

Summary:

“The Wandering Way,” the second in our series for Lent, “The Way of Jesus,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, OH, Sunday, March 1, 2020.

Detail:

So how many of you have had the chance to see the film, “The Way” yet? I hope if you haven’t had the opportunity you will find a way to do that.

And I hope that if you have seen it, that it will help guide and shape your journey thought Lent.

In the film, we meet Tom Avery, a middle-aged widower from California who is an ophthalmologist.

I found his occupation to be ironic in light of the fact that, in the film, Tom is blind to so many things, as well as blinded by his anger, judgmentalism, and his sorrow.

He’s angry and grieving that his wife died.

He’s angry that his only son, Daniel, was really closer to his mother than to him.

And he’s angry that his son has, in many ways, seemed to reject the family’s upper middle-class lifestyle, along with the values, and even the expectations of his father. And this anger is manifest primarily in his attitude and his words, both towards his son and in his attitude towards other people. Daniel has a very different vision of what life is about than does his father.

In one powerful line early in the film, after Tom has blasted Daniel for the life he has chosen, Daniel replies, “you don’t choose a life, Dad, you live it.”

And so Daniel decides to go away, to travel by himself, to Europe. Unlike the way in which his father would do it, Daniel seems to have no plan, no itinerary.

He’s just going on a pilgrimage to find himself, having decided not to complete the doctorate degree that he’s been working on, only adding fuel to the fire of Tom’s anger and judgement.

It’s not long after this, while Tom is on the golf course with friends, that he receives a phone call from a police captain in France, informing him that Daniel has been killed in a tragic accident.

Now, Tom is forced to leave his home, his medical practice, the comfort and safety of his lifestyle, his plans, and everything else in order to go to France to recover Daniel’s remains.

And this is how the film introduces us to the story of Tom’s pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago, the Way of Saint James.

In our scripture readings today, we have two different versions of the story of Jesus’ time in the wilderness. One, the very brief and sparse account we have in Mark, and the other the more elaborate and detailed version that Luke provides. And honestly, in Mark, the first two verses of the passage we read were about Jesus’ baptism, not about his time in the wilderness, so in fact, Mark gives only two verses to Jesus in the wilderness.

I remind you that Mark's was the first gospel written - some 10-15 years before Luke's - and so we might wonder why this difference.

We know Mark tells the entire gospel story in very succinct ways, and for Mark, the key to understanding who Jesus is and what he means, lies in the cross and the resurrection.

Mark wastes no extra words on things that don't guide us on the journey to the cross.

And we also know that both Luke and Matthew used Mark's gospel as, perhaps, their primary source when they were writing their own accounts - they copied and pasted, as it were, entire sections of his gospel into theirs, word for word, without even giving him credit in a footnote. To all of you students here today, don't do that - it's plagiarism and your teacher will give you an F on your paper! So what was it that led Luke to take two verses from Mark and expand them to 13?

Was he dissatisfied with what Mark had to say or how he said it? Did he feel that this story was too important to leave it at two verses?

Did Luke have access to information 15 years later that Mark didn't have?

Or, was Luke trying to make a different theological point about who Jesus was than was Mark and so used this story of 40 days in the wilderness as his framework?

We don't know the answers to these questions - we don't know what Luke's other sources were or have access to them - but I lean toward

this last idea - that Luke was trying to make a different theological point than that of Mark and so expanded on the story of 40 days in the wilderness to do so.

Let's consider a couple of subtle differences that can be seen.

First, in Mark, in verse 12, it says that Jesus was "forced" into the wilderness by the Spirit following his baptism. This suggests that Jesus didn't go willingly, right?

That this wasn't a choice for Jesus, not what he wanted or intended to do, is one possible implication of Mark's use of the word "forced."

Now, it doesn't say he went "kicking and screaming," but we could imagine that's how we might go, right?

Some of you are probably here this morning because you were forced - maybe you came "kicking and screaming" too.

