

Parables of Growth: Walking in Darkness

Texts on Sunday, October 17, 2004

Reading: Job 29: 1-13, Matthew 25: 1-13

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Last Monday afternoon, I hiked into the Adirondack wilderness for a three-day sojourn. I have been making this solo pilgrimage into the woods nearly every fall for half my life. In a very particular and personal way, this retreat marks for me a kind of New Year, around which the rest of the months turn. For some days prior to the trip, I had wavered between traveling by canoe or foot. The former is easier on the body, but obviously limits the terrain to be explored. Finally I decided on a trek out and back over a section of trail I have walked before. It seemed as if the heart of the forest and those high lakes under autumn sun were calling to me.

I set out strong. My pack is loaded with gear to meet every sort of weather that October has delivered in my experience: a pair of shorts, a pair of down mittens—you get the idea. This all weighs a bit, and I feel it more as I age—but I've dropped a few pounds from my own "pack" this year, so I set out strong. I was very pleased. I felt like 25, though I did not plan to walk so far as I did when I was that age.

The hike went briskly. A very few signs at trail junctions indicate the miles to this or that lake or lean-to. The lean-tos—three-sided shelters made from great logs—are situated at outlooks on lakes and river bends so graceful, so welcome that they seem to draw divine praise from the heart as naturally as the lungs their breath. I aimed to stop for the night at the first lean-to on the trail section, and since my pace was good, I would cover the four and a half miles with ample light left to search for dead wood to cut for a fire. A fire warms every part of the being, out under the wild silent skies of the deep woods.

Almost two hours of trekking brought me to the short side trail down to that lean-to. Around a bend, it finally came into view—occupied. Two young men had their gear spread out, working on the essential tasks before the night. Now, there is an unwritten code in the woods, that you don't crowd a lean-to; certainly you never ask to stay in a shelter already occupied. I carry a tent with me, so I can always move off forty yards for the night. But I can hardly express to you how greatly I long, as for sabbath, to rest in the wide open door of a lean-to, and in silence with no companion—not always, but this trip, this trip, each year. I sat in the shelter to perform a bit of repair

on a blister at my heel, and with my fellow-hikers' anticipated encouragement, I pushed off for the next lean-to, nearly five miles further on. It was after four o'clock. Darkness would fall at 6:30 or so. It seemed there would be time enough, even enough to find a dry log to build that fire, that friend.

With my heel blister protected, I moved off quickly—perhaps no longer 25, but not yet 35. When I had covered the better part of the first mile, I began counting off 1760 paces—that is, the number of yards in a mile—in order to time the interval, so I could estimate my overall progress. As the trail climbed, I labored heavily and breathed hard, but still it took only 25 minutes to mark that mile. Surely only two miles and some were left now. I would make my destination by 6:00 o'clock, or just a little later.

Then the terrain began to unfold its nature—and my not so young frame its, and my mind its nature, in conflict with time and pain and the failing light and unnamed longings and fears. Nothing happened. I did not fall. No further blister burned the feet. No trees or wide river water blocked my way impassably. But I slowed and slowed. Pain came to back and hips. The feet ached and resisted. The day's sun grew feeble, and since I remembered clearly from long before how the trail would give on to a view of the lake when the lean-to was near, and since there was no sign of lake at any distance, but only more rising ground giving up its gains in useless descents, my mind was beset like a punching bag with irritation. Its thoughts were a parody of why-ing complaint. "Stupid trail! Why! go up again! Where is the lake! How much time to sundown?" From time to time, I would draw my attention away from all this chatter with a simple word, the briefest prayer on my breath. Then, for a moment, the woods were present to me in their impassive such-ness—leaves and flowers, trees and water, trail and no trail: not me. But pain would tear me from that presence of mind—pain in my own nature, and pain's peculiarly human twist, *time-pain*, obsessing over its ignorance of the consequence of things going on like this forever! Thus my mind and I hobbled fitfully toward the goal, sometimes blessed, sometimes bested by the blasted sense of one self against the world.

In two hours' time, I aged from 30 to 90. As my form arrived at the longed-for lean-to in the twilight, its bent back, its gait, its dependency on a wooden staff for support, its face strained, its feet pained—the whole would conjure the thought of a man of 90, if one ignored the pack on the back. As it happened, three hikers more were there at this lean-to, finishing their supper as I came through the evening shadows. Seeing my condition, and that darkness had all but surrounded us, they encouraged me to stay while one of them built a fire. They preferred their tents anyway, which were already pitched. Such welcome welcome.

There ends the tale in one sense. But here is the heart of it. While my strength was shrinking and between stretches when my thoughts were jangled with uncertainty and pain, often I thought of you who are most aged here. I thought, *How little I know of your terrain, and your struggle, and the sound of your inward arguments, and the sound of your peace. Here it is, I thought, a fly in amber, captured like a parable of the kingdom: a person grows old and weak fast, praying in fits and starts before God and his Christ for peace as darkness draws near, hoping for a good end, which comes.* Bless you, bless you long servants of the Lord at Central, I thought. Our walk is all one walk. Some of us are an hour or two behind you on the trail. Bless you.

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That benedicting word has a peculiar nature, though. You know that blessing is not a bestowed condition, but is only present in the present, and is gone so completely when not present to your mind. Blessing, as we have said often here, is not a status of sunlit health or wealth, but a way of seeing, even in the dark. When I had returned to home after this hike, I went hunting in the Bible for verses with the phrase “walking in darkness.” They come in two varieties. In one, various passages use “walking in darkness” to refer to those who live in ignorance of what is real, of God. The other meaning—you heard an example in Job’s complaint—refers to those who trust so completely in God that they can walk in darkness, that is, walk through life’s valley in the shadow of death. The darkness is the same for both kinds of walkers. In our ignorance, we sometimes believe that what glitters our eyes in this world shines from its own light. Then we are walking in darkness. Sometimes, though, we are present to the fact that one Light illuminates all things, all things; that nothing shines of its own, but all the world’s lights are passing away. Then we are walking, even in darkness.

Jesus’ parable of the virgins, five foolish and five wise, calls us again to seriousness about our brief life. The parable reveals two kinds of people, both religious, both delighted at just the name of the long-awaited guest, all of them eager to be in his presence. But here is a division. Five are wise. They prepare for life as it really is. They prepare for walking in darkness, so that they may be ready for the Presence. Five are foolish. Oh, they are religious, to be sure, but they have no discipline. They are not disciples. They do nothing to prepare for life’s walk. They have *Religiousness A*, as Kierkegaard whimsically named it: the religiousness of people who think that access to God is natural, something they basically deserve in exchange for all their good works. They are fools. They run out of spiritual resources in the middle of the night. Mesmerized by pleasures and fears (addicted to them really) they fall into a coma of complaint and

fevered pleasures. When they come to awareness of how sharp and unbudging is their bitterness, no one can help them. There you have a meaning for the wise maidens' refusal of oil, namely, that under the conditions of extremity and need, the unwise cannot make use of what the wise have. Throwing spiritual depth and practice to the foolish at the last minute would be like throwing a life preserver to a drowning man—with no rope attached. To speak what is wise in fools before they are too ill to act, the Buddhist prayer might also have gladly passed Jesus' lips: "Life and death are of supreme importance. Time passes quickly by, and opportunity is lost. Each one of us should strive to awaken. Awaken. Take heed. Do not squander your life."

Be wise. Put oil in your lamp, every day. Be blessed, and you will bless. And you will be received, as at the lean-to, when your day is over. For all is over. Every day. Did you notice?

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