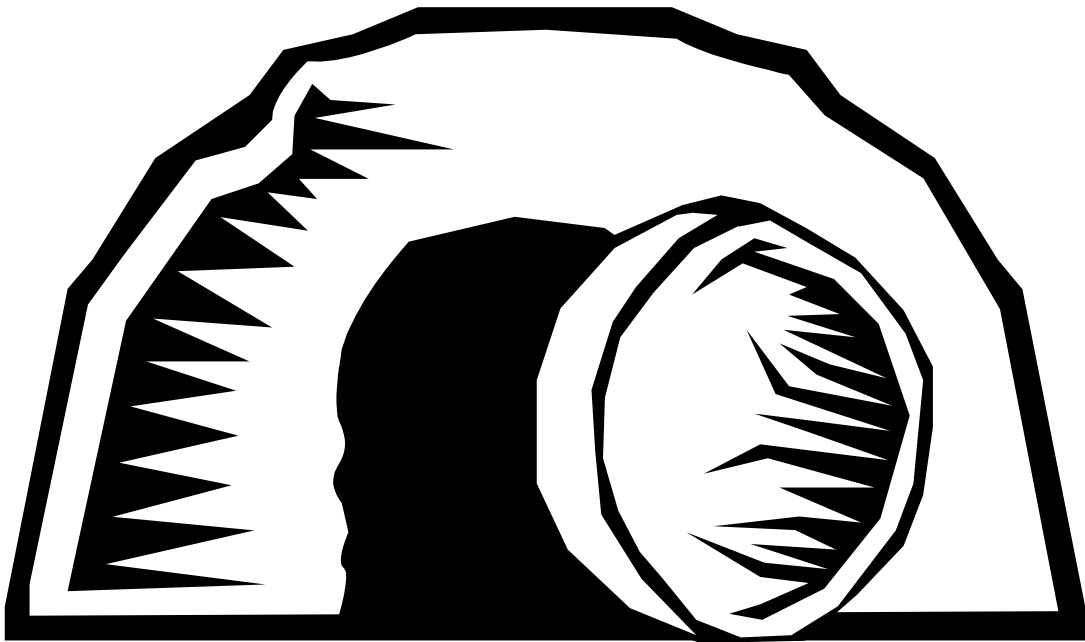


A Pilgrimage to Easter



Stops Along the Way

A Lenten Devotional Book

written by
M. Rick Hendricks
for
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Introduction

I can still remember learning the prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which I had to memorize for a high school English class (in the Olde English, of course):

*Whan that Aprille with his shoores soote
The drought of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every vein in swich liquor
of which vertu engendred is the flour...
...So pricketh him nature in hir courages
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages...*

A pilgrimage is a journey, generally long, to a sacred place or shrine, a quest for an exalted or moral purpose. A sacred pilgrimage involves self-searching and reflection. It may lead us to discover things within or about ourselves that we may not have known before. It usually takes a significant amount of time and involves some self-sacrifice along the way.

In every major religion there are places of pilgrimage. Hindus have many, Buddhists four, Muslims go to Mecca, Jews to the temple wall in Jerusalem. Christians travel to the Holy Land and visit Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and other places considered sacred.

Most of us will not make such a physical journey. But there are times in the Christian year when we are offered the opportunity to engage in spiritual quest and do an 'interior' pilgrimage.

Lent is certainly one of those times. It was a time set aside in the early church for persons considering becoming Christian. The period of forty days before Easter (not including Sundays) was seen as a time of testing, like Jesus' own forty days in the wilderness, or the Jews' forty years of waiting before reaching the promised land.

Lent is meant for reflection and prayer. A time of waiting. A time of self-searching. A time of pilgrimage in search of a higher purpose.

We invite you to take a pilgrimage with us, using this book of devotions and your scripture, toward the celebration of Easter. We will make lots of stops along the way in order to remember our heritage and reflect on the purposes of God.

Finally we will arrive at that tomb.

Ah, but what a surprise will await us there.

