

Into the Woods: Called to Deep Commitment
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Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

Mark 8:31-38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of [Humanity] must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of [Humanity] will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Have you ever gotten lost in the woods or the wilderness? I have – together with my whole family. I have a very clear memory of going hiking with my parents and my sister as well as our aunt and uncle and cousins, who were visiting us. The adults decided that a hike in the hills outside of the city of Concepcion, Chile, where we lived at the time, was just what we needed. Except that part-way through, no one could remember the way back to our cars. I must have been about 7 years old at the time, and I remember feeling a mix of excitement (what an adventure!) and amazement that four adults could make a mistake like this (didn't adults know everything?). And of course, my feelings would have been different if we had not all been lost together. Eventually –

after wandering around and ending up crossing a small river with my dad carrying us girls across! – we made it back to the cars and back home.

This week's worship theme for the second Sunday of Lent is "Lost in the Woods: Called to Deep Commitment." Now the wilderness is a major theme in the Bible, from the Israelites' wandering after the exodus from Egypt to the return of the exiles in Babylon in Isaiah, to Jesus' temptation. It's the place, as womanist (African-American, woman-centred) theologian Delores Williams says, with two aspects to it: it's both a place where we meet God and an unknown place, a risky, even hostile place where one's survival is at stake. Drawing parallels between the Bible and the experience of enslaved Black people in the U.S., she talks about how the wilderness was a positive place despite the risks – it represented freedom and God's gracious presence as runaway slaves found sanctuary and sustenance in the wilderness.¹ The Israelites, too, fled slavery in Egypt for the safety and freedom of the wilderness, but I had never thought about them being lost before. The biblical accounts we have talk about God leading the people, even miraculously providing food and water for them. But hindsight is 20/20 after all. I have to wonder whether at some points in all those forty years, all that wandering felt futile, like they were lost and just going around in circles. Maybe that's why some of them wished Moses had never led them out of Egypt (Exodus 16).

Our Scripture texts for today both speak of faith as takes us into the unknown and unexpected. We're used to thinking about faith as something comforting, something that provides security and rest for our souls. And that is certainly one of its purposes. But at the same time, faith calls us to step out into the unknown, something I know as

¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 20th Anniversary Ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013), 103.

the child of church workers who moved half-way across the world to a country with a different language and culture from our own, a country under military dictatorship, with two little girls (the ages my children are now). Yes, faith also challenges us to step into the unknown and to make our spiritual home in the very midst of that wilderness. And in doing so, we meet God and find ourselves changed, even transformed.

In our first passage from Genesis 17, we find God promising Abram that he and Sarai would be parents to a multitude of people using almost over-the-top language. They will be “exceedingly numerous,” “ancestor[s] to a multitude of nations,” “exceedingly fruitful,” ancestors to kings and generations of children. God seems to pay no attention to Abram and Sarai being 99 years old at this point. God’s unexpected and unlikely promise (to put it mildly) is on the horizon. But this is not the first time God has made this promise. Back in chapter 12, when God called Abram to move away from his homeland, God had already promised him many children. And yet, if we look back just one chapter, we find out that Abram and Sarai had already given up on God’s promise. They had forced Hagar, who was enslaved by Sarai, to be their surrogate and abused her terribly, to the point that she had run away with her son Ishmael into the wilderness. And God met Hagar in the wilderness and promised that she would be a mother to a great multitude (Genesis 16). So here we have an echo of the promise God has just made to Hagar, at a point when Abram and Sarai have really lost their way.

What’s interesting about God’s promise this time around are the names and the re-naming that God does. These sort of get lost in translation for us. First, God identifies Godself as “the LORD the Almighty” (v. 1), a translation of the Hebrew “El Shaddai.” This is a name that ties together imagery of mighty mountains and a nursing mother –

God our mighty Mother, the Giver and Sustainer of Life. Abram and Sarai are also renamed in this passage: Abram (“Respected Parent”) becomes Abraham (“Progenitor of a Multitude”) while Sarai (“princess”) is renamed “Noblewoman,”² a reference to her royal status in being the mother of kings. Both of these name changes are reflections of the power of El Shaddai – God our Mighty Mother – to bring life from even the most unexpected circumstances, such as two nanogenarians who are to become parents of not only a nation, but many nations! Even in these unexpected, borderline ridiculous circumstances, this encounter with God’s life-giving power forms and transforms Abraham and Sarah, giving them new names and new identities as God’s promises are fulfilled.

