

*A Long Way Off*

Two Names, Dudley Wolfe, and Beck Weathers. Both these men, you could say, played the part of the prodigal son. Though the outcome for them was quite different. Dudley Wolfe was a New York playboy. At age 28 he inherited a fortune of \$25 million. This was in 1924. He lived a life of luxury and adventure. In 1939 he found an adventure he couldn't resist, an adventure a long way off in a foreign land. He joined an expedition to K2 and provided a huge amount of funding for it. K2 is one of the Eight-Thousanders, one of 14 mountains in the Himalaya and Karakoram that exceed 8,000 meters in height, roughly 26,000 feet. These are the highest of the high. No other mountains compare in majesty and danger. K2 is aptly named among them. The climber, Fosco Maraini, commenting on the name K2, said, "...just the bare bones of a name, all rock and ice and storm and abyss. It makes no attempt to sound human. It is atoms and stars. It has the nakedness of the world before the first man— or of the cindered planet after the last."

The expedition that Wolfe had been a part of was making considerable headway and the leader had come within 700 vertical feet of the summit but had to turn back and try again. This was a grand adventure, a chance to be first in the world to climb any of these 8,000ers! But things were not as they should be. Supplies were low at the upper camps on the mountain and the leader went down to find out why more weren't being brought up. At this point Wolfe had spent almost 30 days above 22,000 ft. At these altitudes a fit man runs the risk of many terrible maladies. The hard blowing frigid wind can freeze fingers and toes as hard as porcelain, the lack of oxygen literally causes the body to start consuming muscle tissue just to survive. All food must be packed in and painstakingly heated for consumption. This is no place for man to survive. And here is where 43 year old, slightly overweight Wolfe was left alone. He had already been struggling to go up the mountain. Going down would become a matter of life and death.

Beck Weathers took a similar expedition. Blessed with the income of a medical practice he too sought adventure in climbing. At age 49 he had paid for Rob Hall and his crew to take Beck and other clients a long way off to the top of Everest, the tallest mountain in the world. After weeks of pushing and going up and back down from camp to camp to establish supplies and build acclimation, summit day came. Many of the clients were slow and the route crowded. The cardinal rule of climbing that you turn around at a set time, was broken just to get a few more across the top. But then the weather turned in the late hours of that day. Over the next few days a dozen people's fate hung in the balance upon the ridges of Everest.

Our gospel reading today is one of the most well known teachings of Christ, second to the Good Samaritan. Here we see the younger son trying to live the life. The way it's described, especially by the older brother, makes it sound like some kind of rock-star wild Vegas fling straight out of the Hangover movie. The younger son has asked for his inheritance. Something that would come to him when his father passes. He's literally saying to his father I would rather you be dead so I can have my inheritance and do as I please. He's convinced that he'd do better with everything in his own hands apart from the father.

And where does this leave him? He ends up so poor that he's become a slave to a foreigner. He has to trust in this pagan man to survive. He's so completely destitute that the slop being fed to the pigs, which is barely above vomit, seems appetizing. Like the two climbers I've spoken of he's in a world where he has little hope of survival. Just making it thru the day becomes the only priority. This, too, is no place for man to survive. And it is here that he realizes that apart from the father he is incapable of sustaining himself.

Thus it is in our lives. We are so sure that we can handle our inheritance well. We try to survive apart from the father. We wander away from him on our own adventure in arrogant confidence that what we are doing will satisfy us. Indeed this was the first sin. The temptation by the serpent in the garden to our first parents was that they would have knowledge like God. We seek to be our own master by seeking any luxury we can. Comfort, recreation, these are all high priorities in life. Everyone seeks a Jeep, a boat and a beach vacation. They worship their pet animals or their ultra green yard. Not that these things are bad in an of themselves. It's when we go to these things and foolishly rely on them for real comfort that their insufficiency is realized. It's when these things take priority over hallowing God's name gladly hearing his Word taught to us. Furthermore, we may seek this comfort in alcohol, other drugs, or lustful desires. These pursuits for comfort always end up in emptiness, destruction of the body and soul and distance from God. Eventually what we find is a place where everything that sustains life is rare. We are a long way off. Our bodies wither without God. We freeze from the cold tempest of our sins, shivering in fear and guilt. Utterly spent we seek refuge in anything that looks like promising shelter just to have it blown away in a gust. There, starving and dying, I pray that every man comes to himself just as the younger son did.

