



From the Pulpit: April 14, 2024

Third Sunday of Easter

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Exodus 2:11–25

What's Saving Your Life Right Now? II: The Practice of Getting Lost: Wilderness

Last week Squire told us about the Barbara Brown Taylor, who is an Episcopalian priest and a great preacher. She is invited to speak all over the country, one time an Alabama priest asked her to speak in his parish, and she asked him “What do you want me to talk about?”. He said “Tell us what’s saving your life right now”. She wrote down her reflections on that question in a book called *An Altar in the World*. That sounded like a sermon series to your preachers so we’re preaching “What’s saving your life right now”.

One day after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting, and he said to the one who was in the wrong, “Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?” He answered, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid and thought, “Surely the thing is known.” When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.

So Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian and sat down by a well. The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage.

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

“He [Moses] spends forty years working for his father-in-law herding sheep.”

So you remember that Pharaoh is worried that his Hebrew slaves are having so many babies that soon they’ll outnumber native Egyptians and become a threat to his hegemony, so he orders that all Hebrew boy babies be dispatched at birth.

Slave-baby Moses, however, escapes this death sentence when his mother sends him floating down

the Nile in a toy boat, which rocks gently to rest at the feet of Pharaoh’s daughter herself, who adopts him as her own.

After he’s weaned, he goes to live in Pharaoh’s own court, where he becomes a Prince of Egypt, learns to speak proper Egyptian, attends the ancient equivalent of Exeter, masters Emily-Post-style manners, plays polo and squash, takes fencing, and goes to Tae Kwan Do classes.

So at the age of forty, Moses is a Master of the Universe. All he has to do is wave robotically at parades like Prince William, cut ribbons, and kiss babies and he’ll live a life of aristocratic ease, but then he goes and does a dumb thing.

One day he looks out his bedroom window, where some Hebrew slaves are laying bricks for the latest addition to Pharaoh's already elaborate McMansion, and he sees an Egyptian overlord popping a Hebrew slave upside the head, and Moses just goes ballistic.

He looks both ways to make sure the coast is clear and whales the tar out of the Egyptian overlord and kills him on the spot. Someone witnesses this act of vigilante justice, and reports it to Pharaoh, so Moses becomes a fugitive from justice. Moses is Harrison Ford fleeing from Pharaoh's Tommy Lee Jones.

He ends up in Midian and stays there for forty years. Midian is a parched, flinty moonscape 300 miles southeast of Egypt. The closest thing we have to Midian on this side of the world is Death Valley. Midian is Nowheresville.

Now not everything about Nowheresville is futile. Moses meets the love of his life there, a Midianite woman named Zipporah, who worships other gods than Yahweh. "Zipporah" means "Beauty." In Arabic, Zipporah is *Sephora*, and you know what *Sephora* means: "Beauty." That's why they call it *Sephora*.

But do you know what Moses does for forty years in Midian, this Prince of Egypt, this Master of the Universe, this Tae Kwon Do black belt? He spends forty years working for his father-in-law herding sheep. I think it's safe to say that tending sheep would classify as underemployment for a Prince of Egypt, don't you?

What's your Midian, and did you ever have to spend forty years there? Fill in your own blank: forty years in Flint, forty years in Fayetteville, forty years in middle management, forty years in retail, forty years waitressing, forty years working for someone like Steve Carell in *The Office*, forty years in a tedious marriage, forty years in a wheelchair, forty years tending a disabled child, some unexpected caesura in the middle of your intricately choreographed life?

A while back there was a *New Yorker* cartoon showing a couple chatting with friends at a cocktail party, and she says, "We thought it was a rough patch, but it turned out to be our life."¹ Can anybody here relate to that?

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "In my life, I have lost my way more times than I can count. I have set out to be married and ended up divorced. I have set out to be healthy and ended up sick. I have set out to live in New England and ended up in Georgia. When I was 30, I set out to be a parish priest. Almost 30 years later, I teach school... While none of these displacements was pleasant at first, I would not give a single one of them back. I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path...God does some of God's best work with people who are truly, seriously lost."²

"Forty
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Grand Pause."

My Minister of Music in Greenwich was almost as good as Lisa. Not quite but almost. He once told me that there is something in music called "The Grand Pause." The Grand Pause is that space in music where the symphony is sailing along beautifully to its longed-for resolution and suddenly the music.....comes to an unexpected halt.....before the symphony resumes and the theme goes on. The Grand Pause. A famous example is "The Hallelujah Chorus." You know those five seconds of silence before the final "Hallelujah?" Forty years.....in Midian, a Grand Pause.

We may be in the wilderness, but we're not alone. Sometimes without thinking about it, I'll reel off the phrase "the godforsaken wilderness," but that's wrong. The wilderness is not godforsaken; the wilderness is precisely where God lives and where God does God's best work.

¹*The New Yorker*, May 12, 2003, p. 73.

²Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: Harper One, 2009), pp.72-73.

Tony Jones is a minister, an author, and an outdoorsman. He recently wrote a book called *The God of Wild Places*. Tony remembers that when he was 14, his own youth minister took him to the Boundary Waters with a half-dozen other kids. Silvi used to take our 14-year-olds there every year; now Sarah and Squire take our confirmands to a similar place on the West Coast.

So these six teenagers are out there in the Boundary Waters for the better part of a week, and the kids are sitting around the campfire on their final night in the wilderness. One of them asked the youth minister why he hadn't led the kids in a Bible study or even a prayer—this was a church trip, after all.

