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LPTS
February 27, 2009

A Wilderness of Imagination

Mark 1: 9-15

I have been lost in a kaleidoscope of emotion lately. My daily joys and concerns, hopes and anxieties have all been overshadowed by the significance of an African American president. I have been without my lecture since Barack Obama won the race for president. Before the November election, I had a lecture. I even had a polished lecture. I could wax eloquent about all of the deep-seated reasons why this country would fail to accept an African American for its highest office. I even went to bed at an irrationally early hour on election night, fearing the sort of national drama that would once again result in the Supreme Court deciding a disputed and hotly contested election. The calamity I feared was not about who would win, but I feared that all of the ugliness around race and racial identity and racism that this country continues to struggle with would cast a familiar pall over a terribly important event in our national life. Oh, I had my lecture memorized.

On the day after Barack Obama lost the presidential election I was going to read my favorite passage from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In this powerful passage, Nannie is soothing her troubled granddaughter, Janie.

“Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody so low till you can rob'em of they will.”

This is my lecture. These themes emanate from my narrative, the bedrock story of who I am, where I come from, how I fit in, and what I can hope to become in my life. Nannie speaks for

me. It wasn't for my people to fulfill our dreams of what we can be and do. This is one of the legacies of slavery. But nothing can stop us from wishing for freedom. And I was going to deliver my lecture on the day after Barack Obama lost the national election. It is fitting after such an epic loss.

With covers pulled up over my ears, I heard Ann on the phone and I could tell from her joy and excitement that Obama won the election. I said two words. The first word was "Holy." The second word was not. And at that moment I lost my way. My joy immediately evaporated and was replaced by a kind of malaise. My lecture had no more lines. I am stuck between two worldviews, in a wilderness of imagination.

On the one hand, I am firmly planted on the path that I once walked with my parents and grandparents. On that path, a black president was a wish that nobody could stop us from wishing. It is a stony path where I met my God, a path that meandered through valleys of suffering and over mountains of despair. But each stone along the stony way was a stone of hope, a wish against all odds. On the other hand, I am firmly planted on a path that will take my daughters into an uncharted world of possibility, a world in which an African American president is not a wish, not a hope, not a dream, not a vision, but a reality, a point of departure. Robert Frost says it best:

Two Roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one so far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth

“Just let me sit with this for a minute” was all that I could say between election night and the day of inauguration, as I pondered the cost of letting go one worldview in order to construct a new one that witnesses to what God is doing right now.

During the inauguration in January, this uncomfortable pairing of malaise and joy returned to me. At first, I was joyful, very joyful. I took pictures of my wife and my girls. “*Ella,*” I said, “*Come to daddy and let me take your picture in front of the tv.*” Click. “*Look at daddy, Maya.*” Click. “*Okay now, go sit on mommy’s lap and let daddy take another picture.*” Click. “*Just one more picture girls,*” I said. “*Ella, can you hug your sister?*” Click.

That moment was filled with ecstasy. And that little room was filled to standing capacity with spirits I could not see. My parents were there, squeezing the granddaughters they did not have a chance to meet on this side of eternity. And my grandparents were there talking with Ann’s mom. And Fannie Lou Hamer was laughing. And Odetta was signing with Mahalia Jackson. Countee Cullen and Gwendolyn Brooks were writing words of praise in the clouds. And the souls of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren were there praising God. Not because of an election, but simply because God chose to reveal herself in a moment of synchronicity in which everything made sense, in which there was no discontinuity between God’s will and my will. I couldn’t capture the heavenly host on film, so I took photographs of the angels I could see.

And immediately the joy was gone. I am unable to go back to that moment of ecstasy. I am challenged to keep moving forward along a new path that leads out of the wilderness and I am tempted to stay in the familiarity of old ways, worshipping old thoughts, and drinking stale wine from old wineskins. I stand in a wilderness of imagination, somewhere between “*I have a dream,*” and “*change has come,*” somewhere between the ecstasy of my baptism when my God

pulled me up from death to life, and the indescribable joy of Easter when everything is illuminated to belong to God.

The season of Lent has just begun for us, and so our thoughts turn to matters of discipleship and preparation. In anticipation of Easter Sunday we remember John the Baptist's cry to "*prepare the way of the Lord.*" We think again about the ways in which we make preparations, personally and as community, to receive Jesus. We also think about how we stray from "the way." How we unintentionally hinder the work of the spirit in making straight the path from the Jordan to Jerusalem, from baptism to death. The flow of the Lenten season is often characterized as a forward movement from water to wilderness to witness.