The elder son equally foolish in this story. Why, do you say? Didn't he do what would please his father? Doesn't he have a right to be mad? The truth is that the older son desired the same things that the younger did. He felt cheated that he couldn't even get a goat to have a small party with friends. He's obedient to the father because he thinks his actions will win him approval. He's only looking at his works, justifying everything on how he contrasts to his brother. He hasn't yet realized that apart from the father he too would be destitute. He's upset with how the father is managing the estate. Here is where the original Greek is especially telling. For the two sons called the inheritance a word that means little more than portion of property. But the father regards it as his βίος, his life, his entire life's work. This was everything to him and he was willing to divide and risk it for the sake of his sons.

The elder son stands as a warning to us. Especially those of us who would so easily get caught up in our works and begin to rely in them. Those of us that have sat in these pews with our ears shut. Thinking our “work” of being here, doing the chores in this building is the important thing. We don’t see the life giving gifts of God received here in word and sacrament. When our wayward brothers return we may expect them to catch up to us, to pull up the slack. We expect the father to chastise and discipline them. We resent that they are so quickly received back into the church. The apostle John warns us of this in his first letter, **If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.** (1 John 4:20)

In the story we know how the younger ends up. He comes to himself makes a confession and before he can say anymore the father clings to him and restores him. We are not told what the elder brother does. We are left hanging not knowing if he will enter the party. Luke...Christ, leaves that part for us to figure out. While the end isn’t written in Luke 15 it is in Scripture. The older brother sees that his father has gone mad. He turns him over to the authorities and claims his father is a raging lunatic stirring up the people. He has him beaten, bloodied and hung on timbers to be crucified. In the beginning of Luke 15 we are told that this and the two parables before were spoken with tax collectors, sinners, and the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus knows what these latter ones will do. He knows his path to the cross. And he warns them of this, yet they heed it not and see him to that end. Yet from that wicked end the tax collectors and sinners are restored. Just as the younger son is given clothes and shoes and a ring, so to is everyone who believes restored to eternal life in Christ.

In Christ we have rich oxygen to breath, warmth and comfort, protection from the foul frigid works of the Devil. In God's hands the inheritance is kept safe for all the children of God to enjoy. He sustains it to sustain us. Despite being run down wearing rags and smelling like vomit, he runs to us, wraps his arms around us. He fills us with the Holy Spirit and clothes us in the fine linens of righteousness won by Christ on the cross and received in baptism. He marks us as his child with a signet ring of a cross on the forehead and the heart. Finally he gives us shoes upon our feet that we might go and proclaim his Gospel message to all nations. He gives us a feast in the body and blood of Christ, a feat far more extravagant than a steak dinner from the fatted calf. Here we find that all the excess is pointless. All the seeking and wandering and trying to do things our own way, trying to manage our inheritance ourselves counts for nothing. Apart from God is no place for man to survive.

7 days after Wolfe had been left alone on the mountain, three Sherpas returned to the high camp to rescue him with one more just a camp below. He was in an apathetic state having survived with almost no food or heat. They gave him supplies and prepped him so that, after over- nighting at the camp below with the 4<sup>th</sup> Sherpa, they would return to him and begin a descent. After the 3 had returned to the lower camp a storm blew in delaying their rescue another day. When the three finally left their comrade at the lower camp, neither the three of them, or Wolfe were ever seen again, their bodies in an unmarked grave of snow and ice and rock made for them by the mountain's unstable temper in an avalanche on the southeast face of K2.

Beck Weathers had a grueling night without a tent in a blizzard high on Everest. His hands and nose frozen hard he managed to get back to the high camp the next day. Many were surprised to see him coming down a long way off from the camp as several others had already died on the mountain. Now there was a full attempt to get him down to safety. An enormous effort was put in place. The highest elevation helicopter rescue to take place up to that time snatched Weathers off the mountain and down to safety. Loosing his left hand and fingers on his right. Weathers survived, embraced by his wife who was overjoyed to see her husband alive with so many reports of death from that day in 1996. He lives to this day. Content to stay at home, often telling crowds of the heroic efforts of others to save him from death.

Weathers' survival story, amazing as it is, is nothing compared to the salvation that we receive from Christ. Without it, we are left hungering for pigs slop. We are slaves to a foreign master, the Devil himself. We are left to die a cold icy death and struggle to breathe every step of the way. With the rescue Christ gives us by atoning for our sins on the cross, we are brought back to real comfort, to a feast that sustains us and gives us joy. Why would we not do as Weathers does and tell everyone of the amazing rescue story done for us!

Are you a Wolfe or a Weathers? Do you know one? Are you the older brother or the younger? If you see yourself in this parable you are not alone. The church father Jerome saw himself as the younger son. Just as soon as Jerome had come to himself and sought to return to the father he felt Satan closing in on all sides. But Christ came for him. God the Father knows lots of Wolfes and Weathers. He knows many that are older and younger sons. Nearly 8 billion in the world today, including you. And he comes running down the lane to save you, wrap his arms around you, and see you home, even when you are still a long way off.