

Christmas Lights at the Edge of the Wilderness

^{NRS} **Exodus 13:17** When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt."¹⁸ So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle.¹⁹ And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, "God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here."²⁰ They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.²¹ The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Sometimes things get worse before they get better. I just finished reading Ice Bound, the fantastic story of Dr. Jerri Nielsen. She was the doctor who went all the way down to the bottom of the world, to the South Pole, to winter over, care for the crew, and to pick up the pieces of her life, only to find herself with breast cancer and almost no hope of survival.

Though an incredibly strong woman, an emergency room doc no less, Dr. Nielsen suffered at the hands of an abusive spouse. By the time she figured out how much she and her three kids had suffered and tried to get out and get help- it was really too late for a good ending. Just as he had isolated her from her friends and cut her off from any support, when she left, her husband took the kids and cut them off from her, turning them against her. After some questionable legal counsel advising her not to fight him in court and to grant him custody, because you "can't tell teenagers what to do", for all intents and purposes, she really lost her children.

And so, finding the family she had known for nearly twenty years in ruins, she returned to the only other home she had known- she returned to her mom and dad in

Ohio. And there, around tea and the kind of unconditional love you only find with people who truly know and love you, they all mourned what had been and tried to figure out what was next. And what was next, it seemed, would be the South Pole. Having seen an ad in the back of a medical journal looking for a doctor willing to give up all the comforts of home for a year at the South Pole, she was now seriously considering it. At first she just laughed at it, like most people would, but she never was able to completely put it out of her mind. And then, after all of the hell of her divorce, she thought- why not.

And so she thought a geographical cure might be just the ticket- find a new world; find a new life, right? Well, find a new world she did. It got so cold at the South Pole station, she writes, that at one point a worker dropped an iron wrench onto the ice floor from way up on scaffolding- it shattered into hundreds of pieces. Now that's cold! It was so cold even inside the buildings they wore coats all day and as a physician she had to get used to the fact that everyone's temperatures ran below normal even when they were healthy. It was a completely new world- and for the most part she absolutely loved it, especially the people. People with names like Big John, Pic, Nuclear Nick, and Weatherboy. She found a new family of lovable odd-balls out there on the ice. It was just what she was hoping for- and more.

She loved it- but new world or not, nothing could have prepared her for the sinking feeling in her stomach when she acknowledged the lump she had been feeling in her breast her breast wasn't going away, and instead seemed to be getting bigger, and was really starting to hurt.

For Dr. Jerri Nielson things would have to get worse before they get any better.

Now, I don't mean to sound like a humbug, but on some level this is how a lot of us feel about the holiday season. A lot of us breathe a sigh of relief after surviving Thanksgiving but then look at the calendar with a shiver thinking, "This is going to get worse, before it's going to get better." For many of us, Thanksgiving is just the start of what's become out of control Christmas season that for some of us is the hardest time of the year.

Now as a pastor, this breaks my heart- that one of the holiest times on our calendar is such a source of pain for so many. Why? Well, I did a little poking around. The NMHA (National Mental Health Association) cites multiple reasons for what they call "Holiday depression", everything from simple stress and fatigue to unrealistic expectations, over-commercialization, and financial constraints. They say the demands of shopping, parties, family reunions, and house guests contribute to feelings of tension more pronounced at Christmas than at any other time of the year.

www.nmha.org/infoctr/factsheets/103.cfm

I think this is true- but I also think there's more to it. For instance I know it sounds strange that this cheerful, joyful holiday brings difficulty, but for some of us this season is hard precisely because this *is* supposed to be a time of joy and goodwill. There's a pressure this time of year to be cheerful- no one likes a grump at a party. All of a sudden, just because things are red and green all over the place, we're supposed to just turn off any kind of sad or dark feelings, as if we've got some kind of a switch. I can remember how frustrating it would be when I was a kid and my mom would be yelling at me about something I did. And then someone would call on the phone, and like magic, she'd pick up the phone, "Hello? Hood residence?" smiling like she had just knocked

back a few with Robin Williams and couldn't stop grinning. And that's what we're supposed to be like this time of year- no matter how we're really feeling, all of a sudden we're just supposed to be cheerful. Well, this relentless pressure for us to paste a smile on our face is in itself enough to send some of us over the edge.

Now, for others it's something else. For those of us already feeling somewhat lonely and out of place- this season with its emphasis on togetherness and family just underlines this sense of alienation and separateness. I was watching an old episode of Northern Exposure recently and Maurice Minnefield, a single man in his late fifties/early sixties says it perfectly: "Thing is you go through the rest of the year fine. You've got your friends. You've got your business. You're part of the community. And then around the middle of December if you're alone, you start to feel like an outsider. It's the nature of a family holiday to make a single man feel disenfranchised. You're made to feel like a hungry vagrant with your nose pressed up against the window staring at somebody else's dinner." (Northern Exposure, "Seoul Mates") Yes, for many of us, whether it's because we're away from family or because not all is right within our family- this season is painful.

And for still others Christmas is hard because it's a time to see how we're measuring up. The great preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor writes: For good or for ill, every Christmas functions like a kind of time machine for us, taking us back to every other Christmas we have spent on this earth. For some...it is the smell of pine boughs and oranges stuck with cloves, the taste of roast turkey and peppermint...for others though, this night is a reminder of the way life should have been but never was." (p. 21 The Preaching Life) Christmas is like a time machine in which we remember all our

Christmas pasts and compare. We compare holidays and we compare ourselves- wondering how we're measuring up. We wonder if we've accomplished enough- if we're the people we were hoping we'd be by this time. We compare our relationships wondering if this is really what we signed on for.

Oh, whatever the reason, as wonderful and magical as this season is- it is a hard time, too. A hard time and a dark time- and not just because the sun is setting around 4:30 in the afternoon these days. Many of us this season find ourselves pushed- and pushed sometimes to the very edge.

