

Season after Pentecost

Psalms of Lament: 69

June 14, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Mark 4: 35-41 ;Psalm 69: 1-16

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

“I am lost in the Rocky Mountains,” Carrie Visintainer wrote in an article she entitled, “Disorientation” “For what seems like hours, I’ve been trying to convince myself otherwise. I can’t be that far from the road. Maybe the next ridge will look familiar. But now the trees are spinning and my ankles are bleeding, and the river is here, when it was supposed to be there. My breath is jagged, like letting air out of a balloon .I consider my clothing: cotton T-shirt, leggings, plastic shoes. Tourist clothes. If Search and Rescue finds me, and I am still alive, they will say, “Ma’am, do you know this is the wilderness?” If I’m dead they will be surprised to look at my driver’s license and see that I’m a Colorado local. They’ll think, Shouldn’t she know better? But no one will say this out loud because it’s disrespectful to question a corpse.

Everyone will gaze at my motherless children. Jake will be asking “Where’s Mommy?” in his toddler voice, and Elise, one month old, will be sucking formula out of a bottle. Grown men in uniforms will cry because I was wearing leftover maternity clothes in the forest.

...From the boulder, I take in my surroundings: downed pine trees, pungent mushrooms, patches of thorny brush. There are purple wildflowers, too, maybe Liatris, but they seem more frivolous than beautiful now, an obstacle between me and my safety. The rush of the river fills my ears. Steel clouds build in the sky. A lump grows in my throat and then crushes my chest as I swallow my reality: I’m a tiny speck in this vast, gnarled wilderness.

Today, running my hands through my matted hair, I summon the only survival tool I have: my voice. [I call to my husband] “Chris,” I yell. “Chris!”

No answer. I don't even know which direction to yell. I stand up and whirl around. If only I'd left ribbons in the trees. If only I hadn't left. Somehow, I need a plan. I decide on the river. If I follow the river, I won't get more lost. Maybe it will cross the road. I trudge through the brush, hugging the water. Thorns scratch my calves and tear holes in my pants. What kind of mother does something this careless?

I walk for what feels like miles, but is probably only meters. The terrain is steep and slow....Up the hill from the river, a clearing appears. Maybe I will be able to see something. I climb slowly, calves cramping, looking back at the river every few seconds to make sure it doesn't magically disappear. In the clearing, there is silence. I hear myself panting. Far off in the distance, I can see a dirt road. It's probably the one we drove in on. I consider the distance. Five miles? Maybe six? My heart thumps and then drops. I'd have to hike downhill to get there, into the tangled trees where it is difficult to keep a straight line. There's no guarantee that I'd find the road. If I had a compass and knew how to use it, this would be easy.

I sit down and put my chin into my hands. Tears roll down my cheeks. In the sky, the sun arcs toward its resting place. I shiver. I am mere miles from civilization, yet I might perish alone. For the first time in my life, the wilderness feels like a concrete cell.

Brushing the dirt off my pants, I stand up in the clearing and throw a rock at a tree stump. Anger bursts from my throat. "Chris," I yell. "Chris!"

No response. I try again, louder. There is a high-pitched desperation. And then I hear a faint voice. "Carrie?" I exhale. Chris. He sounds far away, and in the opposite direction from where I'd imagined. I must've walked in a squiggly half-moon. But it's him. "Here!" I scream. My heart swells in my chest. I get to go home.

Chris guides me to the road with his voice, which is embarrassingly close, less than a mile away. I finally emerge, ankles wobbling. The sun is hovering in the west. My hair is glued to my scalp, and I reek of sweat and pine sap. From the look on Chris's face, I can

tell I look ragged, like I've been living with the animals for weeks. Elise squirms in Chris's arms, and Jake wails. Chris pulls me close.

"Mommy," Jake sobs. "What happened?"

I consider covering my mistake, saying that I just went for a walk. But I decide to come clean with my family. "I got lost," I say. "But I'm back."

Jake snuffles and grabs onto my leg. "Well, that happens," he says, shrugging.

