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4:1-13
(First Service)

Luke

Into the Wild

In the summer of 1991, I was living in Healy, Alaska a small town just north of the border to Denali National Park in central Alaska. I was working for a touring company that showed people around the fierce and only somewhat livable Alaskan summer environment. The house in which I lived was a 20 minute bike ride from the lodge where I worked and I passed pretty close during that ride to the trailhead of the Stampede Trail. Riding along the road every morning and afternoon was a great time to appreciate the vast solitude of the Alaskan Range. I rode most of the trip right along the highway – the Parks Highway which is the lone road between Fairbanks and Anchorage. I often encountered moose more than cars, even in the relative good weather of the summer.

The spring after I left, a young man named Christopher McCandless, though he had long abandoned his given name and was calling himself Alexander by this time, was given a ride to the head of the Stampede Trail by a local and wandered off into the wild alone. He had read lots of Tolstoy, Thoreau and Jack London and took these men to heart. After graduating from Emory University, he essentially cut off all ties to his family, gave his entire savings to Oxfam and began the life of a wandering traveler.

By the time that he made it to Alaska, he was ready to have the ultimate wilderness experience. By ready, I mean that he was up for it. But he was woefully unprepared and missed some very crucial survival tools. He had only 10 pounds of rice, some books, a rifle with a bit of ammunition and a camera as he headed into the wild. By most accounts, he had no map, no compass, and no idea of what the harsh reality of life on the tundra was like. He died out in the wild. Having entered the wilderness in late April, he died sometime in August and his body was found in September. He was 24 years old.

Much has been made of this story, including a Hollywood movie and a documentary refuting the Hollywood version of the story. Depending on which version you see, McCandless was either a misunderstood monk or a misguided fool. Yet, just like the Jesus story, arguing about the details

keeps us from thinking about what such an inner journey might reveal in us. It allows us to talk about the nature of going “into the wild” from the comfort of our couch without facing our own temptations. It makes this story about who Jesus will be instead of who we will be, and that’s a lot easier discussion.

In the story as Luke tells it, Jesus is led away to the wild *by the Spirit*. I believe that the Spirit led Jesus away to search for truth, but not in the way that we think about it. Here in the 21st century, post-modern, scientific world, we believe truth to be something empirical...something that exists “out there” that we can get a hold of. We believe, at least in general, that truth is but a theory, control group and experiment away. We think that “you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free” means there is some answer that resolves everything in one fell swoop.

This is not the truth of Lent. It isn’t the truth of the wild and it isn’t the truth of Jesus’ wilderness temptation. When Jesus heads towards the wilderness to pray and fast, he is doing a very common thing in ancient literature. He is taking what Joseph Campbell might have called the “hero’s journey”. Theologians have long speculated about this journey into the wild, but I happen to like the author Nikos Kazantzakis’ take on this passage in chapter seventeen of the book *The Last Temptation of Christ*. He has Jesus talk with John the Baptist before he heads off. John, with his usual fiery intensity says, “The tree is rotten. God called to me and gave me the ax, which I then placed at the roots of the tree. I did my duty. Now you do yours: take the ax and strike!”

But Jesus wonders about this plan. He replies, “If I were a fire, I would burn; if I were a woodcutter, I would strike. But I am a heart, and I love.”

Kazantzakis says that the reason for Jesus’ sojourn in the desert is that he wants to discover the path that God wants him to take. He knows that God has called him to speak to the people, but he is unsure what to say. Should he adopt John’s call to the people to repent? That is exactly what John urges him to do, but Jesus does not think that he should adopt John’s message, for he believes that God has a different path for him. As he is about to enter the desert, he encounters his disciple and friend Judas. Judas longs for God to deliver Israel from the Romans, and he believes that God has called Jesus to be the messiah in a very traditional way of thinking about that. He offers to accompany Jesus into the desert, but Jesus tells him, “The desert is not big enough for two. Go back.”

Kazantzakis has Jesus confront both of these men looking for pragmatic truth and expectation with the truth of the heart. That is what Lent will engage. You will have to journey inward and face difficult questions, but such an ordeal leads you to truth. Not a truth that can be measured, explained or even observed, but a truth that shapes us and reveals to us what we are about. This kind of truth only comes from disengaging our own fears, desires and addictions to see what lies beneath.

Lent is closely tied to this story of Jesus, but there is no such practice spelled out in the Bible. In the early church we have no record of a Lenten practice. There is fasting and renewal, but not confined to a period on the calendar. Perhaps it was because simply being in the church in the

first century was a Lenten journey into someplace dangerous. One did not simply attend a membership class and say a pledge, nor did they transfer their membership from one community to the next. Joining the Christian underworld was a dangerous and lengthy procedure in which your baptism came at the end of up to 5 years of acolyte training and ritual. Many sold all of their possessions and lived communally when they joined such a group. Being Christian meant being jeered at and persecuted.

By the time that empire and Christianity married, the danger was not in becoming Christian, but the opposite. So any chance for the spiritual growth that resisting culture can bring was gone. The struggle now was how to live with the dichotomy of life embracing both the culture of empire and the counter-culture that Christianity once was.

Lent became a way to take the natural flow of the seasons and ritualize them into something that awakened people...something which pulled them back in some way to the early years when faith was alive and filled with adrenaline. This was to be 40 days to feel what life was like away from so much of our comfort. It was a way to simulate the rawness of the early experience.