My theme this morning is the loss of that forward movement. Sometimes along the straight and narrow way that Mark describes, we get lost in the wilderness. At times we find ourselves meandering in the wilderness, unable to find our bearings, or get any forward momentum along the way. At times we find ourselves at a crossroads, unable to resolve which path to take.

At baptism we feel a surge of certainty and self-understanding that comes when we accept God's purpose. We feel that God is pleased with us and our decision to accept God's way as our own. We start out on the path of discipleship with a quick step and the road ahead appears wide and clear. But the path leads immediately into hardship and we feel the anxiety of one who is on an unfamiliar road at dusk. We reassure ourselves that soon our destination will appear on the horizon, but the miles pile up, the years pile up, the pounds pile up, the reports pile up, the medical bills pile up, and our journey seems to be going nowhere.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus' baptism is read along with the testing by Satan in the wilderness. Given the brevity of the account, we can't help but read them together. We are not told how Jesus was tested, the content of the test, nor are we told how the testing came to an end. We know that the test or temptation lasted forty days, that both God and Satan had different purposes in the testing, that wild beasts were in the wilderness, and that angels were there too, ministering to Jesus.

The gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist's call to prepare the way of the Lord. The way or the path is a fundamental theme in Mark. It is the language that Mark uses to talk about the journey of Jesus from baptism in the Jordan to death in Jerusalem. Mark's earliest readers understood "the way" in its multiple meanings. The way can be understood as a physical path. Take the Exodus narrative, for example. Exodus 13:17 reads, "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines." The way in this sense is quite literally the way out.

But the way also has a moral connotation. It is a foundation for a Divine Command ethic. Deuteronomy 5:32-33 reads "You shall be careful to do therefore as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left. You must follow exactly the way that the Lord your God has commanded you." The way in this sense refers to how we live with our neighbors. How we treat our enemies. How we interact with the strangers in our land.

How easy it is to turn away from God, so easy that we often fail to notice until we are lost. We turn to the left and are torn apart by wild beasts. We turn to the right and worship idols. But God's way is narrow and straight. And until we learn perseverance, until we make courage a habit, until we practice love, we will stay together in the wilderness for forty days or forty years.

We are called to prepare the way of the Lord. I imagine that John the Baptist had to cry it, couldn't just say it, because nobody got it. Our beloved sister, Sue Garrett writes in her marvelous book, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark's Gospel*, that only two characters take up this command. The first character is John the Baptist who prepares the Lord's way by making people ready to receive Jesus. The second character is the woman at Bethany who anoints Jesus beforehand for burying. But the other major characters in Mark's story "make the Lord's path crooked." One makes the Lord's path crooked by acting as a seducer, as an agent of temptation who leads others astray from the straight and narrow way."¹

To prepare a straight path is a call to join Jesus as he walks on the way to the cross, because that is the way to salvation. To prepare a straight path is to help those who strive to walk the way of the Lord, because that is the way to freedom. To prepare a straight path is to allow our brothers and sisters to lift us up when we are too weary to carry on, because that is the way of love.

God has blessed us and cast us out in the wilderness that we may persevere, that we may endure. We are surrounded by wild beasts that try to harm us, that try to tear apart the fabric of our community, but we are also surrounded by angels, and they minister to us. No matter how lost we feel in our pain, no matter how stuck we feel in hurtful relationships, no matter how shallow our credit and how deep our debt, no matter how much our investments have lost, no matter how intractable the problems that seem to keep our congregation from moving forward, we are not alone in the wilderness, nor are we without divine guidance. We are to prepare a straight path in the wilderness. Don't turn to the left, lest you be tempted to veer from the way. Don't turn to

¹ Susan R. Garrett, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 54.

the right, lest you cause your sister to turn away from God. Just build a highway in the wilderness.

Isaiah 40:3-4 reads:

“A voice cries in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

This season of Lent, let us do just what Nanny did when she was lost in a wilderness of imagination, with one foot still shackled in chattel slavery and the other foot planted firmly on the Emancipation Proclamation. Cast out the double-mindedness that says simultaneously I am a slave and I am free. Rebuke the temptation to worship your narrative, your story. Claim your freedom with every step you take. With your children or grandchildren on your hip, pick up your broom and your cook-pot and throw up a highway through the wilderness. Download a new song to your *ipod*. *Twitter* what God is doing now. Take whatever you need to prepare a straight path.

Renew your strength in God’s invincible love, renew your faith in God’s promise of justice, renew your imagination and witness to the new thing that God is doing. Tell the people what God is doing. Encourage your brothers and sisters when they stumble along the way. Persevere.

This is our task today. We have time enough tomorrow to remember where this path will lead.

Garrett, Susan R. *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.