

It is good for us to be together this morning.

I want to go home. Even if it is a routine trip out somewhere I've been a hundred times over, there is just a point where a switch flips and I am ready to go home. McMinnville is starting to feel like home to me. My internal compass is adjusting so that no matter where I'm at, a technical term, no matter where I am at, when I say I'm fixin' to head home, I feel like I am gesturing in generally the right direction. I like to know where I am going, too. Just last week I had a period where I had received a new phone and the cellular service wasn't active for a few days. I didn't realize how much and how often I relied on that device to tell me the way... the way to the Old Stone Fort, or the best way home from Nashville given the rainy weather conditions and possibility for accidents on the interstate. I want to go home, and I want to know the way home.

One of my earliest memories of feeling a calling, a general sense of what my life's work might be, was standing on the deck of my parents' home right outside the city limits of Winchester, TN. It was a lot like the deck on the back of my house in McMinnville now, except instead of overlooking a river, we had a view of a nursery. Now that is a sight that should be familiar to us here in Warren County. Trees that seemed to go on forever, but in a regular organized grid of rows and columns. I would come home from church and stand on the deck and pretend to direct the trees as if they were a choir. I was about nine or ten. I would perhaps have pretended to preach to them, but the hand motions weren't as dramatic, I was a Methodist at this point in my journey, and besides it would have been like preaching to the choir... I would go out into the nursery and hide when the atmosphere got a little too intense in the house, but it was hard to get lost in those regularly ordered paths... one false move and you were caught. I would find treasures, natural surprises out there, but the manufactured layout of the little contrived forest made them seem odd and perverse. There was a clump of bright orange mushrooms once, and the remains of some antlered animal, probably a deer. But the regularity of the paths announced them plain as day and not a mystery at all. The wonder of them was obscured by their accessibility. I wanted to be shocked or amazed but I hadn't really worked hard enough to find them.

There was another place I would escape to. My best friend Stephen lived out further in the country, even if you live *in town* in Franklin County, you still live out in the country, but this was a special enclave, Williams Cove, and especially the wooded areas along the banks of Norwood Creek. I would go during the Summer days at a time, my brother and I, and God bless Joe and Susan and Mama Lois for taking on two extra kids for that long at a stretch. They didn't seem to mind. Probably because we were, back then, what people now call *free-range kids*. Back then we were just being kids and roaming around the woods all day was what kids did. This was what I longed for the fabricated forest on the edge of my back yard to be. No matter how much we traversed the woods around Norwood Creek, it seemed like we always found something new, something wild. I still want to go home, and I want to know the way home.

We would either go down into the bottom land and criss cross the creek or edge along a ridge area that derelict farm buildings to explore. Typically the creek bottom was Summer territory, and on a day like it is today we would carefully make our way around the high ridge to explore

the old hog house, a particular favorite of mine. I routinely wore high top Converse shoes when I was younger, the lace up canvas kind with the rubber sole. There was a wet muddy spot under some leaves that I could not have known was there except I stepped hard, left-footed, slipped, fell, and then started sliding down the embankment. I would have slid all the way down to the creek bottom if it weren't for another hidden feature of the landscape. An old fence which we guessed later-on, must have closed in all the buildings and the hogs that lived in the hog house, the fence was also buried underneath the leaves and it was old, rusty, barbed wire. It caught one side of the inseam of my jeans, then into the canvas of my shoe and split it like scissors opening up the skin underneath until finally hanging in the rubber sole of my shoe. There I came to a stop dangling upside-down, my jeans already soaking through with blood. The call came down from about 20 feet above, from the mouths of my friends in unison, "You alright." There was a strange brew of embarrassment and self-preservation in my answer trying to keep anger and tears at bay, "Yep." They kept going because that's what us free range kids did back then. I got up and tried to make myself look as presentable as possible because even then I guess I knew what the shock of a parent seeing a child under your care stumbling out of the woods.

I didn't have to make a decision to physically reorient myself toward home. I knew it deep down and immediately got myself together in mid-stride and headed back toward the house in one fluid motion. The depth of my need turned me around, and the knowledge of it pushed me through the pain, brought forth tears, but animated my legs to keep going back that way, back home, through a path in the wilderness informed by the longing in my heart to be whole no matter the consequences I might have to face. I want to go home, and I want to know the way home.

And that is what Advent is about. That's what repentance is about. The re-wilding of the world and our hearts. Flannery O'Connor claims that the hardest story she ever wrote is also the only one where God appears named as a character in the story. She wrote to a friend about this story entitled *The Enduring Chill*, describing the moment of conversion of the main character, "You can't tell about conversion until you live with it a while. Repentance brings the shock of self-knowledge that clears the way for the Holy Ghost." We are accustomed to preparing the way for things. You may have heard me tell you on occasion, "If it is not on my calendar, on my phone then it won't happen." Sometimes even when it is, I still forget. We are chiseling out neat little pathways for our lives to unfold orderly, on-time, and according to schedule. We are standing on the back porches of our lives looking out over the nice neat forest we have created to hide in, to find satisfaction and joy in, to encounter wonder and mystery in... and we don't find any of those things there.

The scriptures today paint a picture of the kingdom of the coming Messiah.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
 the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
 the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
 and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
 their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the
 ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

But in the context of our highly ordered lives, would it look like the reign of the king of peace. Something so wonderful and profound laid over an orderly grid we have prepared. We have not told the truth of our hearts. The wildness of the broken edges and hidden barbed wire. We are not able to look our friends in the eye with our woundedness visible, instead we just say yep, I'm alright. Perhaps in our context this upending of the way of the world would look as disturbing and naked as the day-glo clump of mushrooms in my backyard nursery or the harrowing antlered remains, or maybe it would just disrupt the supply chain, and be inconvenient instead of miraculous.

No the Gospel starts today in the wilderness, with a Wildman telling the truth. Rewilding the domesticated hearts of sinners. We have to go to the wilderness to know how badly we are in need. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." We are preparing to see the world as a vision of the peace of the lord soaked through every leaf pile, and mudhole, and creekbed. I like to go home, and I like to know the way home. But I know how lost I am sometimes. We are preparing to see something utterly different carved out of the wild undergrowth, something more real and true than the stories we have told ourselves about ourselves, about what is possible in this world. But more than that, we are preparing our hearts to be a home for God, and the word made flesh, and the Enduring chill of the Holy spirit to abide with us in this wild season of Advent.