

**FCC Meredith: August 2, 2020 | “Wrestling with God: Harriet Livermore” | Sam Lovett**

Here’s a fact that I’ve never really stopped to think much about, before this week and preparing to worship outside. In the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the vast majority of Jesus teaching and ministry happens outdoors. Jesus uses the fields around him, the plants, and animals and weather – all of his outdoor surroundings, to help teach the people he meets. So, as we worship today washed in light—more in-tune with the natural world—we can use this opportunity to draw closer to the way the Jesus sets before us.

In today’s readings, we heard two stories about people in the bible going off on their own – finding solitary places to be alone. These are wilderness stories, when people leave behind what is familiar to them, and enter into the unknown, ready for change in their lives. It is scripture we can relate to this morning, in the time of COVID, when we know a thing or two about being set apart from each other – and letting the circumstances of the world change us.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus goes off on his own to mourn the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. He withdrew by himself by boat to a remote place, kind of like setting out from Meredith Bay before summer sunrise by canoe or kayak, in search of a quiet island wilderness to be alone.

We read that after a time, the people from the surrounding cities and towns go out to Jesus, wanting to be with him. Filled with compassion, Jesus doesn’t tell the people to go away, but embraces them and heals and teaches the people. And when Jesus’ disciples say that it’s time for everyone to go find their own food and lodgings for the night, Jesus finds a way to provide food, and keep everyone together.

In Genesis, Jacob and Rachel and Leah and their whole community are on a journey. And Jacob comes back to spend the night by the river. In the night, under the stars, Jacob encounters God in a dream, where they wrestle and grapple through the night. And as the dawn breaks, God gives Jacob a new name: Israel.

Both stories are transformative. One goes out from home and from community, into wilderness, where they are confronted by someone or something greater than themselves that changes them. And they return to the fold, inspired, changed, or filled with deep compassion and insight into what it means to be human.

Another person who went through this type of conversion, was New Hampshire’s own Harriet Livermore, who’s life I want to invoke for this sermon. She was one of more than a hundred female itinerant preachers who crisscrossed the United States during the period of the “Second Great Awakening” between 1790 and 1845.

Livermore was born in Concord, New Hampshire to a family of Congregationalists including members of Congress and state supreme court judges with ties to this area. She showed little interest in religion until 1811, at the age of 21, Harriet felt “sick of the world” and began to yearn for some deeper meaning beginning a religious journey.

Livermore journeyed in faith for a decade before deciding to leave home, ultimately finding inspiration in the revivalist stirrings of the religious communities around her. She wrote about wanting to run from God. She didn't want to take up the "cross" of preaching, and tried to deny her call. But God, she wrote, had promised to guide and protect her. She said that God had made the same promise to her that God had once made to the prophet Jeremiah: "Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth."

And so, one January morning, she felt the call to baptism and with her siblings in faith went down to a New Hampshire river, carved back the icy sheath, and was fully immersed in the waters, referring to herself as buried with Christ from that moment on. Filled with the spirit of God, she left home and family, wealth and leisure, to be changed out in the world, like Jesus and Jacob.

Most female itinerant preachers had a hard time finding places to preach. Many held church meetings in barns, schools, or outside in fields when they were barred from churches. They found a way and by doing so became the first group of women to speak publicly in America. Few were more famous or more eccentric than Harriet Livermore. She referred to herself as the "Pilgrim Stranger." She preached before joint-gatherings of Congress on several occasions (making an impression on John Quincy Adams) and traveled to Jerusalem four times.

Most Protestant churches in the early nineteenth century opposed female preaching on the grounds that it violated Paul's injunction to the Corinthians, "let your women keep silence in your churches." Livermore took the powerful stance that Paul's words applied only to the women of Corinth, because surely Mary Magdalene, Philip's four daughters, Priscilla, Phoebe, and other biblical witnesses had spread the good news of Christ as evangelists.

Livermore pushed Christianity to be a better and more inclusive faith by following God's disruptive (but life-giving) call in her life, and pushed America to be a better country by giving her voice and her life to it – a hundred years before women could vote. Two hundred years ago. A woman from New Hampshire followed the power of her own conviction and paved the difficult way along which many more would follow.

May we be filled with her spirit in this difficult 2020 year, forsaking the easy path for the uncertain path when God asks us to walk that road.

I'll close with words that Harriet shared of her own baptism in that frozen river: "It is impossible for me to describe the ecstasy that filled my soul. Better felt than expressed are the raptures of a pardoned sinner. I believe the angels participated in my joys at that season, for they saw a prodigal return, and Jesus spoke of their gladness at such a sight. How charming was the name of Jesus to my ear, my eye, and my heart."

May it be so for us, too. Amen.