

Date: February 25, 2007

SUNDAY: Lent 1

SERMON: Remembering Our Way Out of the Wilderness

Text(s): Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

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I don't know if Daniel Defoe's 18th century classic *Robinson Crusoe* was the first literary exploration of the theme of a person who finds themselves marooned on an island far from civilization and forced to learn how to survive in primitive conditions, but it certainly wasn't the last. The theme appears to hold some sort of perennial fascination for us. The television industry is making hay, or more literally, big bucks with the series *Lost*, the latest in the so-called "reality TV" genre of shows.

You may remember that Hollywood re-did the *Robinson Crusoe* theme a few years ago in *Castaway* with Tom Hanks. It wasn't bad—better than I expected. He did about as much as anyone could do with a script that has about 45 minutes with almost no dialogue, except for when he talks to himself or to a washed-up soccer ball he named Wilson.

Talk about a true wilderness experience! He didn't arrive on that uninhabited island, outfitted with L.L. Bean's camping gear; he didn't even have his Swiss Army knife with him.

He had to start with what was in his immediate environment, which wasn't much besides sea, sand, coconut palms and rocks, as well as with what was inside his head, in his memory of his Boy Scout training and whatever other information he had gleaned along the way that could be turned to some practical use in this wilderness.

Eventually, he remembered his way out of that wilderness. He remembered how to make fire without matches, and though it was a long, and sometimes despairing struggle to do so, eventually he succeeded, and that probably saved his life. His memory of his fiancée and their love for one another also sustained him

psychologically and give him the reserves of courage he needed to finally risk setting sail on his makeshift raft to escape from his wilderness prison.

The great irony in the story, of course, was that when he was finally rescued and returned to so-called civilization, he found that he was in another kind of wilderness, and that he needed to develop the skills to survive in this strange wilderness of his former and future life.

The recognition that we don't have to go far from home to find ourselves in the midst of the wilderness, where our very survival is at stake, is part of what the season of Lent is all about. Life is not all Carnival or Mardi Gras; life thrusts some fairly tough wilderness survival tests upon us from time to time, both individually and collectively. We wonder how we can hang on in the face of grief following a painful loss, or endure the fears and pain of life-threatening illness, or cope with the steady deterioration of our bodies and minds as we age, or remain hopeful despite the loss of a job or vocational disappointment, or stumble our way through the confusion and pain of a divorce, or regain a sense of national purpose that sets us on a positive course, our ability to remember will be crucial to our survival.

Both of our lessons for this first Sunday in Lent give us important clues that can help us face the deserts or wildernesses into which life will inevitably thrust us, and discover that there are springs in the desert that can sustain us and nourish us and enable us to emerge stronger than before we entered that wilderness.

The Book of Deuteronomy is, essentially, an exercise in communal memory. It's a re-telling of Israel's primal story—the story of how they were delivered from slavery in Egypt, endured forty years of nomadic existence in the terrible Sinai wilderness, and finally made it to the Promised Land. Much of the book is cast in the literary form of a long sermon delivered by Moses to the people on the eve of their entry into the land of promise, a land that, as they put it,

was “flowing with milk and honey.” Over and over again, the hearers are told, “Remember. Don’t forget. Tell the story of our deliverance again and again.”

In our passage this morning, which immediately follows a lengthy section of specific instructions on how the people are to live together in a just society that cares for the weak, lifts up the fallen, respects and cares for outsiders and resident aliens, we find instructions for how to maintain such a just society. The people are told to bring 10% of their annual harvest to the place of worship and dedicate it to God. This discipline of tithing functioned as a memory aid; it helped the people remember that they were not self-made, that their good life of peace and plenty in this new land was not solely the result of their hard work or merit. It was more or less the equivalent of our Thanksgiving holiday. By giving God the first 10% of what they earned or produced, they remembered that it was God who had delivered them from slavery and brought them to this good land. This recognition of their dependence, by the way, is the fundamental theological ground for what we commonly refer to as stewardship, whether it’s the stewardship of our environment or the stewardship of our material possessions.

As they presented their tithes, they recited their collective founding story. *“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor, and he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us by making us slaves, we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and he brought us into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore, I bring the first fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.”*

Do you see the relationship between memory and the present, between recall and reality in that passage? It begins with the

past—our ancestor went down into Egypt. But the reciters of that story then put themselves in the story: *“The Egyptians treated us harshly, they afflicted us, the Lord saw our affliction. . . therefore I bring the first fruit that you, O Lord have given me.”* The movement is from “our ancestor” to “we” to “me,” all in the same sentence.

In the Jewish *Haggadah*, which is the liturgy for Passover, there is an instruction that each member of the family gathered around the table for the Seder meal, as the of the story of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt is retold, is to consider himself or herself personally to have been enslaved by Pharaoh and liberated by God. They are to recall the past history of God’s liberating action into their own present so that it becomes part of their own story, their own journey, their own reality.