The Garden of Delight

Gardens play significant roles in scripture. The first one, of course, is that garden of delight, and the story of the beginning of humankind's struggle with God. In the story, God only asked one thing of the two who were there. Just don't eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Now, God told them that death would be the result. But when the woman succumbed to the temptation offered, she didn't die, and so concluded that God was somehow trying to keep something important from them. So she offered a bite to old Adam.

You know that story.

The outcome, I think, was a foregone conclusion. Humankind could never be satisfied with not knowing. I think God created us with that hunger, and it could not be denied. Which, of course, can mean a lot of trouble.

On the other hand, that hunger can also lead to a lot of good as we find ourselves in partnership with God to find solutions to the problems that exist in the world and our curiosity leads us to momentous discovery.

Life in the garden was good. It was all delight.

But is delight enough?

I don't think so. For it is in our struggles that we grow. When everything is going just fine, we tend to rely only on ourselves and give slight thought to the One who gives everything into our hands. But when we find ourselves pushed against the problems of life, that is when we finally remember to ask for help and bind ourselves more closely with God and with one another. It shouldn't be that way. But often it is.

So even though Eden was filled with delight, it could never be enough and we had to have the chance to discover that we need God and each other, and the only way that could happen was for us to take the risk of displeasing God in order to have a more realistic relationship with God.

It also opened the door for God to act in other ways to solidify that relationship.

Without the 'Fall' there would be no need for Jesus.

Sibling Rivalry

My sister and brothers have strange memories. I remember myself as being the ‘perfect’ older brother. Always caring and concerned. Always looking out for my younger siblings.

They seem to have some convoluted memories of someone completely different, who goaded them into unwinnable pillow fights, locked them in rabbit cages, and lorded over them like some slave owner when mom and dad were not around.

I don’t know where they get that stuff.

Siblings seem to always have a kind of love/hate relationship.

The scripture gives us a story that helps us to understand that it has been that way from the beginning, and probably will always be so.

Cain and Abel were the first brothers. They were evidently rivals from the beginning. The rivalry finally reached a fever pitch for one of them, and the result was a particularly sordid chapter in the story of sibling relationship.

Cain killed his brother because he was upset over an offering.

Scholars point to this story as being an explanation for tribal feuds. Some even suggest that it is the story that gives the reason for the present situation in the middle east.

If we are, indeed, all meant to be brothers and sisters under the skin, then this story certainly sheds light on our tendency to reject that kinship and so engage in the kind of fratricide that still plagues humankind.

The story reminds us that we are bound together and that what God wants and expects of us is to relate to each other on a more mature level. It’s a lesson we still have not yet learned.

We are meant to protect each other, to love one another despite our differences, and to work together to create something beautiful to offer to our creator.

It has to begin with us, however. We can’t wait for God to fix it.

*“Let there be peace on earth,
and let it begin with me...”*

Friday, February 27

Read Genesis 6:11-8:19

Ocean View

We could almost name this story “The Great Failed Experiment of Humankind”. For it is the story of God finally becoming tired of the way things were going with us and almost starting over from scratch.

If what they predict about global warming is true, the melting of the glaciers might raise the levels of the oceans enough for us to be able to purchase beachfront property far inland from where it is now. Not nearly so dramatic as a universal flood, but something of a concern. There are island nations that are already nearly under water, and some which have had to be abandoned.

The floods in New Orleans and other places along the Gulf Coast give us ample evidence of the kind of devastation they can result from just a slight change in sea level. Most of the earth is already water. And there is ample evidence that there has been a lot more of it in the ancient past.

But this story is not just about water..

It is a story about the frustration of God and the decision to remain faithful to God’s ‘experiment’ with creation.

For we, as it turns out, are not easy to love. At every turn, it seems, humankind continues to disappoint and swerve from the purposes for which we have been created. At every opportunity, it seems, we kick at the traces and balk at becoming who God means for us to become.

Yet, this story reminds us, God continues to be faithful. God continues to have faith in us, even when we seem to have little faith in God, or in ourselves.

It’s a story that reminds us that living up to our purpose is never going to be easy, and when we don’t there are consequences to suffer.

Now, unfortunately, we hold in our own hands the power to create or destroy.

God continues to have faith in us.

