

THE WAY THROUGH THE WOODS

Homily for the Funeral of

Albert Leonard Stephens, III

Zion Episcopal Church

May 22, 2010

It was a cold day in January, two winters ago, when Leonard Stephens became for me the way through the woods. My wife, Anne, and I were visiting the Stephens family at their house in Dorset, and our arrival happened to coincide with a new snow fall that had left the countryside blanketed in white. Late that afternoon, when the snow had stopped, Leonard suggested that we take the dogs on a hike. I was eager to do that, so he turned the dogs loose, and we followed their tracks across the closest field and into the woods that lay behind the house. The trail led down the side of a hill through thick stands of leafless deciduous trees, and snow laden evergreens. It was hard walking, steeply downhill, and we kept on going until we could no longer see lights from the Stephens house. As I pushed through the snowy branches, working hard to keep up, I began to think about the return trip, which would necessarily be all uphill.

We mushed on another quarter mile, farther and farther Down the mountain, with Leonard in the lead, occasionally stopping to call the dogs while I tried to catch my breath. Then Leonard said, “Looks like they’ve found something interesting on the other side of that pond. You stay put! I’ll go round them up and be right back.” I wasn’t thrilled with that idea, but I said I’d wait. As he trudged off between the trees, I watched him go until the shadows swallowed him and I was standing alone in the forest. It was then that I noticed that darkness was coming fast. I also became aware that my boots were not waterproof and my jacket was much too thin. And then my imagination went into hyper drive.

What if it took Leonard longer to find the dogs than he expected? Had I been standing there five minutes or twenty? What if darkness came and obscured our tracks? What if our efforts to call out to each other were muffled by the snow? I began to think, “Could I, if I

needed to, find my way out of here on my own?" Looking around, I realized that I had no clue as to which way to start. It would be up hill, but which hill? Then something inside me began to whisper, "You really should start now! Leonard might have missed you and gone back by another trail. If you want to find a way through the woods, you'll need to do it yourself!"

Lost in a frozen forest! It was an unfamiliar dilemma for a southern boy, but the feeling was one I knew I'd had before. Beloved, there are many ways to be lost in a forest and not know which way to go! Should I cling to the capsized boat, or try to swim to shore? Should I enlist some strong arms, or try to move the heavy piece of furniture myself? Should I make an appointment with my doctor, or try to treat my worsening symptoms on my own? Should I wait for Leonard, or try to find my own way out of the woods?

Well, I don't know how long I stood there, but just as I was about to strike out on my own, all of a sudden out of the darkness the dogs came rushing by me, and right behind them, walking at an easy pace, Leonard! I tried to make my greeting sound casual, but I felt like shouting for joy! "It's this way," he said, pointing up through the dark and featureless forest. And I quickly fell into step behind him. I didn't have to save myself! My good friend, Leonard, became my way through the woods, and before long all of us, dogs included, were safe at home.

Beloved, I thought about that lonely moment in the frozen forest when I read this morning's Gospel lesson. Jesus had told his disciples that he was going somewhere, and they were to stay put. His announcement made them uneasy. It was as though he was about to leave them alone in the woods. Separated from their homes and families and occupations, they were out of their element, and they didn't have a clue about what to do next.. Peter felt desperate "Lord, why can't I follow you? I would die for you!" Then Jesus said to Peter and the others, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. I'm going to prepare a place for you. And I'll come again and take you to myself, so where I am, you'll be, too!" I could remember Leonard saying, "I'm going to round up the dogs. You stay here. But don't worry! I'll be right back." I wanted to believe him, but the woods were getting awfully dark!

I think it was that way for Peter. He wasn't convinced that Jesus would come back and everything would be fine. "Lord," he said, "

We don't know where you're going! How can we know the way?" He complained like a shivering southern boy about to be left alone in a frozen forest! And Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but by me!" It was like saying, "It's alright! I'll be gone for a while, but I'm coming back. Whenever you feel lost remember, I am your way through the woods!"

Beloved, when Jesus said he would come back for his disciples, I think he meant this. When life gets complicated, when the pressure keeps building, when you don't know what to do next and your emotions are all over the place, when you're lost in the forest, do not try to find your own way out! I will come to you! I am your way through the woods!"

It was a lesson even the most dedicated disciples never fully learned. You remember that in the days after the Lord's resurrection, Jesus would appear at unexpected times in his risen body, and he told the disciples to wait for a gift that he would send from the father. It was a tough assignment! They were ready, they thought, to win the world for Jesus, but they were not prepared to wait for him. Peter was the one who ran out of patience first. "I'm going fishing," he said. And several of the others joined him. Taking their lives in their own hands, they fished all night and caught nothing. Tired, frustrated, they were surprised when an unidentified figure on the beach told them to fish on the other side of the boat. They tried it, and the catch of fish nearly sunk the boat. It was the Lord demonstrating what a tragic thing it is for Christians to give in to their own impulses, to try to find their own way out of the woods.

Beloved, nobody knew this principle better than our Brother Leonard Stephens. If you asked him, he could give you a list of biblical examples where God's people got themselves in trouble by refusing to wait for him. "When God kept Moses on the mountain too long," he might remind us, "the Jews took things into their own hands and made themselves a golden god." "When the Israelites were threatened by Assyria, they made an unholy alliance with Egypt instead of waiting for God to be their way out of the woods."

