

March 6, 2022 – The First Sunday in Lent | The Sunday of our 352nd Annual Meeting

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

WILDERNESS COMPANIONS: Returning, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor based on Matthew 4. 1-11

After Jesus' trials in the wilderness, after his terrible ordeal, we are given a revealing glimpse into the ways of heaven.

Immediately upon the completion of his trials, angels swoosh down from their celestial abode, companion Jesus in the wilderness, and minister to him.

It is a sweet scene: this feathered alighting, this invasion of angels, this heavenly rescue party.

Different biblical translations report this scene variously as the angels ministered to Jesus, or took care of him, or arrived to serve him, or helped and attended him, or waited on him.

And here we thought Jesus was all alone out there in the wilderness. We thought he was isolated, unaided, and unaccompanied. Turns out, what had felt like a Godforsaken wilderness, wasn't Godforsaken at all. God, and a bunch of angels, were there all along. We couldn't see them... but they were there. They were in the stands as it were, cheering Jesus on, praying and rooting for him as he endured his ordeal. Jesus was never alone. Somebody say: *Thank you, God!*

And, that's the thing about God and us. About God in heaven and we here on earth. To us the veil between the two realms, between earth and heaven, can feel like an iron curtain; can feel impenetrable.

But it's not impenetrable for God. God, and God's emissaries – angels and the like – they swoosh and flit back and forth between the realms at will. They are never far from us. They are always looking out for us. They are cheering and rooting us on. Which is to say: You are never alone. You cannot go where God is not.

Repeat after me: I cannot go where God is not. (*I cannot go where God is not.*) Repeat after me: God is here, there, and everywhere. (*God is here, there, and everywhere.*)

There's something more to note about this heavenly rescue party, this flock of angels: their timing. They arrive before Jesus returns to the world of people. Before his reentry into civilization.

You see, reentry, for anyone returning from a harrowing ordeal, is fraught, is tricky. The person who survives the ordeal is changed from the person who entered it. And the world they reenter – the world of family, of work, and relationships – that world has changed too.

The US military knows this. They have learned the hard way that those who return from military deployment often struggle. The ordeals they endure during deployment are hard, intense – life and death hard; life and death intense – but returning, reentering is hard too and things can go sideways. Soldiers returning from deployment are apt to make poor decisions. Back in civvies, bereft of a clear mission, with no one barking orders at them, they too often struggle to regain their footing, to find their place. They can get crosswise with their significant other. The ordeal of deployment changes them.

Lieutenant Colonel Adria Horn is a US Army veteran who deployed overseas five times (Iraq, Afghanistan, Philippines, and Indonesia). Colonel Horn compares military deployment to the intensity of having been under assault, under attack by the Novel Coronavirus. Both are trials, ordeals to endure; both are wilderness experiences.

During Covid, some of you were deployed to your homes and you have hardly left them. Others were deployed to the front lines and witnessed terrible things. Students, severed from their peers, were deployed to their bedrooms, where screens became classrooms. Routines were uprooted, cohesive social networks have been disrupted. Parents of little ones have been asked to do the impossible. We are not the same people who entered the wilderness of Covid, who have endured the ordeal. We're not. We've changed. The world to which we are hoping to return has changed too.

Colonel Horn warns that returning home from Covid – as we are all aching to do – is harder, trickier, more complicated and fraught than we would like to imagine it might be. In her case, between her deployments and reentry, she was ministered to by a flock of angels in the guise of a military chaplain (God bless military chaplains); a chaplain, moreover, with a PowerPoint presentation. In his presentation, the chaplain warned of the hazards of reentry after the ordeal of deployment: friction in relationships, poor choices in spending money, depression, drug or alcohol abuse, a too high tolerance for risk taking.

All of you, each of you, each in different ways – have been through a traumatic experience: two years of Covid-deployment. We've survived a world-wide collective trauma. A wilderness experience. A grueling ordeal. A terrible trial.

As you take up the work of reentry, we are here to minister to you.

Weekly, twice a week, we will prepare a table for you: holy food and holy drink, a God suffused meal for your profound hunger.

We have candles to light against the world's darkness; flames to honor all that was lost during Covid: the people taken from us, and also the graduations, the ceremonies, the travel and holidays taken by the pandemic.

We have sacred music by which to honor the shining beauty of God's holiness; music as respite for your ears, and respite for God's ears, from the cacophony of the world. We have sacred

hymns by which you incarnate the beauty of holiness by taking theology into your mouths, onto your lips, and into your lungs.

We have small groups to companion you, monthly Healing Worship to restore you; and, if it helps, opportunities to lose yourself, to forget yourself and your troubles, by doing for others.

We have symbols to remind you, that no matter how difficult the ordeal, you are never alone. This is our faith.

Among those symbols is the Latin quote carved into stone in our Portico: *Qui Transtulit Sustinet*. The God who brought us here, continues to sustain us. Somebody say: *Thank you, God!* Such is the faith of this ancient Christian church.

Across 352 years, this church has endured its share of trials and ordeal; it has known wilderness and testing:

The God who saw us through the terrifying months of the so called “witch trials”, continues to sustain us.

The God who companioned us through the Siege of Boston, when royal soldiers seized our meeting house, profaned it and damaged it, while confiscating the homes of members, sustains us still.

The God who saw us through agonizing outbreaks of measles and small pocks, the Spanish flu, and the Novel Coronavirus, this God continues to sustain us.

The God who companioned this church through slavery and into abolition, through the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement; and who companions us even now in this Third Reconstruction, sustains us still.

Qui Transtulit Sustinet. The God who has companioned us through every wilderness, every trial and ordeal, continues to sustain us. This is our faith.

Repeat after me: I cannot go where God is not. (*I cannot go where God is not.*) Repeat after me: God is here, there, and everywhere. (*God is here, there, and everywhere.*)

I have news for you – you who have known trial and ordeal – God is sending a rescue party, an invasion of angels. As it happens, God is on your side and by your side, cheering you on.