

February 21, 2010

First Sunday in Lent

Northfield, VT United Church of Northfield

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11, Luke 4: 1-13

Beginning the Lenten Journey

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Introduction and Scripture Texts

The Old Testament and Gospel texts for this morning are all about traveling and making a journey. The Deuteronomy text is about the Hebrew people and their liberation from bondage in Egypt, culminating in their arrival in the Promised Land. It will serve us well as the story of a congregation of God's people. It will be a model for us as we journey together. The Gospel lesson is about Jesus' journey into the wilderness for a spiritual retreat. When I read these texts several weeks ago as I begin to anticipate my ministry here at the United Church, I got very excited because they are just the right texts to help us kick off our own Lenten journey. They are also excellent texts to inaugurate an interim ministry. Let us now examine Jesus' journey into the wilderness.

Lexionary text Luke 4: 1-13

Jesus goes into the wilderness, after he has been baptized, and before he begins his formal ministry. Like Jesus, I'm entering a new phase in my ministry, as I begin as your pastor. I am beginning my ministry in Lent, which is for me a very special season. So, like Jesus, at the end of last week, I went off on a very brief retreat. I retreated to the New Skete Monastery in Cambridge, New York. It is a monastery of the Orthodox Church of America. New Skete is about 2 hours west of Brattleboro. I've been there at least 4 times before. Even though I'm single, I stay with the married monastics, called the Companions. When I called, they said they were on retreat, but for me to come anyway. The only difference was there were no worship services at the Monastery during the week before Lent.

I find going away on a personal retreat to be an essential life practice. I try to make a personal retreat 2 or 3 times a year. You might note that by a personal retreat, I mean a time where I can focus on the direction of my life, and my relationship with God. I will confess that I'm a late learner, and that I only began the practice 10 years ago. A personal retreat means there is no program, no lectures or group events. I go with a Bible and a notebook. I go with three basic questions:

1. where am I?
2. how did I get here?
3. Where does God want me to go?

These are my standard questions when I go on a personal retreat.

I will return to these questions later in the sermon since they are so fundamental. As a practical matter, my retreat at New Skete focused on this sermon and planning for Lent here at the United Church.

While I was driving to the Monastery, I experienced several things about going on retreat that seem to happen to me every time I go away on retreat. I kept wondering how I got so busy that I could only find 3 days to go on retreat? (Yes, I've got an excuse that's called getting ready to move to Northfield.) But every time I go on retreat, the retreat seems to be too short. Remember Jesus was gone for 40 days!

This nagging struggle is the fundamental problem of finding space to be with God in a busy modern life. (It's a good thing we are able to reserve an hour on Sunday for worship!)

This Lenten Season, we will be challenging ourselves to carve out just a little bit more space for companionship with God. -p-

As I was driving to New Skete, I noticed what I call the “letting go of normal life” experience. The “letting go of the past” happened just as I crossed the border into New York state, driving between the hills and after I crossed over the Battenkill River, that the orientation of my life switched from the present and past to the future. Suddenly, I was getting flashes of insight into this very sermon, and it began to write itself in my mind. I was eagerly looking forward to arriving at the Companions House, as I anticipated the good fellowship with Sr. Melanie, Sr. Bridget and Br. Stephen. I had broken away from the chains of the nagging “do list” and the everyday errands that seem to bind me to the present. I had moved into the future!

I had set off on a journey. It was a journey with a well known destination. Yes, the geographical destination was known, but the spiritual destination was not so clear. Further traveling instructions were yet to be handed down by God. New Skete, it turns out, is the roundabout route to Northfield, Vermont. And like all the surprises of God, it is not the traditional route. -p-

Jesus – Into the Wilderness

Jesus, in his faith and life journey followed a similar path. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus goes into the desert. He knows that he is called by God, the God who says at his baptism, “you are my son in whom I am well pleased.” Jesus has a lot to sort out. Where have I been ... I've been raised up in a humble Jewish family. Where am I now? I'm newly commissioned by John the Baptist. Where am I going? Well... he know this... He had disciples to call, a ministry to carry out in Galilee, and a journey to Jerusalem and the cross to face at the end of his journey. First Jesus goes on retreat into the wilderness.

The Desert Journal

So, Jesus went into to the desert to sort all these things out. In order to give you a better sense of the spiritual struggle that Jesus endured, I want to share with you some passages from the book, The Desert Journal by Carlo Carretto. Carretto is a monk living in the monastery of the Little Brothers of Jesus in the sub Sahara Desert. He entered the monastery at age 44 on Christmas Day, 1954. Born in Alessandria, and raised in Tripoli, Italy, Carretto was a man of the world, having traveled extensively. However, Carretto chooses to go into the desert and become a monk. At this point, I can't explain his motivation.

