

A Journey Through The Lion's Den (And Other Stories)

Our theme this advent season is "Together on the Journey". There are a lot of journeys that we embark on in this life, physically, emotionally and spiritually. We might think of any of these when we reflect on life's journeys, and who is together with us on them.

SLIDE I encourage you to call up different memories of journeys for a moment.

You might think about the journeys you have gone on with family, friends and partners. The wonderful times you have spent chatting on a long walk, sharing what is happening with a coffee in hand. The time spent exploring a different country, looking amazedly at new sights and cultures. Maybe you think about a long jog, where the person with you is there to cheer you on and keep you going. The time spent driving in the car, maybe on a snowy day while you are encouraged to slow down, or speed up. Hiking trips, walks, jogs, bike rides, road trips, family vacations, we go on countless physical journeys together with others.

Our emotional journeys in this lifetime are often just as tangible as our physical journeys. We can all recall emotional journeys that life has thrown our way, and in most of those journeys, someone has joined us. The steadfast friend who never leaves while other relationships sour, become difficult, or dissolve. The loving spouse who holds us close in the midst of a difficult diagnosis. The sibling we commiserate with while grieving the loss of a loved one. Life is emotional and difficult, and thankfully we have people together with us as we traverse the mountains and valleys of life.

Finally there is the spiritual journey that we go on. For many of us it starts when we are just old enough to walk. When our parents read us Bible stories, said grace at meals and helped us pray before bed. Even though we are all part of the same church our spiritual journeys have probably taken different routes. There are people who join us on our spiritual journey. The professor who challenges your views on different subjects. The friend who listens intently while you ponder why bad things happen if God is good. The writer whose words give you nourishment and inspiration to keep believing in something bigger than this world.

This morning is all about journey's and who is with us on the journeys of life. Specifically, who is with us when our journeys take us to a low point.

SLIDE The story of Daniel in the Lion's Den, is a timeless tale. My mother has a home video of me playing Daniel in the Lion's Den, in which I stood on the arm of the couch and then bellyflopped onto the cushions as I was pushed down into the lions. It is an event that has grabbed the attention of countless people. Beyond being an example of standing up to an oppressive empire, Daniel in the Lion's Den communicates a powerful truth about God, a truth best communicated through storytelling. Our God is the God there in the pit. There in the scariest and most vulnerable time. Daniel's journey

from captive to royal official had roadblocks, none bigger than being thrown into a deep pit full of lions. God was there with Daniel.

Jesus had similar pit-experiences. His temptation, his betrayal, his crucifixion. From the earliest part of his life, Jesus' family had to journey to Egypt to escape oppression. Jesus was a refugee from a young age, forced to journey into a new place to escape. Daniel was captured and taken into a foreign land.

I thought it was interesting that the Lectionary put Daniel in the Lion's Den as part of the advent reading schedule. It seems a bit odd and unrelated to Christmas. As I was trying to make the connection between someone being thrown in a pit of lions, and the birth of a saviour of the world, I found two connections. The first being that both Daniel and Jesus were foreigners. People forced to leave home, Jesus as a refugee, and Daniel as a captive. The second being that in Jesus coming to earth, and God saving Daniel, it is apparent that God journeys with us into the lowest parts of life. On top of that, we worship a God who not only enters these spaces, but has experienced them personally, which is what we celebrate at Christmas when we think about Jesus' journey on earth. **SLIDE**

Every person goes on a journey in different ways, and I believe that our God cares about these journeys. That God is together with us on our journey. On a cosmic level, Jesus enters into humanity's journey when he is born. In our own lives, God shows up in our journeys, often through the people around us. Daniel in the Lion's Den represents the lowest of times, and this morning I would like to consider who is with us on our journeys at the lowest times. Who are we together on a journey with? I would like to tell three stories, of low points I have experienced on a physical journey, an emotional journey and a spiritual journey. I hope in sharing about those who have been with me on these journeys you can also reflect on how God shows up in the lows, and maybe inspire us as a congregation to enter into the journeys of others. So here are three stories about who showed up, in the low parts of my journeys in life. A physical journey, and emotional one, and a spiritual one. And since they are stories I gave them all fun names. **SLIDE**

