

Sermon for Lent I 2-18-18  
Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson  
Travel Light - Just a Thread

---

In two weeks, my husband, Daniel, and I are flying to India. We're joining my sister to experience two large cities and the holy sites along the Ganges River. We have our visas. Our shots are up-to-date and Molly and Ajit Daniels, members of Trinity, have given me some helpful suggestions. As you may know, they both have roots in India. Now it's time to pack. Because it will be like summer there, I have to dig back into my warm-weather clothes and try to remember what I wear when it's 80 degrees! But no, problem - I always pack for all temperatures. My suitcase is never overweight, but never easy to zip.

What a contrast to the adventure Jesus sets out on from the waters of the Jordan. "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." Mark's gospel is short on details, as usual. Yet, I have the sense that Jesus didn't bring much with him for those 40 days. No shopping at REI for one of those gargantuan backpacks with dozens of pockets, a lightweight aluminum frame and a side pocket for a water bottle with a tube snaking up and around to the mouth. I doubt that Jesus took any form of shelter or bedding either. No pop-up tent with a zippered flap. No sleeping bag offering comfort on a cold wilderness night. And certainly, no foam mattress rolled up over his shoulder.

Jesus is traveling light. He will be with the "wild beasts." Now, before we wonder what kind of animals were likely to share the Galilean desert with Jesus, we need to stop and consider that those words probably aren't an introduction to "Animal Kingdom". Usually, the kind of "wild beasts" referenced in the Bible don't actually have claws and venom.

These beasts are the animal urges inside of us. You know the list - anger, shame, guilt, judgement, rejection, revenge, envy, blame... Pick yours. We all have them and usually a couple we display more than others. Jesus is fully human so he has them too. With a push from the Holy Spirit, Jesus sets out to spend time with his beasts.

Because Mark is so spare, we don't have the details as in Matthew and Luke. But, using those gospels' details, we have a guess about his temptations. Spiritual mentors call them "the false self" And Richard Rohr names them: Power, Prestige, Possessions. Three "P's" so easy to remember and neatly, they match with the three temptations described in the other gospels. Satan tempts Jesus with all three. First, be powerful: turn these stones into bread. Second, own it all: rule all these kingdoms. Finally, prove your worth: throw yourself down from the temple pinnacle and angels will save you because you are the Son of God.

Like us, Jesus has to wrestle with the temptation to cover over and forget the holy words he heard at his baptism: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Those words proclaim his true self. He is the Son of God. God loves and delights in him. That is the truth in the center, the spark, the glory of God within.

Jesus is tempted to replace that center with another message - that his worth and value comes from power, prestige and possessions. Those are strong and seductive messages. It takes time to name them. It takes patience to tame them. It took Jesus forty days in the wilderness to let go and own his own glory, his true self, for God's words in his ears to travel into and connect with his own spirit.

He did it. But what is that “it”? To answer, we turn to a poet, William Stafford’s poem, “*The Way It Is*”:

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among  
Things that change. But it doesn’t change.  
People wonder about what you pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can’t get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you can do can stop time’s unfolding.  
You don’t ever let go of the thread.

Jesus has the “thread”. “And the angels waited on him.” He leaves the wilderness with the “thread” of his true self - son of God, beloved - and ready to live and die as who he is created to be: the bearer of the good news. He is ready to tell everyone he meets and all those who follow him the same good news: he, they and we are all sons and daughters of God, beloved, with whom God is well pleased. That is good news to hear because our wild beasts cover over our thread. We travel with baggage - anger, shame, revenge, judgement, envy. The list goes on. We need a wilderness time.

But who has time and space for forty days to name and tame their beasts? No one in my orbit of life. Yet, all of us have 20 minutes a day, some days. Think about it. Honestly, can’t you find, carve, grab for, claim 20 minutes of quiet and stillness? Can’t you witness to your family that quiet time is as important to you as work, healthy food, relationships and exercise? Think of it as a time to let go of beasts who would like to own you, fill you, define you.

Oh, but wild beasts aren’t so well trained. They don’t just come in a 20 minute “wilderness time”. They show up to be fed throughout the day when slipping away for a quiet 20 minutes isn’t possible. That must have happened to Jesus. We don’t know what he did, but a wise mentor, Cynthia Bourgeault offers help in what’s called the “Welcoming Prayer”. It’s counterintuitive. When a beast pops up in the mind and body, like anger, fear, grief, revenge, welcome it. Name it and then welcome it. We cannot tame what we deny and try to will out of our mind. Just keep welcoming it, letting go so it can move to that deep place where God’s mercy and grace can transform it.

Here’s my story. I was at an onsite session as a student in Richard Rohr’ Living School. I was in a cocoon of spiritual mentors, readings and co-students. Holy Time. One night a friend in my class was going to dinner with the keynote speaker. Don’t know how he wrangled that, so I asked to go. Time to talk with her, have a story to tell others who have read her books. No, he said, that’s not possible. Hmmm. Rejected, I went back to my room and played spider solitaire on my iPad.

Rather, spider solitaire was on the screen, but I was replaying the conversation with my friend and growing more annoyed by the moment. Sounds like junior high school, doesn’t it? Well, what can I say?? It was just last August, so if any of you think that age alone tames the wild beasts, we need to talk! After some minutes, I thought this wasn’t a fun way to spend my evening, so I decided to give the “Welcoming Prayer” a try. Now, its important to name the “beast” - just any old beast will not do.

And if you can connect it to your body, so much the better. And it's cheating to spend time analyzing and second-guessing yourself. Surprisingly, I had to keep digging deeper and deeper to get passed the obvious beasts. But, I knew when it peeked around the corner: envy. I envied Mike for his experience and I wanted it too. I started praying: welcome envy, welcome envy, welcome envy. Moments later, I was back to spider solitaire, thinking I had tamed envy. Not so. Back came the thoughts. So, I prayed again: welcoming envy again and again until I felt release in my body, until I could think about Mike at his dinner and be delighted for him.

The thread, back to the thread. Richard Rohr writes this about Stafford's poem: "Note that Stafford... didn't tell you not to let go of the thread, but rather that "*you don't ever let go of the thread.*" Why? Because you can't. It has you. Love has you. Love, and our deep need for love, alone recognizes love itself. Remember that you already are what you are seeking." (*Immortal Diamond*, page 178)

So, learn to travel light this Lent, just a thread. AMEN.