If we can just tap into that faith, perhaps we will be able to change the self-destruct course upon which we seem to be set.

“Love one another, as I have loved you...”

Saturday, February 28

Read Genesis 11:1-9

Tower of Power

You'd think, after the flood and all, that humankind would have learned a valuable lesson about staying in relationship with the creator.

You'd be wrong.

Memories are obviously short. It isn't long, in the scriptural story, before humankind falls right back into its bad old habits. The love of power is such a strong force in the lives of humans. Some have even suggested that the entire biblical account can be summed up by the struggle between the love of power, and the power of love.

God represents the power of love. It is out of love that the world was created and humankind received the very breath of God when brought into being. It is out of love that humankind faces discipline when they choose to live in ways destructive to themselves and others. It is out of love that God has, again and again, attempted to make it clear as to who we are, and who we are to become.

But we are a 'stiff-necked' creation. Our memories are short and our penchant for ignoring the actions of a loving Creator are tantamount to the very denial of our own natures and of our relationship with God.

Babel is another story that makes that clear.

The tower is not so much an architectural marvel as it is a grasping after the need to be in control, once again.

So they built the tower. The tower was a way of saying, "Look at us! We are invincible. We are eternal."

Like the inscription on the broken statue in the desert, described by Shelly in his poem *Ozymandius*:

*"... 'My name is Ozymandius, King of Kings.
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!
Round the decay of that colossal wreck,
boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretched far away.*

The love of power will lose, eventually. Wouldn't it make more sense to stand within the circle of the power of love?

Monday, March 2

Read Genesis 12:1-16

Trusting God

We generally read just the first part of Abram's story and talk about how brave he was, how trusting to leave the comfort of the known and launch out into the unknown with only a promise from God. It makes for great sermons.

What we fail to remember is that Abram had his doubts along the way, and, more than once, attempted to take matters into his own hands, usually with rather disastrous consequences.

The second part of this story is an illustration.

When they reached Egypt Abram feared for his life because his wife, Sara, was very beautiful and he knew that Pharaoh had a penchant for adding women to his harem, no matter who had to get hurt in the process. So Abram tells Sara to pretend she is his sister instead of his wife. So when Pharaoh indeed takes a shine to Sara, Abram gives her to him with his blessing!

Eventually the truth comes out, of course, and Pharaoh gladly gives her back, as she turns out to be nothing but trouble for him.

It is interesting that this story is even in the scripture. It would be so easy to gloss it over and forget this sordid little chapter in the story of Israel's founding parents. But Judaism chooses to be honest and reveal the skeletons in the closet in order to make the point that trusting God is always the better way to go.

We often find that difficult to do. We tend to want what we want, when we want it, and are reluctant to trust anyone but ourselves. The old 'American Spirit' kicks in: "If you want something done right, do it yourself."

But the reality is that we are meant to live in the world in community with others, and to let go of our selfish pride now and then in order to make a better go of it.

And to trust God. We have yet to do that in a lot of ways. We depend on the strength of our military or the power of our dollar. We are learning, the hard way, I'm afraid, that neither is a solid insurance.

Maybe we should give God's way a try, instead. Maybe...

The Grass is Always Greener...

All of the seven ‘deadly’ sins are tough, but the one which touches just about everybody is greed. This may be especially true for those of us who live among the privileged of the world, and who have so much that we often have to have large storage spaces for our overflow. Having more seems to lead to needing more, and needing more often leads to trouble.

The story of Abram and Lot is a good example. The two had prospered to such a degree that there just wasn’t room for both of them on the same spread. Their herds kept getting mixed up, and their drivers had begun to raise the level of ire to violence. Something had to be done.

So they met on a mountain top to discuss options.

Abram was, perhaps, a bit more magnanimous. He let Lot decide which part of the land he wanted. Lot looked over the possibilities.

On one side was the green and lush valley near the river. It contained two thriving communities which were rich in trade and offered unimaginable delights for the discerning traveler.

On the other side was the hard-scrabble desert with it’s craggy hills and distantly-spaced oases. Life there would clearly be harder.

