

Choosing to Climb with God

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While a man was dying, his wife was maintaining a candlelight vigil by his side. She held his fragile hand, tears running down her face. Her praying woke him from his slumber. He looked up, and his pale lips began to move slightly. "My darling," he whispered. "Hush, my love," she said. "Rest, don't talk." He was insistent. "I have something that I must confess," he said in a tired voice. "There isn't anything to confess," replied his weeping wife. "Everything's ok. Go to sleep." The man blurted out: "No, no, I must die in peace. I...I slept with your sister, your best friend, her best friend, and your mother!" "I know," whispered his wife, "that's why I poisoned you."

Today's Gospel is a story about two parades, two groups of people traveling in opposite directions; one toward death and the other toward life. Those listening to Luke's story would have been familiar with the following from I Kings in the Hebrew scriptures. **The story from 1 Kings takes place during the course of a three-year drought in which the Lord told Elijah to go to Sidon, where a widow would provide food for him.** Widows had a rough time in the ancient world. Women whose husbands had died had no inheritance rights and were dependent upon other family or the charity of the community for survival. When Elijah arrived, the woman revealed that she had only enough oil and flour to prepare a final meal for her son and herself. Elijah told her not to be afraid to prepare the food, as the provisions she had would supply her until the end of the drought. The widow did as Elijah requested, as uncomfortable and insecure as it made her feel, and indeed, the store of meal and oil lasted as Elijah had promised. **By responding to the request of Elijah, the widow had put her own life as well as that of her son at risk; but in doing so, her life was transformed, changed forever.** However, Elijah's promise was put in danger when the widow's son fell ill and died. Elijah, remembering the risk the mother had taken on his behalf, took the child and laid him on his own bed. As he stretched over the child's body, he prayed to the Lord to "let this child's life come into him again." And the child's breath returned.

In Luke's Gospel, we have a variation of this same story. A young man has died leaving his mother vulnerable to poverty and starvation. The family and friends of this young man are slowly processing to an open grave. Along the way, they encounter Jesus who, with his friends, are going in the opposite direction. Two groups of people, two parades, two different paths traveling in opposite directions. **I suggest today's Gospel is a metaphor of life, life in which we must choose in which parade we will march, which path we will walk.** We must consciously choose to walk either toward life, toward that which is life-giving, or the path of death. **How may we tell the difference?** The path toward abundant life is characterized by **two qualities:** (1) a willingness to embrace of risk & adventure and (2) a commitment to live ethically, to live in & through the love of God.

Americans today are obsessed with obtaining as much comfort and security as possible and yet, the more we play it safe, the more we build protective fences around ourselves, the more we demand to be free of all pain and discomfort, the smaller and more fearful our lives become. Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* tells the following **mythical story about a girl from the Arapaho tribe.** "She spied a porcupine near a cottonwood tree. She tried to hit the animal, but it ran behind the tree and began to climb. The girl started after to catch it, but it continued just out of reach. 'Well,' she said, 'I am climbing to catch the porcupine, for I want those quills, and if necessary I will go to the top!' The porcupine reached the top of the tree, but as she approached and was about to lay hands on it, the cottonwood tree suddenly lengthened, and the porcupine resumed his climb. Looking down, she saw her friends craning up at her and beckoning her to descend; but having

passed under the influence of the porcupine, and fearful of the great distance between herself and the ground, she continued to mount the tree, until she became the merest speck to those looking from below, and with the porcupine she finally reached the sky."

This is a native story about the path toward abundant life. The girl is you and me. The tree she chooses to climb symbolizes the path toward a life worth living, a full life, a satisfying life. The porcupine represents **the sacred herald of adventure** who comes into our lives to ask us to face those aspects of ourselves, our fears and selfishness, we carry within and seek to deny. The sharp quills symbolize the uncomfortable truths and painful realities about ourselves which, when faced and only when faced, can bring us healing. The Arapaho girl knows the quills are sharp and painful to the touch and yet, with all her might, she pursues them. Why? She pursues them because she knows comfort and playing it always safe can never make her whole. Rather than running away from difficulty, with all its messiness and unpredictability, she labors to engage those sharp and unpleasant realities which hold the secret to an abundant life. Rather than running away from herself, she turns to face her own places of weaknesses and woundedness. **In other words, if the girl had encountered the two parades in today's Gospel, she would have gotten into the one with Jesus knowing full well that in doing so, she would be required to face her most powerful fears and most deeply entrenched defects of character.** "Do one thing every day that scares you," Eleanor Roosevelt once said. On the other side of that fear, opportunity awaits.

But the path toward the abundant life is not only about "reaching for the sky" in the secular sense. It's not only about facing one's personal fears or climbing the tallest tree in the woods. That's only half of the story. **Elijah's widow teaches the other half.** There was a point in her life when she was asked to give more than reason and calculation said she could. By any human measurement, she had just enough food in the house for one last meal, one last meal before starvation would enter her home and occupy the living room. In that moment of felt scarcity, of perceived shortage and no doubt great anxiety, the representative of God shows up and says, "I'm hungry. Give me something to eat. Prepare a meal for me and you, and trust me when I tell you, the shortage you are so worried about is only a perception within the human mind. Give generously out of the tiny bit you think you have and you will discover the truth, the truth of God's abundance. Trust in God and you will be made whole."

It is not uncommon for Americans to be very successful in the eyes of the world, to reach for the sky, to climb the tallest tree in the woods and yet feel empty, sad and dissatisfied with life. If the first half of the path to abundant life is the overcoming of our lust for comfort and security, the second is overcoming them in partnership with God. **Climb the tree, yes, but climb it with a conscious awareness of and deep love for the God of Jesus,** the God who lives in and through and all around you. Fall in love with the one who loves you. Live a God-directed life of virtue and ethical conduct. Live for others. **Our egos can never be big nor full enough** to bring wholeness and joy. Give your love away generously for the sake of others and do it for no other reason than your love for God. **Reach for the sky with God as your lover and lord** and you will find what you aspire to obtain, a life worth living, an abundant life. AMEN.