

Called to Deep Commitment

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38; Romans 4:13-25

Prayer: *O God, we hear your voice calling us to come and follow you; calling us to deep commitment. Help us as we struggle to follow you into unfamiliar and uncomfortable place. Help us to realize that as we lose ourselves to you, we are found. Help us to rest in your presence. Amen.*¹

As I considered the theme of deep in the woods, I struggled to recall personal experiences of feeling lost in a forest. I grew up surrounded by the fertile soil and large fields of central Illinois where trees and fences were cleared for ease of access. As the equipment used for tending the soil, planting, and harvesting got bigger, tree lines, hedge rows, and fences disappeared.

For many of our family vacations, we traveled to a place called Little Eden on a lake in Michigan. While there were trees present, most of our attention was focused on water activities.

I rarely attended church camp as a grade schooler. I came to appreciate Camp Menno Haven in Illinois and Camp Friedenswald in Michigan as the settings of a variety of events during my youth and young adulthood. I enjoyed walking in the woods, but my attention usually focused on the people and the activities of the events I attended.

Some of my travels around the US have included time in the woods – the most memorable being the redwood forests of northern California. I tend to follow well-marked trails. I've experienced awe and wonder, but rarely fear or disorientation amongst the trees.

Some of my most meaningful times in what could hardly be called woods occurred during my four years in seminary. The one-mile loop around campus was mostly on grassy expanses or amid a sea of wildflowers, but it also included a short stretch through a wooded patch. The rhythm of walking from the street noise into the quiet and back out again, from the wider expanse into the shade and back into the sun again, became an important part of my educational and spiritual life. My trips circling the campus helped me as I synthesized what I was learning and made plans for the future.

However, my first year in seminary, certainly felt like being lost in a forest. Nothing seemed familiar. I didn't know how to do what I was being asked to do. It seemed as if my professors were speaking a foreign language. I began to question what I thought I knew for sure.

You may have experienced something similar. You may feel like you're currently deep in the woods. When you walk through an unfamiliar forest, it's easy to get disoriented. It all looks the same. You lose the ability to see landmarks that help you know where you are. The same sort of thing happens in our daily lives. The people, ideas, or routines that have served as landmarks change or disappear.

Especially when it comes to your spiritual life, when it comes to your relationship with God, you may prefer to stay out in the open, where the familiar stories you tell yourself serve as reliable landmarks, and you know what you believe.

But life takes us all into the depths of the forest sometimes. Lent is designed to be a time during which we dig deep into our faith and find help when we are cut off from familiar landmarks.²

¹ Adapted from Lent 1 focus statement, Lent-Easter Worship Resources, *Leader, Winter 2020-2021*, ©2020 MennoMedia, p. 39.

² Some of what follows is adapted from, *Leader*, p. 40.

Peter, one of Jesus' most famous followers, often found himself in unfamiliar territory. Look at the context of what we read in the gospel of Mark.³ Today's story comes immediately after Jesus asking, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter proclaiming "You are the Messiah," meaning you are the anointed one, the Christ. Today's story comes immediately before the Transfiguration when Peter accompanies Jesus on a retreat to a high mountain. While Jesus is praying his appearance changes; Moses and Elijah join him; a cloud overshadows them, and a voice declares, "This is my beloved son; listen to him." In between Peter's declaration and his presence at the transfiguration is the story we heard a few minutes ago.

It begins with Jesus teaching his disciples many things about himself: how he would suffer, how he would be rejected, how he would be killed, and how God would raise him from the dead.

This isn't what the disciples had in mind! Jews in the first century expected a messiah who would deliver them from Roman oppression and occupation. They certainly didn't expect one who would suffer and die.

While Jesus also announces that he will rise again after three days, it appears that this most important detail somehow goes unnoticed. And it's no wonder. When the disciples hear Jesus talk about suffering, rejection, and death, they stop listening. They can't bear to hear any more. That's a typical human reaction to hearing bad news.

To the disciples this kind of talk is nonsense; it's totally unacceptable. This is so unacceptable that Peter, who has just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah reprimands him!

Imagine the scene. Peter walks over to Jesus, puts his arm around him, and takes him aside to set him straight about messiahship. Peter assumes that Jesus will follow the traditional expectations: kingship, might, and victory. Suffering, rejection, and death are not on the agenda. Prestige, power, and dominion *are*.