When my mother would cut an apple, or a piece of dessert, which piece do you think I would pick? It was clear to me, that as the oldest, I deserved the largest. Every now and then I would decide differently, if it were not a dessert for which I particularly cared. But most of the time the old greed would kick in.

Lot picked the side with the river and the cities. It was a choice which would later come back to haunt him when he found out that Sodom and Gomorrah left something to be desired. He lost a lot more than he gained in the bargain.

Abram got the better deal, though it didn’t look like it at first.

Which is a good lesson to be sure you look before you choose, then choose carefully, and don’t always pick the biggest piece.

Stomach aches are no fun.

Second Best?

Abram, as it turns out, wasn't the only one of the dynamic duo to fall short in the 'trusting God' department. Sara had her own doubts.

She knew the promise: *"I will make of you a great nation..."* which meant that there needed to be children born to Abram. But so far, no luck in the fertility area. She was as barren as the wind-swept desert in which Abram had chosen to plunk them. Either that or Abram was just too old to do her any good. So Sara began to get antsy.

Her solution was to give Abram her maidservant, Hagar, maybe to see if barrenness was Abram's problem or hers. As it turned out, Hagar was as fertile as the valley by the river, and Abram was able to produce a child with her almost immediately.

For which Sara became very angry. She drove Hagar out, and she might have died out there in the desert, except that God visited her and persuaded her to return so that Abram could get to know his son.

When Ishmael was born, Abram was ecstatic. Sara was quiet and, for a while, had to accept her fate as being only the 'second best' wife.

But then came the miracle of Isaac, and, suddenly, Sara was on top of the heap once again.

So what did she do? She insisted that Abram take Hagar and Ishmael, and drop them off at Dead Man's Gulch and let the desert and its creatures have their way with them.

Abram didn't want to do it. But he also didn't want to upset Sara, clearly suffering post-partum depression. So he did it! The coward!

Once again, it took intervention from the Creator, who saved Ishmael and Hagar from certain death, and made her a promise that Ishmael would grow into a fine man and become the father of his own nation.

Even though Abram loved Isaac, Ishmael would always be the first-born in his heart.

And later events might even make Isaac wish that his half-brother was still around.

Thursday, March 5

Read Genesis 22

Testing...Testing...

Do you know why Isaac was twelve when God asked for Abraham to sacrifice him at Mount Moriah?

Because if he'd waited until he was a teenager, it wouldn't have been a sacrifice! (Bah dah bing)

Sometimes you have to find a bit of humor in something in order to make it more palatable.

The story of 'the testing of Abraham' is one of the most difficult passages in scripture, as far as I'm concerned.

The theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, has written a most insightful discussion of the story in his little book, *Fear and Trembling*.

This story lifts up questions of universal concern.

What does it mean to be 'tested' by God? Is the outcome a foregone conclusion? Does God play with the creation like a chess game, and pull our strings like a puppet-master? Or are the things that we see as 'tests' from God really things that we place on ourselves in order to give credence to our own faith?

Since these questions have been discussed for thousands of years, I'm not going to suppose to give a definitive answer in a few lines.

Trusting God for our lives can be a disturbing experience. Sometimes we are led to stand up and be counted when we would rather sit down and be quiet.

I am reminded of Martin Luther Kings discussion of being more-or-less forced into being in the bus boycott in Montgomery at age 26. But, after he had become involved, he grew to understand that the movement was bigger than himself, or any one man, and how he could then *choose* to give whatever necessary, even at the cost of his own life, or that of his family.

One question raised for me by this terrifying story is what is it to which I am willing to give my life, and can I trust God to lead me in the way I need to go?

Tough questions on the road to Jerusalem.

But then, even Jesus asked them. Remember Gethsemene?

Momma' s Little Man

In the perfect world we learn from the mistakes we make, or those we observe others making. Isaac should have known that trouble always follows when a parent loves one child more than another. Of course, Ishmael was only his half-brother, but he had seen the pain caused by the inequities in his own family. Yet he falls right into the trap of choosing Esau over Jacob, and Rebekah does the same with Jacob. He's her little man, while Esau is daddy's boy.

