

“Rumbling In the Wilderness”
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
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I used to think that the Spirit was *so mean*. When I was a kid and I read today’s “gospel” story, I thought: couldn’t Jesus have enjoyed the river, and the experience of his baptism there, for *a minute*, before the Spirit yanked him off into the wilderness? The way that Luke, Matthew, and Mark all tell the story, Jesus has *just* been baptized – like, his hair is still wet, and God’s voice is still echoing, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Then *immediately*, says Mark, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Luke and Matthew are gentler, the Spirit “led” Jesus into the wilderness. Either way, I thought: it wasn’t fair Jesus had to go there. Forty days without food, without friends, away from home. What the heck, I thought; just *rude*.

It was much later – Seminary, I guess – when I learned about the wilderness as a place people withdrew – on purpose! – to seek the face of God. Not always, of course. Sometimes people got lost there not meaning to. Folks died there, even. The wilderness is a dangerous place. Yet people entered it willingly, to think or to pray someplace off-the-grid – someplace people had been known to meet God. And folks *still go* to the wilderness, today, looking for *something*; sometimes it’s something they don’t quite know how to name. I think of Cheryl Strayed, who hiked the Pacific Crest Trail years ago; she felt she had to, though she’d never done much hiking before. She called her memoir “*Wild*.” The wilderness had become a place of learning for her – even a place of revelation.

So Jesus struggled in the wilderness, but he struggled willingly. Throughout his ministry, Jesus went to the mountain or the desert or the garden when he wanted to pray. Christ went to the wilderness – this time and every time – not because someone *made him go*, though it does seem like he *had to go*. This is where it helps to remember that Jesus Christ and God’s Spirit are one! Something *in Jesus* drove him into the wilderness, because there was something important he had to do.

I personally think about the wilderness not only as a physical place, but also as any space in which we engage the hard questions . . . or any time during which we dare to face our demons, and to unpack the lies they may have told us about ourselves and God and the world in which we live. Brené Brown got me thinking about this in her book called, “*Rising Strong*.” There she talks about the research she’s done on exactly how people become brave and do hard things, like getting up again after a fall.

There’s a lot of wisdom in this little book, and for me, one of the most useful bits of wisdom is illustrated in a story Brené tells about herself and her husband Steve – the kind of interaction that could happen with any couple or group – like with parents and children or co-workers or neighbors or folks in a church.

“My husband, Steve, and I were having one of those days,” [Brené said]. “That morning, we’d overslept. Charlie couldn’t find his backpack. [Ellen had to drag herself out of bed ‘cause she’d stayed up late studying. At work I had five back-to-back meetings, and Steve, who’s] a pediatrician, was dealing with cold-and-flu season. By dinnertime, we were practically in tears.

Steve opened the refrigerator and sighed. “We have no groceries. Not even lunch meat.” I shot back, “I’m doing the best I can. You can shop, too!”

“I know,” he said in a measured voice. “I do it every week. What’s going on?”

I knew exactly what was going on: I had turned his comment into a story about how I’m a disorganized, unreliable partner and mother. I apologized and started my next sentence with the phrase that’s become a lifesaver in my marriage, parenting and professional life. [I said,] “The story I’m making up is that you were blaming me for not having groceries, that I was screwing up.”

Steve said, “No, I was going to shop yesterday, but I didn’t have time. I’m not blaming you. I’m hungry.”

[Brené says that] Storytelling helps us all impose order on chaos—including emotional chaos. When we’re in pain, we create a narrative to help us make sense of it. This story doesn’t have to be based on any real information. One dismissive glance from a coworker can instantly turn into “*I knew she didn’t like me.*” I responded to Steve so defensively because when I’m in doubt, the “I’m not enough” explanation is often the first thing I grab

Our stories are also about self-protection [Brené says]. I told myself Steve was blaming me so I could be mad instead of admitting that I was vulnerable or afraid of feeling inadequate. I could disengage from the tougher stuff. That’s what human beings tend to do: When we’re under threat, we run. If we feel exposed or hurt, we find someone to blame, or blame ourselves before anyone else can, or pretend we don’t care.

