

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent: Joshua 5:9-12 & Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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I know this is asking a lot, but if you can grab about three minutes of free time, I suggest you pull up a video on YouTube. It's called "Extreme Happiness." Now, I know extreme happiness may sound like an odd thing to bring up in Lent, but I promise you, it fits. The video is of a bearded Norwegian adventurer named Aleksander Gamme. Back in 2011, Aleksander became the first person to solo hike from the coast of Antarctica to the South Pole and back again. It took him three months to make the trek, and on the way in, he'd stop every 200 kilometers or so to bury supplies for the return trip. He needed to lighten his load, you see, and every ounce mattered.

The video picks up on Day 86 as Aleksander stops at his last cache. He buried whatever he buried there months before and completely forgot what he'd left himself eighty-some-odd days earlier. By this point, he was exhausted, hungry, and 55 pounds skinnier. He digs down, opens his bag, and says to the empty, white terrain, "Oh, I hope it's something good." And the cache is, well, it's disappointing. There's a tub of vaseline, some ointment, a bunch of things he could probably use, but nothing terribly exciting. But he keeps digging, and suddenly, Aleksander lets out a long, ecstatic scream, high-pitched and primal and, for the viewer, hilariously endearing. Holding the camera in one hand, he shows us what treasure he's found: a double-pack bag of cheese doodles. He's so excited, he can't contain himself, and he keeps screaming, finally throwing the bag in the air in a fit of ecstasy. And he keeps on digging, and the joyful screams continue as he uncovers gummies, mentos, and a massive bar of chocolate. Finally, he sort of freezes in place and stares off into the frozen distance, wondering to himself, "Did that really happen? Is this real?" But there he sits, alone in the Antarctic plains, utterly content. In an interview later, laughing about that moment, he asks the listeners, "When did you shout last time you were so happy?"

Now, I know it's no Antarctica, but when the people of Israel are standing in the Plains of Jericho, after years of wandering in the desert, their leader only recently departed, they're finally there, ready to pass into the Promised Land for the first time. Egypt is long behind them, and God's promise is always there, though often they've forgotten what God leaves for them in the desert. Manna was good and life-sustaining, but finally, finally they set foot in their new home and eat their first real meal in generations. I gotta imagine they felt something like Aleksander's joy.

And the Prodigal Son, he's gone off into his own wilderness, a wilderness of waste, the Plains of Dissolute Living. His journey is long, and it's hard. It's hard in a number of ways, but I'm guessing it's mostly hard 'cause he knows he ended up in this desert through his own mistakes. And now he's gotta go home and admit all that. Now the father, in his mind, he's already buried his son, assumed him dead or worse off in some foreign land. But when he catches a glimpse of that same son, alive and finally coming home, he runs to hold him again. And I gotta imagine they both felt something like Aleksander's joy.

Lent is such a counter-intuitive season, especially when we think of all this joy and contentment and shouting happiness. I don't know about y'all, but the way I grew up, Lent was supposed to be a tough time, and the awful-er you felt, the better you were at observing it. But something different's clicked about Lent this year. Since I was little and trudging through Lent on the way to Easter, I've always understood this season to be about suppressing joy in favor of purging something. But I think I've been getting it wrong. Purgation and wilderness, that's just what life is much of the time. Lent doesn't have the patent on suffering. Suffering happens year-round. But what Lent does have, is a special focus. Leanin' in where loss happens, leanin' in

because we trust God is there, leanin' in when our stores have run out and it feels like there's nothing but waste around us.

There's something about embracing those extraordinarily difficult places that throws the tomb open wide for our joy. In Don Quixote, the sidekick Sancho Panza says, "Hunger is the best gravy." There's a longing in loss that makes reunion -- whether with a lost son, a bag of cheese doodles, or the Risen Christ -- there's a longing in loss that makes reunion so much sweeter. And that's Lent, a journey of unknowns leading us to that once-buried cache of extreme happiness. Sometimes we forget what's been left for us, but it's there, waiting for us to find it again. And when we do, often we're struck like Aleksander, staring frozen into the distance wondering if all that really just happened. But there we'll sit, on the other side of the Jordan, on the other side of forgiveness, on the other side of Easter, there we'll sit, utterly content.