

Sermon: If Your Life Were a Book
Text: Matthew 4:1-11
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Context: WWPC
First Sunday of Lent
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Matthew 4:1

“If your life were a book and you were the author, how would you like your story to go?”

That is the question with which Amy Purdy, a professional snowboarder and -- note this well -- a double amputee, opens her absolutely riveting TED Talk.*

We will come back to Ms. Purdy’s story in just a moment. But first I want to pause and briefly ponder how we think Jesus might have answered that question.

Jesus, if you are indeed the Word made flesh, the Incarnate Emissary of God, how would you like your story to go?

Of course it’s impossible to know how Jesus might have answered that question. But I think it’s reasonable to suppose that it would not include a sudden and decidedly unpleasant sojourn in the wilderness

And yet he might not have had a choice. Because if your story is going to matter, if people are going to listen to it, or read it, or be inspired by it, these wilderness journeys are apparently essential and inescapable.

The English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor was perhaps the first person to understand this. In 1871 Tylor launched the study of what he called “hero myth narratives”.

This new vein of scholarship was inspired by Tylor’s insight that, really, from the day stories first started to be told, every hero essentially experienced a similar arc: some kind of sojourn out into strange and unfamiliar territory, there to face down an adversary in service of becoming themselves and fulfilling their destiny.

Thinkers from a broad array of disciplines quickly followed in Tyler's wake and expanded this field of study: the Freudian psychoanalyst, Otto Rank, for example, followed by his more famous contemporary, Carl Jung.

In fact, Jung famously identified the hero's journey as a psychological archetype, recurring in all major religious and literary traditions.

But it was the American academic, Joseph Campbell, who popularized this idea, and brought it to the attention of scholars and readers on this side of the Atlantic.

In his spectacularly successful and seminal book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he writes:

"A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (pg. 23).

If your story is going to matter, if people are going to read it, or listen to it, or be inspired by it, that story is going to have a chapter in it like the one we just read: a journey out into the wilderness and there to face down an adversary.

It's worth pointing out that Jesus was not the first figure in the Bible to have this experience. Think Moses sent to Egypt to face down Pharaoh. Think David sent out to the plains of Elah to confront Goliath. Think Daniel, marooned in the lion's den, waiting to face down Nebuchadnezzar.

But turn the page from one testament to the other, and now it's Jesus's turn.

In the story that immediately precedes today's text, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan. God takes care to make sure everyone understands that the person he just baptized is special: "The is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased" a voice booms from heaven.

And moments later he is driven out into the wilderness, not by personal circumstance or political necessity, but by God's own spirit. And there, as Anne helped bring to life for us earlier, his identity is put to the test in a series of temptations presented to him by the devil.

Which brings us back to Amy Purdy. She was not driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit but she knows what it is to have her identity tested. She knows the hero's journey well. It is the story of her life

She grew up in the hot desert around Las Vegas, dreaming of living in a place where it snows.

The day after she graduated from high school, she moved up into the high mountains and trained as a massage therapist.

At the age of nineteen, with her training complete, she was suddenly free to devote herself to her true passion: riding her snowboard in the deepest powder she could find.

She was happy and free, and all was perfect in her world. Until the wilderness came to her. As she tells it, one day she left work early, thinking she had the flu.

Less than 24 hours later she was in the hospital, fighting for her life. She had contracted bacterial meningitis and now had less than a two percent chance of surviving this aggressive blood infection.

Over the course of the next several months she lost her spleen, her kidneys, the hearing in her left ear and, crucially for a snowboarder, she also lost both of her legs below her knees.

But she survived. When she was strong enough to get out of bed, orthopedic specialists came in and fitted her with new legs.

This was not a mountaintop experience. She tells it this way:

[My new] calves were bulky blocks of metal with pipes bolted together for the ankles and a yellow rubber foot with a raised rubber line from the toe to the ankle to look like a vein. I didn't know what to expect, but I wasn't expecting that.

She felt broken and defeated, lost in the wilderness. It was at this moment that she asked herself that life-defining question: If my life were a book and I were the author, how would I want the story to go?

She knew that in order to move forward, she had to let go of the old Amy and learn to embrace the new Amy.

But it wasn't all bad, or hard. There was an upside. As she tells it:

That is when it dawned on me that I didn't have to be five-foot-five anymore. I could be as tall as I wanted! Or as short as I wanted, depending on who I was dating. And if I snowboarded again, my feet aren't going to get cold.

Once out of bed she quickly began to get better and she worked hard on her physical therapy. Apparently very hard.

Again, I'll let her tell it:

Four months later I was back up on a snowboard, although things didn't go quite as expected: My knees and my ankles wouldn't bend and at one point I traumatized all the skiers on the chair lift when I fell and my legs, still attached to my snowboard went flying down the mountain (without me).

She was discouraged, no doubt about it. But she was just sure that if she could only find the right pair of calves and feet that she would be able to resume her life and that she would someday ride her board again at a high level.

And this is when she learned that, *our borders and our obstacles can only do two things: one, stop us in our tracks or two, force us to get creative.*

She began to dream about once again being a world-class snowboarder. She found a leg-maker (there are such things), and together they designed and built her a new set of calves and feet.

She is living proof that if you can dream it you can do it. Because today Amy Purdy is the highest ranked female adaptive snowboarder in the world.

Here's how she summarizes the whole experience:

Eleven years ago, when I lost my legs, I had no idea what to expect. But if you ask me today, if I would ever want to change my situation, I would have to say no. Because my legs haven't disabled me, if anything they've enabled me.

They've forced me to rely on my imagination and to believe in the possibilities, and that's why I believe that our imaginations can be used as tools for breaking

through borders, because in our minds, we can do anything and we can be anything.

It's believing in those dreams and facing our fears head-on that allows us to live our lives beyond our limits. I've learned that borders are where the actual ends, but also where the imagination and the story begins.

Amy's journey past the borders of what is comfortable and known and familiar tested her identity to the limit. But the experience transformed her.

And now it's our turn. On this first Sunday of Lent the Spirit invites us to journey with Jesus out into the wilderness, out beyond the borders of what is comfortable and known and familiar.

You may find this idea to be a little contrived. After all, Lent is a liturgical tradition. It is not your real life.

And you may not feel like you need any time in the wilderness, thank you very much. Or perhaps you're not interested in having your identity tested, or in living out a story that will endure, and that will inspire other people

I understand all of that. If that's how you feel, that is entirely reasonable.

On the other hand, it's also possible that you're already there. Perhaps....

Perhaps it feels a little bit like you're lost in the middle of a parched desert.

Perhaps you feel like you're marooned in a lion's den of grief or anxiety.

Perhaps you feel like you're bumping up against your own self-imposed boundaries and you need to push through them to be who you are meant to be.

So now we're going to take a moment to observe a period of silence together. And while we do that, I invite you to listen to what God's Spirit might be saying to you.

* *Living Beyond Limits:* www.ted.com/talks/amy_purdy_living_beyond_limits