

The Rev. Kate Byrd  
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## The Good Life

One of Yale University's most popular courses is entitled "Life Worth Living." Coming out of the School of Divinity, the course is led by professors Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, and Ryan McAnnally-Linz. Who recently turned their sell out course into a book, by the same name. Looking "around the world and across human history" to various faiths, historical figures, even popular taglines or slogans these professors seek to answer some of our most pressing questions like: Who do we answer to? Or, How does a good life feel? All in order to discover what a Life Worth Living is all about. My favorite answer, addressing "who do we answer to?" might have to be what they entitled "Smokey Responsibility." You know "smokey the bear?" Who could be spotted Saturday mornings during the commercial breaks between cartoons, or on billboards lining the side of highways. Dawning his iconic dungarees and Forest Ranger hat, pointing his big grizzly paw right in our chest, alerting us to the fact that, "only YOU can prevent forest fires." Until 2001 that is, (note to all you children out there who may not remember) when we moved to "Wildfires," being sure to include the grasslands as well. Either way, the point was, and is, it's ONLY YOU, there's agency. Now, this is not to say that YOU are the only one who can prevent wildfires. But, as our authors state, "[we do] have an inalienable responsibility for [our] life, choices, and actions. Including, as it turns out, whether or not [we] properly extinguish [our] campfire[s]. [Because] even if [we] tried to give this responsibility away, that would still be a way of exercising it." There's also the thing about the forest, the scope of our responsibility. And, there's Smokey, the big grizzly bear, representing the authoritative source of our responsibility. And so as Volf, Croasmun, and McAnnally-Linz argue, this is the kind of responsibility we are all called to in life. Whether we realize it or not. We all have Smokey Responsibility, as it requires agency, scope, and an authoritative source.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, we find John the Baptist out in the wilderness, much like "Smokey The Bear", pointing his grizzly paw right into our chest. As he makes his call for repentance, proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. It is interesting to note that first, on this Second Sunday in Advent, as always, we are called out in the wilderness, to prepare for the Christ, who was and is and is to come. And second, as we find ourselves now in Year B of our Lectionary, we are beginning to make our way through the Gospel of Mark. As such, we would do well to note that this passage, beginning at chapter 1 verse 1, is the entirety of Mark's Christmas Story. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." While it may not sound like the Christmas stories we are most familiar with, it still makes way for the coming of Christ. As we hear John the Baptist proclaiming from the Wilderness, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals." Begging us to consider why John's call for repentance and Mark's message of good news comes to us from the wilderness, especially now in the midst of the most civilized, tinsel covered, traditionally devout time of year.

As Volf, Croasmun, and McAnnally-Linz go on they look further into what a Life Worth Living actually is, asking the question, "How does the good life feel?" Because, even if the question sounds strange, I mean would should all know what a good life feels like? It feels good! Right?! There may be more to it than that. Living into the good life might just be more than just what feels good, or right, or even pleasurable.

To answer the question at hand, our author's looked to historical figures, like Jeremy Bentham, the father of utilitarianism. A Buddhist nun, named Subha who gouged out her eye in order to stay the path, and demonstrate her own detachment from pleasure and pain. And, finally Oscar Wilde, the 19th c Irish poet and playwright, well known for both his writings and his criminal activity. Here, from the damp, dark, misery of his jail cell our authors discover the true wisdom that Wilde desired to impart. As he wrote, to his companion Douglas, his regret for getting caught up in the senselessness of ultimate pleasure. Noting

how they had wasted away their days becoming caught up in the luxury of three-hour meals and endless bottles of champagne. Not that Wilde regretted “for a single moment having lived for pleasure.” Because, as he argued, “I did it to the full as one should do everything that one does.” But, as Wilde noted, he did regret the fact that his pursuit of pleasure ultimately led him to ignore and avoid sorrow. Because, while the pursuit of pleasure is not wrong, it is dangerous to the extent at which it can cut us off or blind us from sorrow, which Wilde argues is the supreme human emotion.

I have been contemplating why it is that we are called to the wilderness each and every year, on our second Sunday in Advent? Not at the beginning, nor at the end, but in the midst of this, for the most part, season of merriment and joy. Between Christmas parades, holiday parties, present wrapping, and tree trimming, why are we always confronted by that camel hair wearing, locust and honey eating, fanatic from the wilderness. The one who calls us to make our paths straight, repent of our sins, and wander out into the desert to be cleansed. All in an effort to prepare and make way for the one who is to come. The one who will baptize, not simply with the cleansing power of water, but with the all consuming power of fire and the holy spirit.

As the easy, successful life Wilde had come accustomed to came crashing down, he “surveyed the wreckage from his prison cell,” and saw what he was never able to see before. “He saw a deep suffering” which runs through life, and the world. A suffering that we cannot, however hard we may try, avoid or get rid of. Because, as our authors argue, “life is shot through with disappointments, failures, broken relationships, unintended injuries.” And here the appropriate and more so the holy response might just be sorrow, because this supreme emotion allows us to become in touch with the suffering that courses through our world, in turn allowing us the ability more fully to connect to one another, to ourselves, and to the Divine. As Wilde writes, “you came to me to learn the pleasure of life and the pleasure of art. Perhaps I am chosen to teach you something much more wonderful—the meaning of sorrow and its beauty.” Of course “Wilde never says that sorrow is pleasant.” We know that it does not feel good. But, it is, he argues, wonderful. Because, for Wilde, the answer to the question of what a good life feels like is “whatever is true to life in all its splendor, all its suffering, and everything in between.”

The wilderness is different for everyone, for Wilde it was a jail cell, painful for sure, but also enlightening and life changing ultimately. For me it might be this holiday season, missing my mother, knowing my memories of her, which bring me joy in their beauty also hold pain in her absence. There are many ways we find the wilderness in our lives, for some of us we stumble upon it without meaning too. For others, we wander out hesitant but knowing there is something more waiting to be discovered. And, then there are those of us who are drug out kicking and screaming. Because, the wilderness is dangerous, untamed, and most certainly unpredictable. But, it is also beautiful, healing, and most assuredly holy. More so, as we find in our passage from Mark, it is a space where we are called to by the Divine. To find forgiveness, healing, and something of the holy. A space where we can feel life in its entirety, in all its pleasure and all its sorrow, in order that we might respond with the (what I would argue) is the ultimate human emotion, LOVE. So, as we find ourselves in the midst of the bright twinkling lights, the shiny new presents, and the merry good spirits, how might we find time to lean into the wilderness discovering what this season is truly all about, the Divine love made human, the birth of the Christ Child. Who gathers together this one human family. Who will bring about salvation, for us as individuals yes, even more so though for the world. Who will always be by our side as we wander, if just for a moment, into the untamed places of this earth and ourselves. So that we might find, if just for a moment, the holy, the healing, the salvation that lies in the midst of the wild, the untamed, and the unpredictable reality of this world. The wilderness is calling, I hope to see you out there!