Our passage from Mark also focuses on turning expectations upside-down, this time in a tense interaction between Peter and Jesus. (And let’s remember Simon-Peter is another person who’s had a name change to reflect his new life as a disciple!) This passage comes just after Peter has identified Jesus as the Messiah or the Christ, something that had not yet been said out loud. Just after this confession, Jesus is explaining what kind of Messiah he is – the kind who is now headed to Jerusalem, the one who will suffer and die and be raised. But the disciples – especially Peter – just don’t get it! Peter starts “rebuking” Jesus, telling him that he’s got this all wrong. The Messiah is supposed to be a militant king who battles to liberate Israel from Roman oppression. But Jesus says, sharply, “Get behind me, Satan!” In other words, “don’t tempt me.” Jesus’ is a different kind of victory – the kind involving death and resurrection. Leader magazine says, “Jesus’ words led Peter right into the forest. He

² Name meanings from: *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation*, by Priests for Equality (2007).

imagined victory, dominance, a kingly reign. Talk of suffering and death and rejection was not the story Peter told himself about the Messiah. But going there with Jesus was part of Peter's journey – learning a different story.”³ And Jesus calls them to likewise take up their crosses and follow in Jesus' footsteps. Their faith will be costly, a path that will require them to let go of some of their previous expectations and risk stepping out into the unknown.

Author Sarah Bessey was recently interviewed on Bible scholar Pete Enns' podcast. The podcast is called “The Bible for Normal People,” and I can pass along the link if you'd like. In this episode, Bessey shared about how her understanding of prayer has changed over the years, as her faith has evolved and shifted.⁴ She used to pray in a very results-oriented way, in a prosperity-gospel kind of way that is about “controlling outcomes”: if you ask God for health, wealth, and happiness, you'll receive it. But after the tragic experience of losing a young person she loved, this kind of prayer didn't make sense to her anymore; if it didn't work, why bother praying? So she stopped, and she speaks of this as “losing prayer.” But what happened in her losing that kind of prayer is that she discovered a multitude of other ways to pray; losing the miracle-or-bust attitude toward prayer made space for her to reimagine prayer altogether. She learned liturgical prayer and ancient prayers, and the biblical prayers of the Psalms and elsewhere, which are honest and raw, bringing any and all joys and sorrows and anger and delight to God. She learned two important things: that prayer is not just individual – even when

³ Mennonite Church Eastern Canada worship resources team, “Deep Calls to Deep: Lent-Easter 2021,” *Leader Magazine* (Winter 2020/21): 40.

⁴ Interview with Sarah Bessey: Why Bother Praying? on *The Bible for Normal People* podcast, <https://peteenns.com/interview-with-sarah-bessey-why-bother-praying/>

one cannot pray oneself, one can rest in the prayers of others or “borrow hope” from others. And the other she learned from her son, who was asked to draw a picture of prayer in Sunday school. He had drawn a picture of him and Jesus sitting side by side in lawn chairs, and they had those speech bubbles above them and were just saying “I love you,” back and forth to one another over and over again. So prayer became for Bessey not a duty or a list of requests for miracles or something that controlled outcomes, but a regular rhythm of resting in the love of God, in God’s loving, sustaining presence. So in losing one form of prayer, Bessey actually discovered a more profound way of practicing prayer.

We may be feeling lost in the woods these days, as this whole year hasn’t turned out how we expected. Even as certain things have become clear, we’re still left with a lot of unknowns. We feel the losses of this year, especially the recent losses of two beloved members of our congregation, and the loss of not being able to gather as a whole community to grieve. We feel the strain and stress of this pandemic on our family lives, on our workplaces, on our friendships, on our mental health, on our spiritual lives. In the midst of this, let’s remember that God is present even – especially – in the wilderness, in the woods, offering sustaining love. Even when we can’t see a way forward, God is with us, calling us to let go of expectations that hold us back, to reimagine what could be. Even when everything feels unfamiliar, God is our Rock and our Strength – nothing is unfamiliar to God. Even when things seem hopeless, the God of Life calls us out of the tomb into the wonder of resurrection. AMEN