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Psalm 107, Ephesians 2:1-10

I’ve been thinking a lot about the wilderness lately. Just this week, for instance, the child of one of my friends from Seminary has started their trek along the Appalachian trail. Morgan has been posting about the trip, about what they’re taking and what they’re shipping along the way for resupply.[[1]](#footnote-2) They’ve got 2200 miles of trail to travel, and will experience so many challenges along the way. Now, Morgan isn’t alone out there – in fact, after the trail reopened in 2021, around 3000 people have hiked from Georgia to Maine within twelve months of their starting date. Still, I hope that you will join me in praying over the next several months for Morgan’s safety and endurance on their thru-hike.

Packing for such an adventure is a challenge – how do you carry all that you need, while still being light enough to hike for tens of miles, day after day? Along the trail, especially within the first 100 miles, are places where hikers leave gear, tools, and even food that they realized they didn’t need. Like our blessing box, the things are left in protected boxes for others to use. In this way, the hikers become “trail angels” for each other, offering things you may have forgotten, or find works better for you than for someone else.

This is a wilderness grace – sharing what we have for those who may need it, and taking what is shared when we need it most. In experiencing these moments of grace, we naturally begin to think of the greater grace shown by God. Psalm 107 reminds us that even those who follow God’s trail can get lost on the way:

Some of the redeemed had wandered into the desolate wilderness, and they couldn’t find their way to a city or town. They were hungry and thirsty, their lives were slipping away. So they cried out to the Lord, and God delivered them from their desperate circumstances. God led them straight to human habitation. (Psalm 107:4-7)

When we recognize that God leads us to each other – to help each other out – we can celebrate with joy. That’s what this pink Sunday, in the middle of Lent is all about –celebrating that we’re not alone on this Lenten journey! God has led us to each other, led us back from our aimless wandering, and back to the trail of love, mercy, and grace. I wonder how God is calling you, right now, to the trail made just for you?

But even if we’re back on the right trail, we may have a pack that’s too heavy. After all, there’s always a trade off, between weight (or volume) and utility. Sure, it may sound like you want to curl up with a good book at the end of a day of hiking, but carrying a library of hardbacks with you probably isn’t worth the extra weight and space. Things like that are a luxury on trail – and maybe, if you take a day to stay in a hostel or a cabin along the way, you’ll find a book to be just the pick me up you need. But it gets more complicated when you’re packing gear that’s not as obviously extraneous. What you pack in your bag reflects your needs – but also your fears. You need a shelter – but do you pack the deluxe tent, a camping hammock, or just a simple tarp? Or maybe your rain jacket could work? To lift you off the hard ground, maybe a quarter inch of foam, rolled up is enough for you. Or maybe you need an insulated, inflatable mattress. Choosing what you need is an endless series of decisions and trade-offs.

I mentioned that you might “pack your fears” – this is an expression that hikers use to mean adding extra gear, “just in case.” Sure, you have a down quilt – but what if it’s still too cold? Just in case, you better pack a camping blanket. Or, if one method of water filtration is good, then surely three is better, just in case the first two break. What if you encounter a bear? Better pack a set of bells, bear spray, and bear cannister. As you add more and more to your pack, it gets heavier and heavier, fuller and fuller, and you slow to a crawl along the trail.

In life, sometimes we metaphorically pack our fears. We might look at how we treat others. As a teenager, maybe you were afraid of not being cool enough. So, you learned to just lean on things and not say much. And it became a quirk. “Hey, it’s Jordan Catalano. I just like how he leans against stuff. He leans great.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Other times, it may not have been safe to be yourself, for any number of reasons. And so, you may have learned to deflect conversation, to bottle up or pack away what you felt. As the world has changed, some of those strategies that became quirks or became habits – well, it may be time for an emotional pack review. I wonder, what do you need to keep? What might you be able to do without? How can you be more of who you are inside, who God has called you to be?

