee and immigrant issues, in long standing relationships with the Muslim community, in our deepening commitments to our homeless neighbors. In our desire to care for the environment.

Last week when our college group Connections helped host the homeless dinner in Charles Town, we heard two remarkable comments: 1. Yeah, *we know your church!* yours is the very best cold weather shelter, because you spoil us; and 2. no one shares with us a better Sunday evening supper. That is radical hospitality.

Tonight, we will welcome the whole community to this meeting house for a public forum around this marvelous documentary *Out of Order* and explore together the ongoing struggle of LGBT faith leaders to find true welcome in the church. Not many places have that kind of freedom.

None of this happened overnight. These are fruits of a deeply rooted community, blessed for very many years with wise and prophetic leadership willing to walk alongside a ragtag band of some pretty courageous misfits. Together we have moved

through numerous experiences of chaos and wilderness. In the process, we have been blessed beyond measure, and we have been shaped by that blessing. Like Abram, we carry those blessings with us, as we move out into the unknown. Like Abram, our call remains to keep listening deeply for the Spirit's invitations to bless as we have been blessed, to continue seeking ways to live out that vision of universal kinship.

So as we move into this next wilderness chapter, let us keep choosing welcome, welcoming even now our grief, uncertainty and anxiety. Let us leave behind our false idols of security, scarcity, and control. And let us seek to welcome unknowing as we deepen our trust in one another and in the Spirit who has been at work here, in and among us, for a very long time.

The wilderness is where transformation happens, and it is necessary for human flourishing. This is the central claim of the book *Wisdom of the Wilderness*, the source of our front cover and first reading today. It is an exuberant celebration of wilderness, this very last book written by my beloved teacher Jerry May, inspired in large part by his experience of dying. He carried that exuberance with him to the very end. You can hear it in his very last words, which I offer you now, with an invitation to carry them with us on the journey ahead: "trust in love, trust in God". That's it. Amen.

First Reading, From *Wisdom of the Wilderness* by Gerald May

Love creates, and it keeps on creating,
and everything it creates also creates.
And there is nothing but creation,
for even what we call destruction is creation;
all breakings apart precede new comings together
that have never before existed...
its all going on in overflowing splendor,
lavish profusion, luxuriant exuberance...
the Source of the All constantly yearns
for each one of us (to) know without doubt that we are loved,
and that we are intimately irrevocably part
of the endless creation of love,
and that we will join,
with full freedom and consciousness,
the joyous creativity
that is Nature,
that is Wildness,
that is Wilderness,
that is Everything."