It's a disaster waiting to happen.

You already know the story. Jacob first enticed the birthright out of his 'older' brother, and then he and Rebekah schemed together to make sure that the blessing of Isaac, which amounted to naming the one who would inherit the lion's portion of everything after he was gone, went to Jacob rather than to Esau.

It was a dirty trick and one which sent Jacob packing to escape the wrath of Esau after Isaac had passed on.

Of course, in the scriptural stories, events often seem dire, but by the grace of God everything works for the good in the end.

Had Jacob stayed at home, he might never have become the man he needed to be in order to live up to the purposes that God had in for him.

As it turned out, his time away from home, and from the over-protection of mom, allowed him to grow up and grow into a greater purpose.

We always want everything to be perfect for our children. So sometimes we protect them too much. Remember - roots and wings...

Without a sense of belonging, children are adrift without a rudder. But unless we give them the freedom to fail, they will never learn their own strengths. The wisdom of Kahlil Gibran reminds us:

Your children are not your children

*They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself
...Their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot
visit, even in your dreams...*

Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

You May Kiss the Bride...

Jacob was a schemer. A bit of a con-man. He relied on his wits and didn't seem to particularly care who got hurt as long as he got his.

Not a very sterling example for the people of Israel to follow.

So when we see him get bested, there is that within us which says, "Finally, he got what he deserved!" His uncle, Laban, obviously didn't get to where he had gotten by always playing fair, either. Jacob's sojourn with him and his family while he was on the lam from Esau contains enough good material to give the writers of (two choices - depending on your age) *Dallas/Desperate Housewives* enough for a good season or two.

There was always a struggle between them to see who could get the upper hand.

Maybe word had gotten to Laban about what Jacob had done to Esau, and he wasn't about to be bested by this young whipper-snapper. Or maybe it was just a family trait. But when Jacob asked for the hand of Rachel in marriage, Laban made him promise to work for seven years to earn the bridal price. Then when the seven years were up, and the minister allowed Jacob to lift the veil and kiss his bride, he found himself looking into the smiling face of his new wife, Leah.

When Jacob protested, Laban responded with, "I thought you had read the fine print and understood that the youngest can never be married before the oldest. You asked for the hand of my daughter. I have to give you the one available at the moment of the marriage. Tough luck. But you can have Rachel, too. Just work for another seven years."

It went back and forth like that between them for years, with Jacob generally coming out on top.

And when it came time to leave, Jacob was on the lam again, and now caught between Esau on one side and Laban on the other.

Maybe these stories are there to remind us that the 'Big Ten' are mostly about how we live together in community, and how God would prefer that we treat each other. Jesus summed it up, of course.

Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. If you do that, you can't go wrong. And you'll be a lot happier in your life.

Down By the Riverside

A young minister was called to the bedside of one of his elderly parishioners who was approaching the end of life. Unused to dealing with death he muttered something about how sorry he was that she was at that place in her life.

The elderly woman smiled and said, “God bless you, young man. But there’s nothing to worry about. I’m just crossing over the Jordan, and my Father owns the land on both sides of the river.”

Jacob was not so sure when he camped by the Jabbok. He couldn’t go back the way he had come because he had stolen from his uncle Laban. But to cross over meant having to face Esau. He was stuck by the choices he had made and the actions that had gotten him into such a mess.

This story is one of my favorite in the scripture. I suppose it is so because it is so universally true. There come those moments in our lives when we have to admit to ourselves who we are, and find, somehow, the grace to live in spite of it.

Jacob wrestled all night.

He wrestled with who he had been, and compared that to who God had showed him he could become. He wrestled with his past and the mistakes he had made in his relationships with just about everybody. He wrestled with the future, and what might be. He wrestled with himself. And he wrestled with his God.

Those times of decision are never easy. They involve a lot of soul-wrenching discovery.

But they are necessary.

At the end of his time of ‘testing’ Jacob was changed. He didn’t swagger through life after that. He limped a little. He didn’t say his name as though everyone should know who he was. Instead, he was a bit more humble. Because his name was no longer ‘schemer and supplanter’. His name from then on was ‘wrestler with God’.

