

A Walk in the Woods

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:6-7).

I grew up near a patch of woods, where I spent lots of time until I went off to college, so the woods have always been my favorite setting in the world. I love the peacefulness, the endless combinations of plants and animals, the way the light slants through the trees and plays on all the forms of life in the forest.

In my college and divinity school days I had occasion to hike up two modest mountains: Monadnock in New Hampshire and Katahdin in Maine, where the summit is almost exactly a mile above sea level. Part of the path up the mountains involves long stretches of woods, and I've always thought of those long wooded walks as a kind of metaphor, so I thought I'd share that image with you this morning as a little meditation before we all receive communion together.

The most obvious thing about hiking up a mountain is that it's hard work. It takes a lot of effort. You can get tired quickly, and the great temptation all along the way is simply to quit. We human beings are always tempted to do the easy thing, and that's as true in matters of faith as it is in work, or in our personal relationships or our public life together. There are always voices telling us we can have more for less, and those voices are tempting, especially when we're tired and just want a little rest.

Then again, when you're walking in the woods you can rarely see very far ahead. The final destination is a long way off, and most of the time you can't even see it, so you

tend to focus on whatever is in front of you. You pay attention to the next log to climb over, the next rock not to slip and slide on, the next little creek to cross without falling in. And if the trail leads uphill, it's easy to lose perspective. It's not just that you can't see the forest for the trees. You start to wonder why you're in the forest at all, when you could be home doing any number of things that require a lot less effort.

Sometimes the trails are well marked, and sometimes they're not. On a good trail, people have gone before to show you the way, but even when the path is well-marked, you have to trust that it will take you where you want to go. It's an act of faith that the trail will lead you to top, but you still have to do the hard work of climbing yourself.

Once in a while, though, if you're climbing up a mountain, there are places where you come to the edge of the woods, and you can look out over the landscape below. Those are great moments, because that's when you see how far you've come. You take off your backpack and sit on a rock and look down on where you were before. You can see so much more from here, and that sense of progress helps to keep you going.

I mention the backpack because experienced hikers know that it helps to travel light. Novices pack all sorts of stuff they think they'll need, but the farther you walk and the higher you climb, the heavier all that extra stuff feels, and the more it wears you out to be carrying it. After a while you realize that the best way to make it up the mountain is to leave all those unnecessary things behind.

And it helps if you have people to share the journey with you. Some hikers are more experienced than others, and they can give you tips on how to get around the obstacles. Some of them can also point out the subtler beauties of the woods, things you might have missed if you spent all your time focused on the challenges in front of you. And in any case, hiking companions make the trip more fun, and encourage one another all along the path.

In all these ways and more, the spiritual life feels to me like a long walk in the woods on our way up the mountain. There are interesting things to see along the way, especially if you know what to look for, and every so often you come to a place where you can look out over the edge and see how far you've come. But still, it's work, and if you're going to get to the top you need to keep on walking—even when you can't see the destination, even when you're tired and the whole journey feels like just one more obstacle after another.

But St. Paul says, "We do not lose heart." People are tempted to lose heart for all sorts of reasons: frustrations, disappointments, illnesses, obstacles of all kinds across the path, and the sheer energy it takes to keep on climbing. But Paul says, "We do not lose heart because, though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." Little by little, the Spirit of God sustains us in our progress up the mountain. And the more obstacles we've faced and found our way around, the more we know how to do that, the less intimidating they become, and the stronger we grow.

Then, as we get higher up the mountain, we catch a glimpse of the summit from time to time, and though we're not there yet, it's closer now than it was before, and so we want to keep on climbing. We come to an overlook now and then, and the view is so much more beautiful from here; and we know that when we get to where we're going, it will be more beautiful still.

Finally, at long last, we will make it to the top, and then what Paul told us about the journey will turn out to be true. All those long stretches in the woods when we couldn't see where we were going, and we were tempted to give up—all of that will be behind us now. Then our struggles will become just a memory, the stuff that stories are made of, and what in retrospect appears to have been a "slight momentary affliction" will in fact have prepared us for an eternal weight of glory.

Walking by faith and not by sight, and learning to see what matters along the way, is a major theme in the Bible. So Jesus heals a blind man, and for a little while the man's vision is still pretty poor. "I can see people," he says, "but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus lays his hands on the man and looks intently into his recovering eyes, until the man can look out again and see everything clearly himself. He walked by faith until Jesus healed him, and then he could learn to walk by sight.

Almost always, in the gospels, when someone has a physical healing, there's a spiritual healing that goes along with it, and learning to see what really matters is one of the ways people are healed most clearly in this life. It's no coincidence that, as Mark tells the story, this blind man's

healing comes right before Jesus asks his followers, “Who do people say that I am?” Which is another way of asking, Who really sees? Who is ready to follow Jesus, and walk by faith, all the way to the kingdom of heaven?

Peter sees it first. He says, “You are the Messiah!” He catches a glimpse of the kingdom; and though a long, hard climb still awaits him, he’s seen the goal of his life, and Peter will walk the rest of the way by faith, however imperfectly, for all of his remaining days.

So let’s not lose heart when the way feels long, and the walk seems hard, and we can’t see very far in front of us. We have companions with us along the trail. And once in a while we catch a glimpse of the summit above, and the view below is so much broader than it was before. So we head back into the woods, and we walk by faith, seeing things more clearly than we did before, and trusting that this trail will lead us to where we always wanted to be.