And Leonard wasn't just a student of the Bible. He was amazingly competent in so many ways. Creative and confident, he was an artist, not just in the studio with a variety of media, but also in the

kitchen with a chef's knife and a sauce pan. The joy of watching Leonard prepare an elegant meal almost equaled the pleasure of eating what he brought to the table.

He was a dreamer, a visionary and an entrepreneur. Few people get as excited as Leonard did over the potential benefit of some new idea. It was a challenge sometimes to keep up with Leonard's imagination! Not all of his plans worked out, but he was quick to come up with another way.

He was a friend, and I mean not just a casual acquaintance but a trusted companion for scores of people, including many here today. Few people love to do for their friends as much as Leo did. And he kept up with us, reaching out with a phone call or a card or a thoughtfully worded letter.

Most of all, Leonard was a devoted father. Time with his children was top priority for Leonard, and he loved to take them on adventures. He welcomed their friends, and helped make the Stephens home a mecca for their school mates. Even when he had to discipline his children, Leonard was always proud of them. Talking with his own friends, he would look for opportunities to tell us about his children, not just about their accomplishments at school or at home, but about the kind and caring individuals each of them was becoming.

And Leonard was a servant of Jesus Christ. His faith provided the foundation of his life, and he was eager to explore the deeper realities of God's love. He had a rare gift for the kind of abstract thinking that can grasp complicated concepts, and talking theology with him was a rewarding experience. He demonstrated his love of the Lord not just in the congregations where he worshipped, but by reaching out to people wherever he found them. Leonard was excited about his call to seminary study. He had dreams of helping people in the hard driving world of commerce to think more clearly about their spiritual foundations. It was an extraordinary kind of ministry, and it would have been exactly right for Leonard.

A few weeks ago, Leonard sent me a book that had excited him. It's about the possibilities of Christianity in today's secular culture, and the title is, *To Change the World*. I thought at the time,

“This book is so Leo! It will be about his restlessness, his entrepreneurial desire to find a better way, his high expectations. And sadly, it will be about his disappointments.

All of us who've known and loved Leo understand that there was often a gulf between his dreams and his deeds. He was filled with love, and couldn't give enough of it away. He had great plans, and rarely saw them perfectly fulfilled. I think Leo faulted himself for much of what troubled him. When things didn't work out, his solution was to try a different approach, to find a fresh focus, to pour himself into a new challenge. Leo had a way of letting us think all was well, but inside he was accumulating a heavy load of frustrations that wearied him more than anybody knew. When he continued to give and give and give, which of us realized that his giving was not from strength, but from the emptiness of disappointed dreams? To pick up the frozen woods metaphor, Leo was lost in a forest of feelings and kept trying to find his own way out..

The tragic irony of Leo's life was that he knew perfectly well who was able to save him. I think Jesus was saying, “Leo, I know you love me. Slow down! Just wait and let me come to you. You don't have to save yourself. I will be your way through the woods” But you know, Beloved, when the forest is dark and cold, and you can't remember that the sun ever shined, it is very hard to wait in faith for an unseen savior. When you're hurting more than anybody knows, how long can you resist the desire to bolt, to find any way out, to hurry off into the darkness on your own? Leo's disappointments made him sick, and for a moment, his illness overshadowed his faith.

When I learned of Leonard's death, it broke my heart.

This was my friend, my brother in Christ, my companion on unforgettable adventures. That winter evening in the forest, he told me to wait for him, promising to come for me. Suppose I hadn't done what he asked. Suppose my fears had clouded my confidence in him, and I had rushed off into the darkness. What if I ignored my friend's plea and put my life in jeopardy. What would Leonard have done? Would he have left me there floundering in the forest, consigned me to suffering because I had taken things into my own hand? Not at all, Beloved! If I had given up on Leonard, he would never have given up on me! He would have found me in that forest!

And that is exactly what Leonard's friend, Jesus, has done for him! The Lord promised his disciples, "I will not leave you comfortless! I will come for you!" Not just when we wait obediently, but even when we get ahead of him and try to find our own solutions. Leonard is with Jesus now. His disappointments are behind him, his failures forgiven and washed away by the blood of Jesus, and the lasting accomplishments of his life are there for him to remember and enjoy.

And what about us, as we remember Leonard? Can we be glad for him, and at the same time, be angry with him? We certainly can! It's important to remember that anger denied, hidden, and fed will take us deep into the woods. Anger acknowledged and forgiveness given will take us out.

The question for us, Beloved, is what we will choose the next time we find ourselves lost in some forest of damaged dreams and frustrated feelings. Will we yield to our fears, and listen to the voice that often whispers to us when we're in trouble, "Fix it yourself! Don't worry about hurting other people. Find your own way out of this forest!" Or will we listen to our Savior, who says, "Wait for me! I will not leave You long. I will come to you with an idea you could never come up with on Your own, or with a friend you've never met before, or with an answer to a question you're not wise enough to ask. When the forest is coldest, I am closest! I will come for you! Don't give up! I am Jesus, and I am your way through the woods!"

Richard I.H. Belser