Peter is blinded by his own preconceptions. His cherished convictions about what the Messiah's agenda should be won't allow him to see what the Messiah's agenda must be.

Jesus hears Peter out. Then, turning and looking at all of the disciples, he reprimands Peter. He says that Peter is speaking for Satan, the great deceiver.

After his rebuke of Peter, Jesus teaches Peter, the disciples, and the gathered crowd about saving and losing your life.

If any one of you wants to follow me, you will have to give yourself up to God's plan, take up your cross, and do as I do. For any one of you who wants to be rescued will lose your life, but any one of you who loses your life for my sake and for the sake of this good news will be liberated. Really, what profit is there for you to gain the whole world and lose yourself in the process?

Jesus' words led Peter right into the forest. He imagined victory, dominance, a kingly reign. Talk of suffering and death and rejection was not the story Peter told himself about the Messiah. But going there with Jesus was part of Peter's journey—learning a different story.

Stop for a moment to consider these questions: What assumptions am I making about what God should do? What are my prejudices, presuppositions, and preconceptions of the way things must be? What prevents me from seeing what God's agenda must be? What different story can I learn from Jesus?

In his letter to the churches in Rome, the apostle Paul points to Abraham as an example of righteousness. Paul had trusted in laws. He was zealous about defending this faith against anyone and anything that offered a different way. But an encounter with Jesus and a temporary state of blindness disoriented him completely. As he listened to the voice of Jesus and those whom God sent to help him, Paul found faith. He realized that the promise given to Abraham and his children, that one day they would inherit the world, didn't come because Abraham followed the rules of the law. It came as a

³ What follows draws from W. Hulitt Gloer, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary – Year B*, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

result of his right standing before God, a standing he obtained through faith, as he followed God's leading throughout his life.

Similar to Abraham, Paul's transformation came from his commitment to following God's leading through the twists and turns of life.

At the beginning of the week, I thought I knew where this sermon was going to go. I gathered information about the trees, plants, and animals found in a mid-latitude temperate forest biome. I researched the threats to the forest. And I thought of possible analogies between forests and the church. What if all you see are the oak trees and all I see are the maples? Can we realize they're both part of the same forest and work together for the benefit of both? What if I think the greatest threat is insect outbreaks and you think it's wildfires? Can we work together to minimize both? I need a few more days and a few more laps around the seminary campus to work it all out.

Perhaps my struggle to write a sermon this week is the analogy I'm seeking. As I set out, I thought I knew the path, but along the way the landscape shifted. As I ventured deeper into the woods, the way became less clear. I needed to sit and consider my surroundings before venturing on.

I invite you to sit and ponder with me. After having me as your pastor for more than a decade, you know that I never profess to have all the answers. But I'm willing to ask the questions, listen to your questions, and seek wisdom together. So I'll end the sermon with a few more questions for you to consider.

What twists and turns is life presenting you? Do you feel like you're currently deep in the woods? Have familiar landmarks – people, ideas, or routines – changed or disappeared, causing you to be disoriented?

All of us have experienced changes in routine during the last year, some more than others. We've experienced the death of people we love – spouses and friends. We've experienced damage to property and the threat of losing everything. All of these and more cause disorientation.

How is God calling you to deep commitment? What do you sense God calling you to commit to more deeply?

This week I had Zoom calls with four groups of people to whom I am deeply committed – my brothers and sisters-in-law, three long-time friends, my pastor peer group, and, of course, this congregation. We touched on some of the same topics in all four settings – faith, scripture, and current events – but, the way we talked about them varied from group to group because the relationships within each group and the purpose of each gathering were different. There is greater unanimity of mind in some groups than in others.

In each setting I want to be honest and express my opinions while still maintaining relationship. I want to read scripture together while recognizing that we won't always agree on how to interpret what we're reading. I want to follow God's way and Jesus' example in all aspects of life, while knowing that there are differences among us in what that means, especially when it comes to politics.

As I think about our Sunday morning gatherings, I'm committed to singing, praying, and hearing God's word together. I'm committed to expressing my concerns and listening to yours, of recognizing and respecting our differences without widening the gaps between us. I'm committed to join with you in sharing God's love through celebration, nurture, service, and peacemaking.

We're transformed by God as we follow God's voice along the path of life, a voice calling us to deep commitment. Even when our path leads deep into unfamiliar woods, as we lose ourselves, we are found. Thanks be to God. Amen.⁴

⁴ Adapted from *Leader, Winter 2020-2021*, p. 39.