

Chapel Talk  
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It is indeed a beautiful experience to watch the community slowly emerge and come together for spring at St. Andrew's.

I appreciate all that you and your families have done to assure a safe and healthy opening to this term. And of course, I look forward to the learning, friendship, creativity, and love this community will inspire in the coming three months.

Over the past few days, I have been thinking about our friend and colleague Phil Pensinger, who died of cancer last week. As I thought about this remarkable man, I realized that Phil's battle with cancer had strengthened his already abundant love of humanity, generosity of spirit, kindness, and faith. The more he suffered and endured, the greater his love, dignity, and humanity became. This was exactly how he triumphed over death.

Last Sunday, I listened to a sermon delivered by Reverend Becca Stevens at her home chapel at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. As she explored the powerful reading of Jesus' experience in the wilderness after his baptism, I realized she was eloquently exploring a dynamic and life affirming role of suffering, kindness, and desolation in our lives. And I imagined Becca Stevens was talking about Phil Pensinger and encouraging us to experience the wilderness and then emerge with new understanding, empathy, and intention.

Becca Stevens explored that in order for a saint to enact their calling in the world, they must undergo a traumatic period of isolation, fear, and solitude. She observes that before Jesus could preach, teach, and minister to the world and its poor, despised, and dispossessed people, he had to start alone, solitary, silent, and desolate. He emerged from the wilderness with an open and compassionate heart and an overflowing spirit of generosity and empathy.

We have dedicated our year at St. Andrew's to the spirit, legacy, and example of John Lewis, whose wilderness was found and experienced at the base of the Pettus Bridge--his response to that experience was to endure and fight even harder for justice and empathy in the world.

“I was bleeding badly. My head was exploding with pain. That brief sweet sense of just waiting to lie there was gone. I needed to get up. I’d faded out for I don’t know how long, but now I was tuned back in.”

It is my hope that you and your families’ descent into the wilderness of the pandemic has spared you the agony, suffering, and pain of over half a million people in this country and over two million people in the world.

But if we possess open hearts, open minds, and an open spirit, we can imagine the wilderness of COVID-19 in all its painful and searing reality. And of course, we can remember and experience daily the smaller sacrifices we have to make because of the pandemic: change in routine, loss of privileges, loss of freedom and autonomy.

My question today for St. Andrew’s is twofold.

1. Does your St. Andrew’s experience prepare you to confront, experience, and emerge from the wilderness of life?
2. When you emerge from the wilderness, (large or small) what are you going to do with your new found understanding of love, life, humanity, suffering, and inequality? How will your consciousness or experience of the wilderness change you?

Now the wilderness can be tied to your decision to live a life of proximity--experiencing life, serving communities, honoring people who are vulnerable, despaired, and neglected. The wilderness can be suffering from a virulent illness or nursing a loved one through the pain of a disease; or confronting the loss of a beloved family member or friend; or experiencing ridicule, bullying, cruelty at the hands of bitter people; the wilderness can be the deferral or denial of a dream or a goal you have worked so hard to achieve; the wilderness may be the experience of being denied for employment, publication, enrollment in a graduate program. The wilderness can be the moment when you realize that the world has tricked you, mistreated you, asked you to believe in things that are wrong, unethical, intolerant, and cruel.

But since the wilderness is life’s best classroom we can emerge with new confidence, new vision, new intention, and new humanity.

This awakening is what I look forward to witnessing this spring.