In his first diary entry, as Carretto begins his journey from Rome to the desert monastery, he speaks of letting go of the past, “I set out from Termini at 20.20. Many dear friends came to see me off. I am leaving my past – good and bad at one and the same time – behind to go to the desert. Liliana wrote to me that I must forget everything, and in a way she is right.” So, you can see from this diary entry that Carretto is leaving behind the past, and moving into the future.

Retreat Spiritual Goals – Carretto and Jesus

Jesus had spiritual goals of gaining strength for his journey and close companionship with the Father. After only 6 days as a novice, on December 31, 1954, Carlo Carretto lays out his incredible and challenging spiritual goals:

1. I believe the Lord will lead me to him as if I were a sheep, to be with him, to love him only, to renew the ancient pack.
2. I believe he will teach me to pray.
3. I shall try to achieve spiritual childhood, striving above all for love. To help make this easier I shall improve my relationships with:

Jesus the brother
the Father
the Holy Spirit, the Bridegroom.

4. I shall try to live the beatitudes with good will and with maximum receptiveness to the action of the Holy Spirit.
5. I shall always try to *be* and not to *seem*, in truth and in freedom.
6. I shall pit all my strength against my selfishness because it is an obstacle to the rule of love I have chosen as my vocation and as my natural spiritual attitude.

These are incredibly impressive spiritual goals, aren't they? I imagine we could adopt some of these spiritual goals for ourselves?

The Hebrew People's Journey

Our Old Testament scripture is a story told at the end of the Israelites journey. The Hebrew people have arrived at the Promised Land. God is reminding them to remember and be thankful. God's people have traveled from Egypt to the Promised Land. They have journeyed from slavery to liberation. In the process, they have had their ups and downs, and have cemented more closely their relationship with God. They struggled with temptations as a community. Remember, they made the golden calf, and worshiped idols forbidden by God.

Concluding Questions and Challenges

So, as we begin our Lenten journey together, there are some challenging questions for us to begin to answer. The importance of these questions is that they outlast the Season of Lent. First, we remember Jesus on retreat in the wilderness. So during this Lenten Season, we challenge ourselves to find min-retreats to be with God, even if they are 15 or 30 minutes in length. This is our challenge to let go of the present and reach into the future!

When Jesus went into the desert, he sought to find strength from God to claim his ministry and to resist the temptations of the Devil to be someone he was not. He would be asking himself, "what is this ministry God has given me?" So, we are challenged to set our personal goals for the Lenten Journey. What do we want to achieve in this special time? Will our goals be as simple as improving our practice of prayer? Will we find time each day to read a passage from the Lexionary readings? How can we let go of the claim of worldly tasks, so that we may be grasped by the hand of God for holy tasks? As we grapple with the essential three questions:

1. Where have I been on my life's journey?
2. Where am I now?
3. Where am I going?

There is something to recognize about these questions. First, they must be answered in numerical order. Second, underlying them is an understanding of spiritual practice. During Jesus time in the wilderness, he practiced prayer, fasting, and solitude. These are three of the "spiritual disciplines" discussed in Richard Foster's book, Celebration of Discipline. This is a book I'm considering for our Lenten Book Study.

Foster describes "solitude" as something we call can practice, even if we don't go away to be in a formal retreat setting:

"Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place. There is a solitude of the heart that can be maintained at all times. Crowds, or the lack of them, have little to do with this inward attentiveness. It is quite possible to be a desert hermit and never experience solitude. But if we possess inward solitude we do not fear being alone. Neither do we fear being with others, for they do not control us. In the midst of noise and confusion, we are settled into deep inner silence. Whether alone or among people, we can always carry with us

a portable sanctuary of the heart.”

Companionship

The blessing and uplifting matter is that we, like the Hebrew People, are a people on a journey. We do not travel alone. We have God and we have each other! Just, as I had the Companions to accompany me on my retreat, we also have each other to accompany one another as we continue our faith journey as a faith community.

Closing Prayer

Now I will send you forth with a prayer poem by Eric Milner-White, which comes to me from Suzanna Griefan of the Dummerston Congregational Church.

Lord, bless to me this Lent.

Lord, let me fast most truly and profitably by feeding in prayer on the Spirit.

Reveal to me myself in the light of thy holiness.

Suffer me never to think that I have knowledge enough to need no teaching,

Wisdom enough to need no correction

Talents enough to need no grace,

Goodness enough to need no progress,

Humility enough to need no repentance,

Devotion enough to need no quickening,

Strength sufficient without thy Spirit, lest standing still, I fall back for evermore.

Show me the desires that should be disciplined, and sloths to be slain.

Show me the omissions to be made up and habits to be mended;

And behind these, weaken, humble and annihilate in me

Self-will, self-righteousness, self-satisfaction,

Self-sufficiency, self-assertion and vainglory.

May my whole effort be to return to thee;

O make it serious and sincere, preserving and fruitful in result,

By the help of the Holy Spirit, and to thy glory, my Lord and my God. Amen.