It was out of that people who were his offspring that would be born the one named, ‘Mighty God’ and ‘Prince of Peace’.

Tuesday, March 10

Read Genesis 37-50

“God meant it for good...”

Of course I know that most of you won't read the whole thing. But I hope you'll at least scan for content. This is an important story. It sets the stage for the pivotal event in the history of Israel, and, indeed, for all of what we would term 'salvation history'.

The story of Joseph and his brothers has all the elements of great drama. Envy, betrayal, sex, deceit, intrigue, reconciliation.

It begins with another example of a parent showing favoritism. By now we should have gotten the hint that whenever we see that as a theme, trouble is about to follow.

The beautiful coat that Joseph received as a gift became the key element in the betrayal and deceit that followed.

The story winds through several twists and turns, ending with Joseph, once proud and lordly, cooling his heels in Pharaoh's prison, the victim of someone else's pride. Potiphar's wife just couldn't get over the fact that someone didn't think she was the hottest thing around, and when Joseph failed to fall for her charms, she yelled 'rape' and got him sent up the river.

But God wasn't finished with Joseph. Through a series of events it transpired that Joseph ended up being the number one trusted advisor to Pharaoh himself, and was given the opportunity, because of a famine, to get payback from his brothers in a big way.

But thankfully, Joseph had grown up through his experiences, and when push came to shove, he ended up so happy to see the ones who had sold him out, that he couldn't contain his tears.

His insight was farsighted, as well. He told his brothers, *“What you meant for evil, God was able to use for good...”*

Paul says that in everything we should be able to give thanks, because the love and grace of God overwhelms even the worst of situations and offers hope.

His proof, of course, is the cross, and the tomb, which, instead of being the end of the story, turns out to be just the beginning, and what humankind may mean for evil, God transforms into the best news we can possibly imagine.

Selective Amnesia

For a while Egypt was just about the best thing that ever happened to Abraham's offspring. The kingdom was a marvel of technology and the source of such ready wealth that it really turned the heads of those the Israelites, who, up to that time, had been pretty much a collection of nomadic tribes co-existing through their cooperative efforts and making the best of their desert surroundings.

But suddenly they were in the 'flesh-pots' of Egypt, and after a short time had all but forgotten their humble roots and were living high off the hog in the fertile valleys around the Nile.

A generation or two there, and many had deserted their agrarian ways and begun to insinuate themselves into the workings of the secular society. They began to neglect their reliance on the assurances of the seasons, and their worship of the God of creation. They became acculturated to the ways of Egypt, with its worship of the Sun God and Isis and Min, the god of fertility, Sobek, the crocodile god, and Anquet, who held the Nile in her arms. There were dozens of others, all of whom demanded sacrifice and worship.

And they began to prosper there. So much so that Pharaoh (a different one than the one who had been friend to the Israelites) began to take notice and become concerned.

So some laws were passed and some edicts proclaimed and the upshot was that the Israelites became little more than slaves, their lives under the complete control of Pharaoh, who decided on a whim who should live and who should die.

The events there were a preview of the kind of thing that would occur again and again in the history of the Hebrew people.

And not just them. We fall into that same trap of calling on God only when we get into trouble, but keeping God at arm's length when things are going well.

Thank goodness God continues to be faithful even when we are not.

Thursday, March 12

Read Exodus 12:1-27

The Price of Freedom

One of the places on everyone's list of things I needed to see in Costa Rica was Volcan Arenal, one of Costa Rica's four 'active' volcanoes.

I finally made it there in the second month, and was certainly glad I did. It was a fabulous experience.

Passover is a 'must see' on our pilgrimage.

It is the most important date in the Hebrew calendar. It is from that moment that they really begin their history as the Jewish people. Everything before that has led up to it, and everything after that harks back to that event.

It is a date that reminds all of us of how costly freedom can be.

We in the U.S. seem to take that for granted because since we fought and won our little skirmish with the British on American soil, aside from the shame of the Civil War, have been blessed with relatively few instances of having to fight to preserve the freedoms which we won.