"Yeah," I say. "It does."¹

This is what our psalm is about today — disorientation. Those times in our lives when suddenly our world, our perspective is turned upside down. We wonder how things got so turned around. Things aren't where they should be. Or maybe it's we who aren't where we should be or where we've always been before.

Disorientation. A great wind-storm rises up threatening to swamp the boat and Jesus is asleep in the stern. "Really?" "Teacher! Don't you care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38) But when at Jesus' command the demonic, threatening sea and wind calm, there's a new realization rocking their world. "Who IS this man who the wind and sea will obey?"

Disorientation. The loss of a job or relationship. The diagnosis of cancer or life with chronic pain. The death of a loved one and life as you always knew it. Whether it's circumstances out of our control or consequences of our own making, we can find ourselves feeling utterly lost.

Disorientation. It may not be the result of anything bad. It can even be a time of life we've looked forward to, that will likely be rich with adventure and rewards. A new job or home. The kids are all out of the house with lives of their own. Retirement. Visiting a foreign county. Graduating from high school. Starting a career or setting out to a college in Washington D.C. A church sponsors a Block Party for the first time which may lead to its Vacation Bible School being flooded with more participants than ever.

In any event, disorientation is just that — the loss of our sense of grounding or direction, a confusion about where you are and how to proceed that is momentary or monumental. And that disorientation, with people of faith, will also include God. Life is not as “well-ordered as a simple Sunday School faith may pretend” life is really messy and not always as the Lord would have it be.² In those times you find yourself thinking or screaming, “Where are you God?” or “How can you let this happen?” Many people of faith feel it is “unchristian” or a sign of weak faith to admit to feelings of anger, fear or bitterness toward God. What our Hebrew ancestors and those first disciples teach us in our readings today is that people of very deep faith don’t try to hide their feelings from God but turn to God with whatever they are facing. The Word of God in the psalms teaches us about just such a faithful relationship with our God.

The portion of the 69th psalm that we read today is one of the many psalms of lament — prayers and songs that cry out to God in times of dire or strained circumstances. Did you hear the outcry as we read the psalm? “I’m drowning here, Lord. I’m stuck in the muck of flood waters. I’ve cried myself dry. There are people who hate me and are out to destroy me. I may even cause you shame, Lord. I’ve been trying to be zealous in following your ways – praying, fasting, worshiping and people insult and mock me.” But instead of weakness, what these psalms express most certainly is a trust in God’s character and proven history, a trust that God hears and cares. Yes the psalmist spews dark feelings and terrible suffering AND also expresses a confidence in God’s steadfast love, abundant mercy and faithfulness, even though he can’t see it at the time.

A good scout or orienteer may be able to teach us how to deal with being lost in the wilderness. They can teach us what to do to survive or find our way in mountains, woods or deserts. But it is the psalmists of laments who teach us what to do whenever we get disoriented in life — turn to God in honest and searching prayer. Share your feelings and complaints. Good or bad, grateful or desperate, certain or questioning. Our Lord is strong and loving enough to bear our feelings and care. But

don't stop there. Follow your feelings to the reasons behind them. Speak of the reasons with God. But still don't stop. Here's the part that will eventually move us to a new place. Claim God's promise to be with us always. Remind God, and yourself, of our Lord's very nature. "You are a God of redeeming grace, eternal love and determination to bring new life where we only see wilderness and deadends. I will trust that you won't stop now, Lord." Such prayer will hold you in the waiting of disorientation as you wait to find your way in the new landscape of your life. Give God your feelings, situation, and trust. It's not easy. It's now magic. There is no set time table. But it's the way of faith that has lead this Christian faith in God to survive and flourish over centuries of challenges, suffering and disorientation "Answer me, O Lord, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me." And know, God will. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 6/13/15

ENDNOTES

1. Carrie Visintainer "Disorientation: A New Mother's True Tale of Getting Lost in the Wilderness" posted on <http://www.backpacker.com>

2. Rolf Jacobson, "Disorientation: When the Floods Rise" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org.