So, what does that mean for us now? We don't live in a time in which it is dangerous to call ourselves Christian (at least not in this part of the world). Lent comes from an old English word meaning "the coming spring" but we don't have the pull of a seasonal feast or famine pattern to connect with. We aren't eyeing the storage cellar nervously wondering when the frost will stop so that we can plant. Lent for us becomes a much more figurative fasting. How do we recapture that sense of connection to God - that sense of no safety nets but the divine presence?

It can be tempting to just think we have no way to be that exposed. This is what happened with Chris McCandless. He felt the only option was to literally reject everything that caused conflict in him and reduce life to the essence. But for most of us this is not an option we can or will choose. We have to live in the tension of being rich Christians in an age of hunger. We have to name and address our privilege...our attachment in a world full of distraction.

Lent, as I talked with a friend about the other day, is the most Buddhist seasons of the Christian calendar. It is a time to reflect, assess, ruminate and be aware...aware of our lives, our goals, our loyalties and our attachments. Before each temptation is given to Jesus in Luke's version, Satan precedes it with some form of "prove that you are the Son of God". These challenges are not so much the lure of temptation, but the test of loyalty. If you are what you claim you are, namely the "Son of God", what will it take to turn you? Everyone has their price. So, this wilderness story asks - what is Jesus' price to shift his loyalty?

And we can't ignore that it is Satan who comes to test Jesus. Satan has a long history in Jewish lore - he figures prominently in the Book of Job as the adversary - the figure who comes to place questions in our ears or, in Job's case, God's ears. Forget all of the devil references...this isn't Rosemary's Baby or the Exorcist. This Satan is a trickster who lulls us into shifting loyalty...something that is far more familiar. Look at what Satan uses to tempt Jesus. First it is

bread, the staff of life, food...the very thing that our bodies need to survive. He tempts a starving Jesus with food. That's cold.

Then it's fame...or at least power. Both of which are quite devious in their tempting. You can win the lottery, be on the cover of Newsweek and have the seat on the couch next to Oprah. Who could resist that?

And then...the most cruel of all. In a move that William Shakespeare would reference in Merchant of Venice, Satan quotes scripture to Jesus for his own purpose. C'mon Jesus...Let's see how that whole "God will protect you" thing works out. I wonder what might have happened to Jesus' ministry if he had taken Satan up on any of these challenges? Do you imagine that a rabbi who could turn stones into bread, ruled the world and could fly would be pretty popular?

What Satan offered Jesus was certainty. He would never be hungry, never without power, never scared of what might happen...and what Jesus knew was that might be assurance, but it wasn't faith...and it wasn't true. That's the thing about our attachments, most of them aren't even true...just comforting.

And even at Lent, we so often stop with the bread...or the food. That's what we focus on for Lent. But Satan doesn't stop there. In fact, that's the smallest bomb in his arsenal. It's the other stuff...the power and the privilege that really hits us. That's where the church gives into temptation.

Unwilling to let go of our certainty about how God works and what the Bible says, we make all too devilish goals for ourselves. The church is as guilty as any one person of succumbing to the temptation of power and privilege. We get so comfortable and sure of our discipleship that we can attack others with perceived impunity.

The monk Thomas Merton, a man quite familiar with the practice of Lent, once wrote this prayer:

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going; I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following
your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.
And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Lent is a time to give something up. It can be something that seems relatively trivial. Chocolate is actually a fine thing to give up...but only if you love chocolate. You won't change the world by giving up chocolate, but you might just change yourself a little bit. You don't have to sell all of your possessions and head north...you have to be willing to enter into places that aren't exactly comfortable. Lent would be a great time for the church to give up the power of Biblical certainty in the name of being hearts that love. Lent is a wonderful time to look at our privilege and see how we can move from models of helping to models of serving. Lent could be the time that we open the doors of the church as wide as possible because we trust God and will not test Her.

Look around, we have plenty to set aside for a few weeks. What if we gave up relating to people based on labels? What if we gave up judgment – even for those who really deserve it? What if we gave up needless car use, relentless busy-ness or mindless channel-surfing? What if we gave up the notion that we can't change anything and believed that it was changing already...even if it is at a different pace than we would like?

What are the things we cling to because we're afraid to trust God? What are the attachments we develop because we look to live in certainty rather than trust?

So, this Lenten season may you practice your own journey. Head into those woods a little bit. Remove something of your safety apparatus and see what happens. Set aside those things which distract and pacify for a little while. You might hear that voice telling you what you're missing out on. Listen to that still, small voice and believe it for a change – instead of the blaring scream of the world. Take a step towards this truth of the heart...a truth which may not be measureable or even obvious at times, but is true – God believes in you. Even if you can only hear that in a faint whisper...hold on to it. Plant that tiny seed, nurture it and see what grows.

Expect great things and believe great things because all things are possible with God, as long as we don't require them to look like what we want them to look. This is why I like Kazantzakis...he sends Jesus out into the wild seeking a different kind of truth. He sends Jesus the Heart out there to learn more about being love.

That is what I wish for you this Lent. I hope that you save some money on chocolate or turn your TV off, but above all I hope that you take the real journey...open your hearts. Find room to love someone you never thought you could. Focus on love and hope while you are getting over certainty. Open a few more doors, hug a few more people and give a little more than you think you can. That will fill you with the Spirit...

AMEN



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