

Sermon: Proper 24A

Title: Courage by Looking Backwards

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Juliane Koepcke was born in 1954 in Lima, Peru. Her parents were West German zoologists studying at the Lima Museum of Natural History.

As a young child, she and her parents moved into the Amazon rainforest to establish a research station. She lived there until the West German educational authorities decided that wasn't a very legitimate way to get her education, and she was shipped off to boarding school.

She graduated in 1971, on December 21. Her parents were very excited to have her home in Peru, but she wanted to stay for her graduation, which would have been the 23rd, so her mom came and they booked a flight home on December 23, 1971. The only airline that had space for them was one called LANSA, which had a terrible reputation and her father had some anxiety about them flying home on that airline.

That anxiety turned out to be very well founded. That flight, in the middle of the night, at 10,000 feet, the airplane was struck by lightning and began to disintegrate. Juliane found herself buckled into her seat, plummeting into the rainforest in the middle of a storm.

Miraculously she survived the fall. She had a broken collarbone, a serious cut on her arm, (which would subsequently become infested with a bottlefly larvae), an eye injury, a torn ligament in her knee and a concussion.

Juliane was 17 years old, alone but alive, in the Amazon rainforest. If there ever was a moment to cry out to God, that must have been it.

But Juliane had been raised in the rainforest, remember, by zoologists who were scientific by nature. She figured if she followed the river to its end, it would eventually dump into a larger river, and she would find villages there.

She walked for nine days. She knew vaguely what was safe to eat in the jungle. She knew how to protect herself from the elements, she knew how to set up sleeping arrangements, and she knew to follow that river.

After nine days, she found a cabin that had been set up by lumberjacks, and she was subsequently found by the lumberjacks who put her in a canoe for 11 hours and got her to safety.

Juliane was not the only person to survive the destruction of that flight. Fourteen others survived, but died awaiting rescue.

Experts still speculate about why it is that she survived the flight. She was in the window seat connected to two other seats, and those seats may have operated as a parachute or helicopter, slowing her acceleration toward the ground. It may be that the canopy of the rainforest cushioned her landing, or the updraft of the storm in which they were caught slowed her descent. In any case she survived and is still alive today.

In our Hebrew Bible reading this morning, Moses wants to see the face of God. I think this is an interesting statement from Moses. Here's a person who has been a foundling, a murderer, a runaway, a shepherd, and is now the leader of a people. All of these events of Moses's life were the result of direct intervention from God, but Moses still needs assurance.

Moses says. "Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your way so that I may know you and find favor in your sight" And then later, "for how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people unless you go with us?... show me your glory" (by which he means the face of God).

Moses, one of the most favored of God's people, in the moment, is seeking assurance. It's comforting in a weird way.

And God replies that no one can see God's face "for no one shall see me and live."

This is not entirely true - Hagar was the first to see God's face and Jacob saw God as well - but none of us should be surprised to learn that God can change his own mind.

And so God tells Moses to stand in the cleft of a rock, and God will pass by and Moses will be able to see him in retrospect, to see the back of him.

This is how we most often see that God was present in our lives. In retrospect. We can't say to God "show me the way, show me that you're here. Show me that you are with me and that I have found a favor in your sight." Very rarely does that work. In the moment, it is difficult to see where God is at work. When the crisis has passed and we look back, it is often abundantly obvious that God was walking with us all along.

In her Fargo office, Archdeacon Jessica has a poster with the famous quote from the book of Esther: "Perhaps you were made for just such a time as this."

In that moment, Esther is looking back at all the things that formed her into who she was. Even if she faces circumstances that will require her to be heroic and have faith in God, whose presence is not obvious to her, she is strong because she can see how God has formed her.

How often do we feel as though we're looking into a future we cannot see, and we wonder if God will be with us?

Perhaps in that moment the more helpful thing is to look backwards.

Juliane Koepcke was raised by zoologists. She knew what to look for in the jungle to avoid predators and venomous snakes and insects. She was raised in the Amazon, in Peru. She knew what to expect from the topography, she knew about the vegetation, and she knew that most of the villages would be situated on the rivers. So in a manner of speaking, God had prepared her for the crisis of her life, all along the way. And then there is the fact that she survived it all. Was her seat a helicopter? Did the updraft of the storm capture her like a gentle hand and slow her race to the ground?

The gripping thing about the story of Juliane Koepcke for me though, is that she got up and walked out. Everybody else who survived that crash was either too injured or too frightened to be able to search for rescue. Julian was sufficiently prepared, in good enough shape, and had the knowledge and determination to walk her way to rescue.

It's not enough for us in moments of crisis to look back and see how God has guided us in the past. It's not enough for us to look back and say, "Oh, God was there, isn't that amazing."

In our Exodus reading today, the people of Israel will soon lose their leader Moses, he will be replaced by another almost perfect stranger, and they will enter almost immediately to battle.

They must take with them the fact that God has been with them until now, and carry it into the next crisis, and the next and the next. It's not enough for us to look back and see God present, we have to use that knowledge to be courageous, to be strong, to seek again and again to find favor in God's sight.

This episode with Moses in the cleft of the rock is not the end of the story, it's the pivot. It's not the moral of the story, it's the food for the journey.

I think we should take from the story not just comfort that even when we cannot see God, God is present and walking with us. I think we should take from this story not just confidence that God has prepared us for the challenges that we faced in this life.

I think we should draw from these facts the willingness to take risks, a courage and determination *born of faith*, and the willingness to walk out of the wilderness, confident that God is with us, that God has prepared us, and that God will send us a lumberjack when we need one. Amen.