Each time we gather around the Lord’s Table, we collectively pray the long prayer called the Great Thanksgiving. That prayer is the Christian equivalent of the story that the ancient Israelites recited when they brought their offerings of first fruits to God. It’s our collective way of remembering who we are and where we have come from and how we got here. In fact, the old Greek name for this prayer is *anamnesis*, which means “remembrance.” In that Great Thanksgiving, we remember the story of God’s faithfulness in creation and redemption through Jesus Christ, and in remembering, we recall that redemption into our present reality so that it becomes our story in this present moment. It grounds us in the present moment, even if, in that present moment, we happen to find ourselves in a bleak and frightening wilderness. Remembering that we are part of the people of God, is a key to finding our way out of the wilderness, to a new place of peace and well-being, of *shalom*.

We see this same act of remembering and reciting in a more individual way in the story of Jesus’ temptations in our Gospel lesson. Jesus is

tempted to ground his life in material things, in the exercise of power, and on the desire for immortality or a charmed life. And if we reflect on these three tests for a moment, it becomes clear that they are only three different forms of the same test. The real test which Jesus faces here, and it is the test that every one of us must face as well, is the question, “On whom or what does my life ultimately depend?” Or to put it another way, “From whom or what does my life draw its meaning?” Each of the scriptures that Jesus remembers and recites acknowledges his deep dependence on God. The temptations of materialism, desire for power, and a quest for a magical formula to keep death at bay are the three most common answers to that question. And which of us doesn’t face the temptation to build our lives, our very existence, upon one or more of those three things?

A few years ago, Bill Joy, then the chief scientist of Sun Microsystems, called for scientists to simply renounce certain research and the quest for certain kinds of knowledge because it carries with it the likelihood of misuse, and the misuse of some knowledge could very well mean the extinction of the human species. Joy understood that our track record of using our knowledge wisely in life-enhancing ways is poor. In fact, with every advance in knowledge, we seem to have demonstrated not only our ability, but our willingness, to use it destructively. In other words, while we may become godlike in our knowledge, we have not become equally godlike in our wisdom in putting that knowledge to use. Joy’s warning was prophetic, but like most prophets, he didn’t get much of a hearing. Our desire “to be like gods, knowing good and evil,” the primal sin in the Garden of Eden, is too deeply embedded in us. That fundamental temptation—to become our own God—is the temptation that Jesus faced, and the temptation we all still face. It’s as contemporary as our newspaper headlines.

As Thomas Merton reminded us a

generation ago, we no longer have to leave civilization to find ourselves in the desert wilderness. We have made everywhere a desert. In the desert we unleashed and tested the power of the atom which now gives us the power to uncreate the world. In our contemporary deserts we have built glittering cities with their gleaming skyscrapers which are dedicated to worship of money. Our machines and our wealth and our arrogant exertion of our power have caused us to become alienated from one another and from ourselves. We are lonely and isolated, dwelling in a solitude enforced by our own arrogance in thinking that we can do a better job than God at being God. The result, says Merton, of this “desertification” of our society, is despair and despair is everywhere.

We see it, don’t we? We see it every day if we open our eyes. During the week, some of us see it in the faces of the men and women who come to our church offices seeking shelter because they’re homeless, or food because they have to make a choice between paying their rent or eating. We see it in the brutalized and starving people of Darfur in the Sudan, we feel it in the in the sense of futility and weariness that comes over us whenever we think about the mess we’ve made in Iraq and the apparent lack of any positive way out. We see it in the suburban consumerism bred out of our own affluence: “I shop, therefore I am.” We know the cold fingers of despair in our own hearts when we fail in our relationships or when we look into the future and see nothing but bleakness and a weary drawn-out continuation of things as they are.

This, then, is our desert: says Merton, to live facing despair but not to consent. To trample it down under hope in the Cross. To wage war against despair unceasingly. That war is our wilderness. If we wage it courageously, we will find Christ at our side. If we cannot face it, we will never find Him.¹

If we are ever going to survive in the wilderness, we will need good memories; we

must tell good stories. We must remember who we are and who God is; remember that we are not self-made, remember that God has been faithful to us in the past, and dare to hope and believe that God will not give up on the creation, that our lives have meaning, not only the meaning that we give them by our achievements and our choices and actions, but a meaning that arises out of that primordial blessing, "*Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth.*" When we find ourselves in the desert places of life, in the dry and frozen winters of our discontent, the way out is to remember.

This remembering is best done in company. It is not merely our personal memory of God's faithfulness in our individual life, though that is certainly important. It is our memory as a people that underlies our individual memories. We are part of a people who have a story to tell. We tell it in song and liturgy, we tell it in the intimacy of small group meetings, we tell it when we raise money or volunteer for the Habitat for Humanity build, we tell it when we volunteer at Mid-Coast Hunger or in whatever other ways we reach out and minister to people who have lost their way in the desert of the world, and whom the world has passed by.

Each act of remembering, each re-telling of the story brings to our minds the landmarks on our journey, retraces the lines of the map on our hearts, and points us beyond the wilderness to the promised land.

1. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1956, p. 21.