The Tale of Geraldine Lakes

Many of you know I enjoy going hiking a lot. I try to go every year, and while this year I didn't make it to the mountains as intended, I still had a great hike in Northern Saskatchewan. This love of hiking started for me when I was about 12 years old, and my family went on our first overnight backpacking trip. We went to a place called Geraldine Lakes, and it was a very memorable journey. I think the best way to describe the trail is to say it is basically three large stairs. You walk along a lake, climb beside a waterfall, and scramble across a stream on some boulders. You just repeat the process a few times, and then you are at the top, camping beside a mountainous lake. We had a lot of fun going up, with no stress involved in our ascent on a mountainside with loose rocks. We were not scared running across the large boulders while it rained, though our

Mom was worried about an ankle being injured. We made it to our campsite and the next morning started our descent. When it came time to climb down the steep mountainside with the loose stones I froze. Going up was great, because I did not have to see how far I would slide, but when it came time to climb down, I started crying. My Mom and Dad comforted me, and my siblings were kind to me. On this physical journey I needed some encouragement, and my family gave it to me. We decided to bum scootch down the hill, and had fun doing so. A few years later, when I was graduated, I returned to the same spot, and I have a picture of it here. **SLIDE**

Sleeping on the Floor, Reading 'The Green Mile'

Life is also about the emotional journeys we embark on. In the first semester of my second year of college, the emotional journey I was on was chaotic to say the least. To keep things brief, I stretched myself too thin with extracurriculars and classes, I wasn't sleeping, and to end my semester I had a friendship dissolve, my Grandmother passed away, and I got a not great health diagnosis. I felt completely drained and exhausted. I came back to Saskatchewan for my three weeks of Christmas break, unsure if I could get myself back to Abbotsford at the end. As I tried to journey from exhaustion and sadness, to healing and stability, I had people on the journey with me. One of these people was my younger brother. I remember two things very distinctly from that Christmas break: The bad things that happened, and sleeping on the floor in my brother's room so I wouldn't be alone. Every night we played FIFA on his X Box and watched Friends before bed. I still wasn't sleeping much, so I stayed up long after he fell asleep, lying on a mat on the floor, reading the Green Mile and trying to process the sucker punch of emotions I felt. Coincidentally, I would consider The Green Mile one of my favourite books of all time, and one of four books that I have read more than once. I am forever grateful to my little brother for coming together on that journey with me- for being gentle and letting me have a sleepover like when we were kids, despite the fact that I was 19 years old. **SLIDE**

The Pondering Plumber

The final story I would like to tell is one of a spiritual journey. When I had to resign from a previous job at a church I was devastated. As strange as it is, I wanted to be a pastor for a long time, and it felt like something so solid in my life had fallen through. In the leadup to this moment, I felt that I had more questions than answers, and as a whole, my future and my faith felt unsteady. I thankfully had people join me on my spiritual journey, the main person being my wife Becca. She listened to a lot of questions and a lot of venting. She gently nudged me to attend church again after I needed a break. She more pushed than nudged me to consider looking at the job here at OMC. I am thankful that on my spiritual journey I have had Becca, and people like her in my life. People, who listen when I am confused, ponder with me when I have questions, and encourage me to keep learning and growing. It has been nice to find those things in my place of work, so I owe the church here a debt of gratitude. **SLIDE**

I hope that by telling these three stories of journeys that had low moments, you are able to reflect on the stories from your life where the journey got difficult. Where you found yourself in the pits. While not all of those stories have happy endings, I hope they have foundational memories embedded within them. Memories of who joined you on the journey.

As we move through advent, we are reminded that God is Together on the Journey with us. That happens in a lot of different ways. God joined the journey of a foreigner by having the mouths of lions shut while they were at their lowest. God joins the journey of humanity by becoming human themselves, embracing the highs and lows of this life. God joins the journey by putting the right people in our life. It is our job to journey together, through the lowest pits, and the highest mountains, as our saviour did. Amen.