I'm reminded of the story of a couple who woke up on Sunday morning and the one got up to go to church but the other didn't. The one who had risen kept trying to wake the other, nudging them to get up, but they would have nothing to do with it.

"We're going to be late to church," the first warned. "I don't want to go to church!" the other finally exclaimed, to which the one replied, "You have to go to church - you're the pastor!"

Everybody at some time or another has to go somewhere or do something they don't want to do.

Tom, in our film, didn't want to go to France - Daniel had invited him to go along as a father-son bonding time - to which Tom had replied angrily that "not everyone has the option of just dropping everything and taking off."

Now, after Daniel's death, Tom still didn't want to go, didn't want to drop everything, to be inconvenienced by leaving the comfort of his surroundings, his routines, his schedule. But like Jesus in Mark's telling of this story, Tom was forced into this wilderness of discomfort.

Luke doesn't present this story in the same way though. Notice in Luke, it doesn't say Jesus was "forced" into the wilderness, but that he was "led by the Spirit." That seems so much nicer doesn't it? Being led doesn't necessarily imply a willingness, but it does allow for it. Being forced, on the other hand, negates any idea of choice.

So Luke's choice of words creates a completely different lens through which to view this story.

There's very clear symbolism present in both stories. Being in the wilderness for 40 days is intended to remind us of Israel's journey in the wilderness for 40 years under the guidance of Moses. It's supposed to remind us of Noah and his family saving creation in an ark where it rained for 40 days and 40 nights and of Elijah's 40 days of fasting. "40" is a religious symbol as much as it is a prescribed amount of time in scripture. It is considered to be sufficiently long enough to make serious changes in one's life, habits, or thinking. This film was shot in 40 days along the Camino de Santiago. Lent is 40 days.

While Mark gives us the basics - in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan, with wild animals, the angels taking care of him - Luke goes

into great detail describing the nature of the temptations and spelling out the conversation and interaction that takes place between Jesus and the devil.

“The devil,” they say, “is in the details.”

Some describe these 40 days to which Jesus was “led,” as a pilgrimage, a retreat of sorts.

That might be a stretch - because again - it doesn't say Jesus “went” or “chose to go,” but that he was either forced or led into the wilderness.

Wilderness in scripture is often symbolic of a time apart, a time of struggle, of discernment, or of mental wrestling.

Jesus often goes away on his own into the wilderness in the gospels, sometimes up a mountain, sometimes out on a boat, in order to get away from the disciples, away from the people, in order to take time to pray, to discern, and to be with God.

Taking time away to be with God is both biblical and is prescriptive for us.

So, in anticipation of Scout Sunday next week, I wondered how many of you like to go camping?

I've shared, at least with the Scouts, that I was both a Cub Scout and then a Boy Scout when I was that age. While I was active in the

Scouts for several years, there came a point where I realized scouting was probably not for me any more, and that was when I decided I really didn't like camping.

There was really nothing about sleeping outside, or in a tent, in a sleeping bag, on the ground, that I enjoyed. Nothing. And I guess if you're going to get the most out of the experience of scouting you kind of have to enjoy camping - at least a little bit.

Well, it wasn't for me.

I love the outdoors, but I don't want to sleep there. "Roughing it" for me would be to stay in a Motel 6.

That said, I literally had to be forced to go to my final Boy Scout Camporee that my troop held because it was happening rain or shine, and it rained non-stop all weekend. You could have earned a merit badge for ark-building those three days. That was it for me, I was done. There are some things you can plan for and control, but you cannot control the weather...or poison ivy.

On that final campout that I attended as a Boy Scout, I ended up with poison ivy on every, yes every square inch of my body. At that point, I was way past done!

Another kind of getting away is when we go on a trip and sometimes have to stop at one of the Rest Areas along the way. As you know, some Rest Stops are pretty nice, others are rather basic, and some are just horrible. Some offer more amenities than do others.