But this unconscious storytelling leaves us stuck. [Brené says that in all her research she’s realized that an essential part of resilience is to recognize the false stories we tell and to challenge them.] We just have to be brave enough to reckon with our deepest emotions.¹

In her book, Brené describes a process we can use to acknowledge our feelings and the stories we “make up” to explain them. The point, of course, is to get closer to the truth. But she warns us: this doesn’t come easy. First, we have to acknowledge what we’re feeling, like: My stomach’s in knots. I want to punch a wall. I need Oreos, lots of Oreos. Then we have to get curious about the story behind the feelings: Why am I being so hard

¹ <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/Brene-Brown-Rising-Strong-Excerpt#ixzz3zszsL8XyM>

on everyone? What happened right before this Oreo craving set in? I'm obsessing over what my sister said. Why? But this can be really hard! If you're furious because someone else got the job you wanted, you may start by telling yourself that person's a brownnoser or the company's a joke. But maybe, after you examine your feelings, you'll realize you're more hurt than you'd wanted to admit. Or maybe, after you reality-check the situation, you'll see that your own attitude played a part in the boss choosing somebody else. It's hard, but pushing through our discomfort is how we get to the truth.²

The wilderness is where we confront ourselves and “rumble” with the stories we tell ourselves, moving from our knee-jerk responses and faulty assumptions to a deeper understanding of our fear, our expectations, our aggression and shame and regret and resentment, or our perfectionism and privilege and identity and nostalgia. It can be painful to get to the bottom of that! But it's important to do this work, if we're going to grow and live courageous lives.

I say all of this because in today's gospel, I see Jesus rumbling with a number of the stories we make up and tell in innumerable ways to our detriment. According to Luke, it was the devil who told these lies. For Jesus, maybe, it *was* an *external voice* shouting made-up stories, but for me, they come from within. Like, the idea that I can satisfy this craving I feel with – Oreos, for instance. Or salted peanuts. Or the hope that *any emptiness* can be assuaged for more than a day or two with a good meal, or a fine wine . . . or pot, or heroin. Different addictions for different people. For me, the temptations are more around shopping than food. When I'm anxious about something, check my web history; it's all REI and Amazon, not because I *need* anything, but because I've wanted, for a moment, some *thing* to make me feel good.

But gosh, now that I think about it, maybe the problem with Jesus commanding a stone to become bread had less to do with the bread than the commanding. Maybe the story Jesus was tempted to tell was that he'd feel better if he just got busy. Do you ever think that? Do you ever think that, if *you* could just “take command” of a situation, you could fix it? Does that feeling ever come to you when, what you *really need* to do is *let go* – for your own sake, or for the sake of the people around you?

“*One does not live by bread alone,*” Jesus said, refusing to fill his emptiness temporarily with the wrong things, and refusing *to act*, when what he believed he was called to do was to wait and to listen and to learn.

The second challenge Luke describes relates to glory and authority, and we tell those stories, too, in all kinds of ways. Maybe what we're thinking is: if I had a better job – a better title, maybe, and more authority, or a higher salary – I'd feel successful. Or, if I had more money – nicer stuff and the means to do more – I'd be happy. The stories we tell around wealth and position are powerful stories, and the devil who tells them comes in many a guise. But there are other lies at work here, too, like: “*If no one will listen to me, it must be because I have nothing important to say*” . . . Or . . . “*I'm not smart*

² Ibid.

enough to be here” . . . Or . . . “I can change to fit in, if I have to.” These are stories we tell about authority and belonging, but Jesus wasn’t fooled by such stories.

“Worship the Lord your God and serve only God,” Jesus said, claiming his truth that God is good and strong and has given God’s children everything we need to do what God wants us to do . . . *that’s what’s important in our lives: what God wants us to do* to be part of the kingdom God’s building. When we *worship and serve God well*, we shine with a holy glory, casting light into the darkness like Jesus did.

But sometimes we think, as the devil challenged Jesus to think: *“I’d like to see some proof that God exists.* I’d like some assurance that God is real, and God loves me.” Or we think: *“I’d like to know, if I stick my neck out there, on behalf of the stranger, or the truth, or God’s kingdom, or whatever – that God will protect me.” . . . “God gives us nothing we can’t handle. If you pray hard enough, God will answer. You’ll see!”* That’s how the stories have been told, at times, to me. But I think those stories can be misleading. In the wilderness, it seems there is more fear and hurt and disappointment to face, than there is protection or proof. God doesn’t guard us from pain; God accompanies us through it, as the Spirit led Jesus Christ through the wilderness. Christ’s time in the desert (and on the mountain, and in the garden) prepared him to *face* brokenness and death, not to avoid it.

Lent provides us with a space to examine the stories we tell to make sense of the world and to calm ourselves and protect ourselves in the world. Here’s a chance to face all the feelings behind those stories – a chance to name the longing and pain and fear we feel, and to learn from those feelings. What truths will you uncover, if you dare to use this time to examine the stories you tell? I can’t say. But I do believe God meets us in the wondering and grappling, what Brené Brown calls our “rumbling” with all we feel. God’s Spirit will guide us, as it guided Jesus through the wilderness. The question is, will we go there?

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