Firelight dancing across his face, Paul swept his arms across the lake beside them, raised his palms to the starry sky, and said “how could you be out here in God's creation and not be in a constant state of prayer?”

Tony says, “That one sentence sermon was so powerful that I remember it verbatim, four decades later. My Youth Pastor had chosen not to preach to us that week, nor to pull out a Bible to talk about Jesus and the prophets. Instead, he trusted us to find God in the wilderness. The forest was our teacher, the lakes our Bible, the fire our prayer.”³

The wilderness is not godforsaken. That's where God lives, at least part of the time. And also we have companions who take us by the hand and help us get unlost. Can I mention Caitlin Clark once more? I promise this will be it, because now she'll disappear into the WNBA. Lennon Rink lives in Ankeny, Iowa, about two hours west of Iowa City. In July of 2021, when Lennon was three, they found that she had tumors on both of her optic nerves. Lennon was in danger of going blind. She went through 80 weeks of chemotherapy, until October of 2022, when she was five.

³Tony Jones, *The God of Wild Places: Rediscovering the Divine in the Untamed Outdoors* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2024), pp. 145–146.

When Lennon's parents realized she might be completely blind, they made sure that Lennon first saw the world's most beautiful sights: sunsets, oceans, and Caitlin Clark shooting a three. Lennon is six now. She is almost completely blind in her right eye, but she has full sight in her left, and she is an unabashed Clarkie.⁴ One of the most beautiful things in the world. In the wilderness, there are companions who will help us get unlost.

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So your life is punctuated by troubling gaps and Grand Pauses. So it's not perfect. So what? Who needs perfection? It's boring, and God can't use it. God prefers gaps, flaws, mistakes, scars. Sir Alexander Fleming discovered that a certain mold killed bacteria. He called it penicillin and won the Nobel Prize for it in 1945, but it was completely an accident. A speck of dust fell on an uncovered culture dish in a dilapidated laboratory. Some years later, Sir Alex was touring a modern research laboratory: sterile, air-conditioned, dust-free.

His guide said, “Too bad you didn't have a place like this to work in. Who knows what you might have discovered in such a place.” “Not penicillin,” said Sir Alex.⁵

A speck of dust. The Grand Pause. Forty years in Midian. But you know, Midian is just where Moses found God, not to mention a wife named Sephora to boot. “The gaps [in our lives] are the abysses into which we fall from time to time,” but where are we falling? Into the hands of the living God.⁶

⁴Grace Raynor, “Caitlin Clark is a College Basketball Sensation. In Iowa, She Is Much More,” *The Athletic*, March 29, 2024, <https://theathletic.com/5376647/2024/03/29/caitlin-clark-girls-iowa-city-fans/>

⁵*The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), p. 210.

⁶Kimberley C. Patton, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Winter, quoted by *The Christian Century*, in “Centurymarks,” March 21, 2006, p. 6.

—The Prayers of the People— The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

With reverence and awe, we awake to this day. The swirl of spring, the delicious expanse of sunshine across the east, the wheel of the sun flung higher and higher in the sky, us “drenched in light,” mindful of the potent day before us. We perform the day, making our way from there to here, to be present to the possibility of your presence, to the lure of your divine love, to the thundering call of holy awareness, a canticle of thanks.

For the quiet, when rest and calm persuade us to bend toward peace. Thank you.

For the loud, when energy and imagination and creative love convert us toward strong hope. Thank you.

For the mystery of a new beginning, vibrant, bright, alert to what is just over the horizon. Thank you.

For the comfort of routine, the freedom and ease and intimacy that comes from experience, competence, aptitude, familiarity. Thank you.

May this day be brimming with gratitude for those close, for those far, for those in our everyday, for those we long for just beyond the horizon of this life.

O Christ, the one whose love of neighbor changed all of us, at the heart of your love disclosed we notice that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have their debts canceled. And, from the distance of two thousand years, this, still, remains our longing:

For those who worry about money, about where their next meal will come from, or if they will make rent, or if they will be able to hang on through to the next paycheck, Lord hear our prayer.

For the ones who cannot hear, those who literally long to hear the stories their neighbors tell, who wish their dinner conversation, the voices of their grandchildren, could rise up through the fog, and for those whose ears are closed to the truth, the ones who cannot hear what they most need to hear, who cannot hear discern the path ahead, who cannot perceive the reality that is right in front of them.

For the ones who long to walk, who have been ill for longer than expected, whose injury has challenged their very existence, whose legs cause them to stumble and fall. For those injured in the path of war.

For those grieving who cannot stand for the weight of it all.

Our prayer is the same, as ancient and true as the one of Christ’s day: may the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers be cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead be raised, the poor have their debts canceled. And let us be participants in the work of love that accompanies these prayers of longing. You give us a precious identity, beloved, embraced, transformed, and you offer us a demanding summons, custody over all that is beautiful and tender and raw, all the while extending a radically different life, the mundane and flat transfigured into a spirit-breathed reality in which the impossible becomes possible and the shimmer of incarnational love is bewildering and clear.

We pray in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed and the hungry of this world. We hold many upon our hearts this day, those for whom we pray, those who we carry with us no matter where we are on life’s journey, those who are lost and lonely, forgotten or friendless. And, to you, O God, we lift now the prayers of our hearts, in faith and in silence.

Let us pray together the prayer Jesus teaches us, saying...
Our Father.... Amen.

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