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At Home In The Wilderness

Luke 4:1

The season of Lent invites us to remember the wilderness journeys of our lives. On these journeys we discover who we are.

There's a 1932 movie, starring William Powell, called *One Way Passage*. It tells the story of a young man and young woman who meet and fall in love on an ocean liner in the Pacific at a time when both are caught in the midst of deep personal crises. The young woman is suffering from a terminal illness and is trying her best to have a good time while her doctor is watching her every move and encouraging her to moderate her activities. The William Powell character is a young man unjustly convicted of murdering a gangster. After his conviction he escaped to Hong Kong, only to be tracked down and taken into custody to make the cruise back to the U.S. to be executed for his crime. Because there is no way to escape from the ocean liner on the high seas, Powell is given the freedom of the ship where most passengers do not know what his real situation is.

The dying woman and the condemned man begin to spend all their waking hours together. They come to learn everything about one another except that most important fact that neither can tell the other. They do not want to break the spell of the romance by admitting how quickly their time is running out. The moment of truth in their relationship comes when the ship makes a one-day stop in Hawaii and the William Powell character is locked in the brig. He escapes to meet the woman he loves who has planned an elaborate set of activities on the island. He also makes arrangements for passage on a freighter headed for the Philippines. His plan is to tell the young woman the truth as she returns to the ship and he boards the freighter. But the plan goes awry. Before he can tell her she collapses on the dock and loses consciousness.

At that moment he must make the most important decision of his life. To save her life he must carry her onto the ship where medical care is waiting. But doing that means giving up hope of escaping the gallows. He then realizes that this relationship has changed him. When he gives up his life to save the woman he loves his journey has been transformed. The wilderness is no longer the place of pain and emptiness. It is the place where he has discovered what it means to love and be loved. His journey to the gallows has been changed into a journey from death to life. On this journey he learns who he really is.

Scripture speaks of the wilderness of life in precisely these terms. The wilderness is experienced as the place where life seems to come crashing down around us. But it becomes the place where we meet the One who loves us most. In that encounter with God's love we discover who we are as human beings.

Moses fled to the wilderness of the mountain of God when his life hit a dead-end. He had led the people out of slavery in Egypt and everything was going more or less according to plan when he delivered the ten commandments to the people as a gift of God's love for them. When Moses returns he finds that the people have lost their faith in the God who has set them free and are worshipping gods

of their own making. Moses is so frustrated and angry over this failure of his ministry that he smashes the tablets on the ground and destroys them. Moses then leaves the people for the wilderness of the mountain. There he spends 40 days and 40 nights trying to put the pieces of his life back together. But in that wilderness Moses encounters God in a more intimate way than ever before. When the 40 days are over Moses comes down from the mountain with a new set of tablets and the assurance that God's love is at the core of who he is.

This was not just the story of Moses. It was the story of the Hebrew people. God had led them in a wilderness journey from death to life. In the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy the people are poised to enter the promised land. They are instructed to remember the wilderness journey which has shaped their identity. If they forget that journey they will lose touch with who they are as the people of God.

Jesus faces the same temptation on his wilderness journey in the fourth chapter of Luke. There the tempter offers instant success, wealth, and power. All these can be his for one small exchange. All he has to do is forget his journey with God and let the tempter redefine who he is. Jesus rejects the tempter by remembering his relationship with the One who has loved him in the wilderness.

This act of remembering was part of our worship on Ash Wednesday. There we used the words from Genesis that God directed to Adam to let him know that he was destined to die. God says, "Dust you are and to dust you shall return." When the ashes are imposed we say, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Kimberly Bracken Long remembers one Ash Wednesday service in these words:

During one memorable Ash Wednesday service at the church where I worship, we went forward for the imposition of ashes. Instead of being marked by a pastor, however, we marked one another with an ashy cross. After I had taken part, I watched from my perch in the choir loft as people imposed the sign of the cross on one another, flesh upon flesh, and spoke those words, sometimes to strangers, sometimes to friends, often to spouse, or child. As I watched a mother lean down to trace a smoky cross on her child's forehead, tears rolled down my cheeks. How could a mother begin to speak words of death to her own child? Quickly tears of pain became tears of joy as I realized that in that gesture a mother does not curse her child but pronounces blessing: you will turn from God only to be drawn in again, she says with that mark. You will die, but in order to live.

In life and in death, *you belong to God* (*Journal For Preachers*, Lent, 2007, page 11).

Our journey through Lent is a time to remember who we are. We are people who are traveling from death to life.

Many of you have met my 92 year old mother. Sometimes I am amazed by what she remembers. I visited with her recently about her memory of the great flu epidemic of 1918 which caused millions of deaths all over the world. She described to me how her parents responded to that threat. When an outbreak began in Ardmore, Oklahoma where they lived, they put their two children, ages 4 and 6, on a train to Sulphur, Oklahoma, a town which the flu had not reached. There they could stay with their grandparents in a place of relative safety. On that wilderness journey my mother knew that she was loved and she still remembers.

We are people who can be at home in the wilderness because God goes there with us. Remember who you are.