

A WAY IN THE WILDERNESS
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March 13, 2016
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the LORD, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

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Two weeks ago this Sunday, a little dog named Snickers ran away from her new home in Sharpsburg, swam across the Potomac River and got lost in a wilderness of sorts, out on Terrapin Neck where Paula and I live. For a little bitty dog it was a wilderness of spooky sounds, strange trees, tangled shrubs, jagged rocks and wild creatures. Day after day, Snickers dashed hither and yon searching for the way back home.

Strangers and friends rallied together to look out, to call out, and to set out food all in order to make a way for Snickers to be found. And sure enough, a way was found in the wilderness. Monday morning Snickers was found.

That's what love does for the lost and bewildered, for the frightened and wounded. We make a way in the wilderness.

And that brings us to the Old Testament lesson for today.

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, I will give drink to my beloved. (Isaiah 43:16-21)

As it turns out, you don't have to be God to make a way in the wilderness. God's voice is our voice. God's heart is our heart. Theology is anthropology. We are one with the divine.

I am about to do. I will make a way. I will give water.

God's voice is our voice. God's heart is our heart.

Snickers was nothing if not beloved. But the beloved got lost in a haunting and terrifying wilderness.

Many of us here today are caught in a wilderness of one sort or another. We feel lost. We wonder if we'll ever find our way home. Will we, or our loved ones, ever be whole again? Will we die of thirst in the desert?

This week more than most weeks, illness and foreboding situations have come to my attention. Many of you have been on my mind and in my heart.

One of our fathers is now under hospice care, facing his final days. Another father is slipping away from reality. One of our mothers is riddled with aggressive cancer and the family is counting months, not years.

A husband keeps falling and can't get up. One of our daughters gets up and gets clean and sober, but falls again. One of our sons is in the same boat. And actually there is more than one son and one daughter.

One of our brothers and one of our sisters are hanging by a thread that could snap at any moment. Many of our parents are worried sick about their young children falling prey to peddlers and predators.

Several of us—no matter how hard we try—cannot shake grief that weighs heavy on the heart. Several of us weep with victims of pernicious racism still embedded in our land.

There are many ways to be lost in a wilderness. And then a voice speaks: *I will make a way.*

I've seen it and I've heard it. I've seen a way in the wilderness many times.

Many times after a service here, I've seen a hand softly placed on a sagging shoulder. I've heard how cards of comfort arrive in mailboxes. I've seen prayer shawls delivered. I've heard of your visits to homes, hospitals, nursing homes, and hospice. I've heard of rides given and meals shared. I've heard of hours spent simply listening to the broken or fearful heart of another. By the way, listening is one of the greatest gifts we can ever offer.

No, we cannot eliminate the wilderness, but we can make a way through. No, we cannot eliminate darkness but we can hold a light. We cannot eliminate burdens, but we can share the load. We cannot eliminate the road of suffering, but we can walk along.

I am about to do a new thing; do you not see it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

That's what love does.

And that brings us to the gospel.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He knew his days were now numbered. He stopped by the house of his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Martha served a meal. Lazarus talked about life after death. And Mary saw the shadow of death on Jesus' face. No, we cannot eliminate death but we can anoint the dying with mercy and compassion.

So Mary took a pound of costly perfume, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Then Judas Iscariot said, "Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?" Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it to keep for the day of my burial. You can always serve the poor; but this moment will not last forever." (John 12:1-8)

It's true: love alone is not enough. To make the whole world whole, justice is required. We must practice justice always. But there are moments when only love will do.

Which is to say: don't save your best for later. Later may be too late. Now is the time.

Now is the time to hold the light. Now is the time to walk the road. Now is the time to share the load. Now is the time.

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HYMN 727
"Let Me Be Your Servant"