

When I was a kid, my family had one particular spring time tradition. Every year over our Spring Break, my parents would pack me and my brother into our ginormous, gazzling, grey station wagon and drive us into the woods. We went to Blackwater Falls, West Virginia, where we rented a cabin and spent a week hiking and playing pioneer. We loved it. Now, my brother and I are thoroughbred suburbanites, so this cabin stuff really felt like roughing it: building a real fire in a fireplace, living without a dishwasher, and using this strange contraption that Mom and Dad informed us was, in fact, a hand-held can opener. We were such novices at this wilderness stuff – even my parents. I remember our first year in the cabin, when on our last day, like magic, a herd of deer slid silently out of the woods and lingered in our backyard. We were in awe, so we started whispering to one another and slinking around from window to window so not to disturb these almost mythical wild beasts. We didn't realize how ridiculous we had been until the next year, when we came home from a hike to find the same gaggle of does and fawns happily munching on our backyard grass – that is, until they saw us, at which time they came bounding over and started nuzzling in our pockets, looking for the treats that they were obviously used to getting from the human beings who so often shared their woods.

Now the fact that we always went to the woods over Spring Break meant that we were always there the week before Easter, Holy Week. And while my family was a faithful, churchgoing family, our church was a non-liturgical one, so Holy Week didn't mean a whole lot to us. The most we did to observe the season was to dye hard-boiled eggs with vinegar and Paas tablets and search for our Easter baskets on Sunday morning. Years later, when I became an Episcopalian and first experienced the immense power of Holy Week,

there was a part of me that regretted that I hadn't known any kind of Lenten liturgies growing up. Later, of course, I realized that we had had Lenten liturgies. We spent our Lent in the woods, and we had practices that we replicated every year. We always spent one morning hiking to a remote pine forest, where we would sit in the soft, spongy bed of pine needles and speak to each other in the muffled, hushed undertones of church. We always spent an afternoon out on a cluster of rocks that we had discovered far off the beaten path, sitting in silence, soaking in the sun, napping, praying. And we always took time during our hikes to listen, to stop and stand still on the trail, absorbing the sounds of the forest and of each other's breath. We most certainly did have our Lenten practices, and they were practices that took us into and through the woods.

Why do we go into the woods? "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately," Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." In stories from Grimm's Fairy Tales to Harry Potter to *Into the Wild* or *The Shack*, people have gone into the woods in search of something: simplicity, answers, healing, truth. The woods are "lovely, dark, and deep," and they offer solitude, holiness, a place to stand still and listen. Like Jesus journeying into the wilderness, we walk into the woods because they remind us that even when we are alone, we are not alone. We can suddenly find ourselves sitting peaceably with the beasts of the kingdom and ministered to by angels. We can find ourselves clarified and refined, focused and lean, more fully ourselves, more Godlike.

But the question I ask of us this morning as we face the woodland wilderness journey of Lent is this: will we be not only more Godlike in the woods, will we be more

Godlike *about* the woods? Will we act in godly ways towards the very woods themselves, not some metaphoric internal space but the real, live, bark-and-blossom trees themselves? Will our Lenten journeys of self-discovery and re-turning to God help us to act more like God when it comes to creation? Remember our story: God made everything that was made, and God called everything good. And God watched as the creatures She had given birth to chose wrongly, chose not-God, over and over again. God brooded over the bites from the apple and the murder of Abel and the growing wickedness in the world, and God resolved to blot out all of creation like a spill that needed to be wiped up and to start over. Except that God loved Noah and his faithfulness, and saved him and his family and his two-by-two creatures, and when God witnessed the destruction wrought by the flood and saw that Noah was still faithful, God had a change of heart and said, “Never again will I curse the ground because of humankind.” And God made this promise: “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, that never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

Listen carefully – “the covenant between me and the earth.” This covenant is not simply between God and human beings; the covenant is between God and the earth. God promises to never again destroy the whole earth, and God promises this as much to the lions and the dung beetles and the rocks and the rills as He does to Noah and his family. Even when the world deserves it, even when the clouds of judgment rightly hang in the air, God will hang up His bow and cause no destruction. Through no merit of their own, the earth and all that dwell therein are forever protected by God’s act of generous love, that is,

God's choosing to limit Himself and His actions in order to bless us, and every living creature, and the earth itself. Almighty and everlasting God, the omnipotent creator, puts limits on Himself for the sake of His creation. Will you and I do the same?

A few weeks ago, Pierce Klemmt, our rector, gave me an article clipped from the New York Times about a family that has given up use of their refrigerator. They own a small freezer, they shop often, and they store perishables in a large cooler. Interesting, I thought. They save money on their electric bills, use less energy, and waste far less food. Fascinating. They have a lot more space in their kitchen. Wow! And when asked what they miss most about having a fridge, the husband replied that he misses having a cold beer when he watches baseball games on T.V. At this point I stopped reading. I do not stand before you as one who has sacrificed her fridge. I do not always recycle. I do not always walk to work. I do not plant trees or clean up the parkway. Occasionally, when the caffeine level is dropping dangerously low, I have even been known to drink coffee out of a Styrofoam cup. I stand here as convicted as any of us in this room in my care of creation. You and I aren't good at this all the time. That has got to change. We have got to use far less stuff and recycle what we do use. We have got to stop it with the disposable plates and forks and coffee cups. We have got to rid the world of the scourge of those ubiquitous plastic bags, which I'm sure are listed somewhere as one of the signs of the apocalypse. We have got to demand more energy efficiency from our cars, our homes, our workplaces, and our church. We have got to make some changes, and those changes have got to happen now. Not now because Al Gore says so, or now because of global warming, or now because it would be economically advantageous. We have got to make changes now because now is

when justice must always happen. Now is when acts of love must always happen. Now is always the time to align ourselves with God's purposes.

And now is a perfect time to start. It's the beginning of Lent; we're going into the woods anyway, trimming down, lightening our load, limiting what we eat and say and do. In Lent, we are invited to re-turn, to turn back to God and so to ourselves, to recognize ourselves as made in the image and likeness of God – as creatures woven into the fabric of God's making. We are invited to widen our embrace to include the poor, the outcast, the sick, the other, black, white, old, young, gay, straight, human, animal, mineral, the rock, the river, the tree. We are invited to choose to be on God's side. For God has covenanted to protect the whole earth, God is making all things new, God is redeeming all of creation. We can be with God on this; we must be, for the earth's sake, for God's sake, for our sake.

When this church was built in the late 18th century, it was not in town. Town was down there, closer to the water. This church was on the outskirts of the city. And it wasn't known as Christ Church. It was called "The Church in the Woods." May we live into both of these names this Lent and be a community by and in Christ, and a community in and for the woods.