I don't know how you are when you travel, but I've known people who map out a trip in such detail that they know exactly where each and

every rest area along their route is, which ones are nice and which ones to avoid, and will actually plan out their rest stop breaks along the way.

Now, I'm a planner, but I've never planned a trip to that level of detail.

Because I'm directionally challenged, I try to at least have a visual in my mind of what our trip looks like, how far it is between cities. Now that we all have GPS on our phones I'm less uncertain about just getting in the car and driving even when I don't know the area.

In the days before cell phones came with GPS that's something I just couldn't do that because I would never, ever, find my way home.

I needed GPS to come into our lives.

The pilgrimage we're talking about here, though, the kind of pilgrimage that Jesus' 40 days reflects - the kind of pilgrimage that Lent invites us into - is less of a camping trip or planned vacation route, and more of an improvised journey.

Lent is a season that allows us to know in advance our destination.

We know that we begin on Ash Wednesday and that we're moving to Holy Week: Palm Sunday and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Holy Thursday and the Last Supper, Good Friday and the crucifixion, and Easter Sunday and the resurrection.

So we know the destination and get to choose how we'll make that trip, what route we'll take, what we'll take with us for the journey, and what we hope to get out of this time. Our GPS for this trip, though, is not on our phone, it's God's Positioning System.

Lent invites us into a wilderness journey, a pilgrimage, with God as our guide, in order to experience this journey anew each year, as though we've never made it before. And in truth, we haven't made this particular pilgrimage before.

As much as we may think we're the same people, that we haven't changed, in fact we are all, each and everyone one of us, very different people from who we were the last time Lent invited us in.

We've experienced joys and sorrows in the wilderness of this journey that have shaped us - perhaps by building us up or maybe by breaking us down.

We've met new people in the last year who in crossing our path have also shaped that path.

We've read books and magazines, heard sermons and lectures, watched the news and movies and television programs, all of which have transformed us, shaped up - like water over time shapes rock - from who we were to who we are.

That journey over the past year may be one that was forced upon us, it may be one we were led towards, or it may be one that we chose for ourselves.

Regardless, we have been and continue each day on that journey of life and of faith.

As settled into habits and lifestyles and patterns as we may believe we are, we are made in the image of a God who transcends both time and space, who lives within us even as we live within God, and that God is never stagnant, never still, never stationary.

This is the God who came to us in the form of a child, becoming one of us and confirming in the incarnation what God had already proclaimed in creation, that despite our flaws, despite our missteps along the way, we are good, that creation is good.

This is the God who sojourned with Abraham and Sarah, who led Moses and the Israelites, who guided the prophets, and who journeyed into humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, to show us the way.

So in this journey of Lent, as we begin wandering along this path, this road, this way, know that the foundation of who you are - before you are a man or woman, husband or wife, father or mother, accountant, nurse, mechanic, teacher, or librarian - is a beloved child of God.

Know that the God who created you - loves you.

And know that the God who created you and loves you is always with you, always in you, always walking beside you, always accompanying you as a travel companion.

In the film, the further along the Camino de Santiago that Tom journeyed, the more his eyes were opened, the more his blindness was both revealed to him and then healed. And at times, as he trekked through this wilderness, as the journey itself was transforming him, occasionally he would catch a glimpse of his son, Daniel. The Way of Jesus is the way of God, it's a wandering way that will take us to many unexpected places, but it's the way of love and compassion.

The way of Jesus always includes people that we may not know, may not think we want or need to know, the ones we either don't see or

choose not to see - those at the margins of society - those who have been pushed off to the sides of the trail.

But these are the people Jesus invites along because he knows that we need them and they need us for the journey, because it is only in the wandering, and the wilderness, that we find our true selves.

And if we allow Christ to heal ~~our~~ blindness along the way, ~~we~~ might catch a glimpse of God. Amen.