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul talks about the aftermath of just this sort of spiritual/emotional pack review:

You used to wander around like the people of this world. You followed the rule of a destructive spiritual power… All of you used to do whatever felt good and whatever you thought you wanted, so that you were children headed for punishment just like everyone else. (Ephesians 2:2-3 selected)

Whatever vices we’ve packed, the problem comes when we don’t consider the way our actions affect each other. We are not meant to wander in the *desolate wilderness*, but to wander together, as part of God’s family. Loving each other means being able to be authentically ourselves with each other. Being able to call out something harmful, or to be able to say, “Hey, I see God working in this way through you!” And that’s what Paul does next, too: he writes, “God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God’s grace!” (Eph. 2:4-5)

“You are saved by God’s grace.” Or, to put it another way, no matter how heavy, how unwieldy our backpacks become, God helps us pare it down to what we need. Everything you’re struggling with, God understands, and helps to carry the weight. That’s why, as Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, my burden is light.” We’re not called to go alone – but to know that we are yoked together, following in the footsteps of Jesus, and with our packs lifted by God’s good grace.

Sometimes, though, we can become too zealous in removing things from our packs. I recently have been experimenting with hiking in a great kilt, or *feileadh mòr* in Gaelic.[[3]](#footnote-4) This is a wonderful multi-functional garment – it’s essentially a five-yard long wool blanket that is pleated and hung over a belt. While hiking, you can pull the ends over your shoulders for warmth, or even secure it like a hoodie for rain protection. Since it’s made of wool, it keeps 80% of its warmth even when its wet, and the natural oils in the wool act like a water-resistant coating on modern clothing.[[4]](#footnote-5) All of that is wonderful – and so, I got a little full of hubris, and decided to hike with only a tarp, hammock, and my kilt for warmth for an overnight at Robbers Cave state park. I figured it’s been warm enough lately, so I don’t really need to worry about it getting too cold at night. Surely the warm wool of the great kilt would be enough?

Turns out, in my efforts to push back against “packing my fears,” I went too far the other way. Though I love hammock camping, I’d forgotten that you need to protect against heat loss in two directions – above and below. The kilt was great at keeping me warm as an overblanket, or as an underquilt – but not both at once. Compounding the problem, the temps fell to the low forties over night, when I was expecting mid-fifties at worst. Fortunately, on my way out of the house before leaving for the hike, I had remembered that I had been given a very small, very lightweight emergency mylar blanket as a gift for Christmas. I grabbed it, as a “just in case” – and it fulfilled its purpose, keeping me warm enough to not get hypothermia and actually sleep for a short while. So, thank you Faith, for your gift was the grace I needed to make it out of the wilderness.

I learned only after this misadventure that the Gaelic for the Great Kilt - *feileadh mòr –* derives from two or three sources. One is a Latin root – *velum* – meaning curtain or veil – later, a sheet, as in a sheet of paper or the sail of a ship. The other roots are Proto-Celtic, which meant generosity, modesty, and/or a festival vigil. A “modesty sheet” – a “blanket of wakefulness” – or a “celebration of generosity.” Somehow, all three roots seemed appropriate.

As we reflect on the journey of wilderness grace, we see that it encompasses our challenges and fears along the way. Like thru-hikers on the trails of life, we pack our metaphorical backpacks with both essentials and excess baggage. But the good news is that God is our ultimate trail angel.

Just as hikers leave supplies for each other along the trail, God offers us the grace we need for our journey. The psalmist reminds us that even in our wandering and desperate circumstances, God leads us to human habitation, to each other. Ephesians tells us that we are saved by God’s grace, and no matter how heavy our burdens, God helps us pare down to what we truly need. However, there’s a delicate balance in this journey. We shouldn’t become so zealous in removing things from our packs that we overlook the essentials. As I learned on a chilly night at Robbers Cave, sometimes we need unexpected gifts – like the emergency blanket – to keep us warm and safe.

So, my friends, as we celebrate our shared journey through Lent, and our shared journey through life, let us embrace the wilderness grace of sharing and receiving. Let us be grateful for the trail angels God places in our lives, those who offer the essentials we need when we least expect it. And may we, in turn, be trail angels for one another, sharing God’s grace generously. Amen.

1. Morgan’s story is used with their permission. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Referencing ABC’s *My So-Called Life*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Pronounced “FAY-lee MORE.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Thanks to Tom from Fandabi Dozi for the overview of the Great Kilt’s utility. https://youtu.be/YbAKRffKsPs [↑](#footnote-ref-5)