⋮ ⋮ ⋮

Pushed to the very edge- well at least we have company this morning. See, this is where we find the Israelites this morning, too. Now, I know this is a somewhat curious text to hear in Advent- we normally hear in Lent, but I really think it captures both the darkness and light of Advent perfectly. Just imagine it- the Israelites have finally escaped from Pharaoh about to start their lives afresh. Only, it doesn't take them long to realize that this isn't going to be easy. I mean they are leaving the great cities of Egypt with their Fred Meyers and Crate and Barrel's on every corner. They leave it all only to find themselves smack in the middle of nowhere, no idea where they are actually going, not a Motel 6 in sight- much less a Four Seasons, and what's more- they find themselves, to use the evocative language of the text, camped out on the very edge of the wilderness. Yes, they were lead in a roundabout way and found themselves pushed to the very edge of the wilderness.

Now, wilderness for us means recreation, it's a place where we get our maps out and have fun; but wilderness in the ancient world is a frightening place- it's a place where

the maps stop, where the demons begin, and where few make it out alive. And the only thing worse than being pushed to the edge, pushed to the edge of this wilderness, is the fact that new life for them will only come from actually entering it and passing through.

Now, the good news for the Israelites this morning- and for us as well- is that when they find themselves pushed to the edge, pushed the very edge, they find they are not alone, they are not abandoned- but discover help. They find help.

And curious help it is, too. According to Exodus the Israelites survived because of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Ever since I first heard and read about these signs, they have been some of my favorite images in all the Bible. And you know, I've always thought that they were helpful to the Israelites because they showed them the right direction in which to travel- like they were a kind of ancient compass always leading them true. I learned this week, though, that some offer another suggestion. One commentator writes that this cloud and fire were more protective than anything else. And it makes sense. What's the most deadly force in the desert during the day? The sun. This commentator writes that this cloud above all else shelters the Israelites, giving them some relief from the sun's heat. And similarly, the most dangerous thing about the desert at night is the night itself- both because all deserts cool down dramatically after the sun drops due to being so dry; but also psychologically. Because of light pollution few of us know how incredibly dark a moonless night would be- especially so close to the land haunted by wandering spirits and unspeakable demons. The Greeks had many different ways of describing different kinds of darkness- one of them being a night so dark you couldn't see your hand right in front of your face. So cloud and fire not so much guiding the Israelites but protecting them- cloud protecting the

children of Israel from the sun; the fire protecting them from the chill and terrors of the night.

λ λ λ

And it is thanks to such blessed moments of relief that the Israelites make it through this dark wilderness. Now it strikes me that this is true for you and me, too. It strikes me that we're able to get through difficult times, through Christmases on the edge of the wilderness if you will, if we have enough help, enough protection.

I think it's how Jerri Nielson made it through the dark wilderness of 6 months of Antarctic night and cancer during her winterover. She made it through because pillars of fire, little moments of light, broke up the darkness enough for her to keep going. One of the brightest pillars of fire for Nielson were these poetry slams they held there. Every so often they would gather and read verse- whether their own or from someone else. Once, it even turned International. When Jerri started chemo, she worked with a team she trained at the pole, as well as stayed in satellite contact with her doctors back in Indiana- the same doctors who worked with Lance Armstrong, I might add. And during one particularly brutal chemo session, they turned it into a big, international poetry festival, doctors from America sharing lines with electricians from the South Pole. The brightest light of all, perhaps, came from Dr. Kim Miller- Nielson's primary physician. Over ten thousand miles she read this poem to Jerri:

“After A While” by Veronica Shoffstall
 After a while you learn
 The subtle difference between
 Holding a hand and chaining a soul
 And you learn
 That love doesn't mean leaning
 And company doesn't always mean security
 And you begin to learn

That kisses aren't contracts
 And presents aren't promises
 And you begin to accept your defeats
 With your head up and your eyes ahead
 With the grace of a woman, not the grief of a child
 And you learn
 To build all your roads on today
 Because tomorrow's ground is
 Too uncertain for plans
 And futures have a way of falling down
 In mid-flight.
 After awhile you learn
 That even sunshine burns
 If you get too much
 So you plant your own garden
 And decorate your own soul
 Instead of waiting for someone
 To bring you flowers.
 And you learn that you really can endure,
 You really are strong
 And you really do have worth
 And you learn
 And you learn
 And with every good bye, you learn... (P. 320 Ice Bound)

Sometimes it gets harder before it gets better- it just does. For the Israelites, not only would they have to brave the wilderness, but a few verses later we learn they have to escape Pharaoh's soldiers by crossing through the Red Sea hoping against hope they would make it alive. And this was just the beginning of what was a forty year journey to the promised land. And of course, even when they reached it, they found it already filled with Canaanites not exactly eager about turning their land over to this rag tag bunch of former slaves doing a Blues Brother imitation telling everyone they were on a mission from God. Sometimes it gets harder before it gets better- that's true for the Israelites, it was true for Jerri Nielson, who was rescued from the South Pole and taken to America

for an operation and to this day is still learning, and still very much alive. And, it's true for you and me in this time of Advent, too.

Friends, this season isn't always easy. I know that. Just admitting this might actually take some of the burden off us, I don't know. What I do know is that if we're going to make it through this time of preparation before receiving the true light of the world, Jesus Christ- we're all going to need smaller lights, little pillars of fire to keep us going. So I ask you this morning- where does this light come from for you? What are these pillars of cloud by day and pillars of fire by night? What is it that keeps you sane when you're feeling yourself pushed to the edge?

Beloved, may such pillars of fire and cloud protect you and warm you during these long, dark nights. May we all have enough light to keep us headed on right paths. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**