Oh, we have engaged in other wars, but they have been far away, so that mostly only those who have lost loved ones are really cognizant of the sense of price which freedom sometimes exacts.

Pharaoh's kingdom was the one which felt the cost of Passover. The first-born from every house paid the price. It seems a cruel and unusual punishment for being 'hard-hearted'. A terrible price for freedom.

But freedom really is worth it. God has placed within the human spirit the need of, and the desire for, freedom. And it seems that we will, indeed, pay whatever price needed to attain it.

Passover is a major stop for Christians, as well. It was at the Passover meal that Jesus gave us that special meal and called us to always remember.

What we remember is that, in Jesus, we know that God understands the cost, and is always with us, wherever we are, and in whatever battles we are engaged, to achieve that precious commodity.

Sometimes it takes a while. Ask Clara Luper or Rosa Parks. They'll tell you that it's been a long struggle. Long and costly.

But worth it, after all.

Back to the Desert

They had started out as nomads wandering around in the desert, and now, here they were, back to the old stomping grounds.

Psalm 78 expresses in poetic form the history of the Jewish people and especially of their sojourn in the wilderness.

But I've had people ask, "Why did they have to stay out there forty years? Doesn't that seem like a little bit of overkill?"

Notice something, however.

The ones who went out of Egypt were people who had never known anything but Egypt and slavery.

Were they overjoyed with their new-found freedom? Sure. But only for a short while. Then they began to realize that freedom was a hard choice. They no longer had anything upon which they could count. Gone were the whips of their masters, but they were familiar whips. You could learn to live with whips if you knew that at the end of the day you'd still have your hovel to which to return, and a meal for the table. They may have been hard masters, but at least you always knew where you stood.

The people began to complain. About everything.

They even tried to mount a coup against Moses and Aaron to get back to Egypt to throw themselves on the 'mercy' of Pharaoh and take their chances there rather than face the uncertainty of where they were.

And then, of course, came that shameful little incident with the golden calf. God became really angry then.

But why? Was God really concerned with them worshipping some stupid idol. I don't think so. God knows human nature. But what God saw was that these people still had a slave mentality. They would never be able to make in a new land it until they were purged of that.

It took forty years before that generation died out and a new generation, used to freedom, was thoroughly in charge.

Then they were ready. Then they could live their freedom.

Sometimes, for us, it seems to take forever. But eventually we will get there. Eventually we will understand and be ready to accept the love of God which surpasses all understanding. Eventually we will understand the meaning of grace and begin to live it.

Saturday, March 14

Read Joshua 1 & 2

Spies and Lies

I think there are probably two main ways that people deal with trouble in their lives.

The first is to see the trouble as being so big that it simply overwhelms and leaves us feeling powerless and weak in the face of it.

This was the problem of the first spies Joshua sent to scout out the ‘promised land’.

Remember, these were people who had been living in tents for the past forty years, existing from day to day on what they could raise or find in that desert place.

When they crossed the Jordan they were suddenly standing before huge walled cities, bustling with commerce and defended to the teeth by well-armed and well-trained militias.

They looked at those places, and then at themselves, and, well, they just began to shrink in their own eyes.

“Who are we to come up against something like this? Why, the people who can build and defend these places must be giants.”

Notice, that when they reported back, they didn’t say that the people were giants, they said, “*They appeared to us to be giants.*”

Were they lying? Only slightly. Because if the problem in our eyes is an insurmountable one, then by self-fulfilling prophecy, we will probably fail.

The second way to see trouble is to view it as an opportunity to grow and change. To meet the challenge head on and face it down, rather than cowering before it.

The two spies who gave a positive report had that view. They also realized that they couldn’t, and didn’t have to, face the problem alone. They enlisted valuable allies in the process.

What we tend to forget, when we face trouble in our lives, is that we are never alone. God is always with us. And we have resources and allies plenty, if we will only allow ourselves to ask.

The church isn’t just a place for Sunday. It’s a community for everyday and those of us who realize its blessing discover ourselves to be much stronger and more able, than we may have thought.

Signposts

In Costa Rica, if you want to find directions to a house or a business, you do not ask for the address. Streets have names, but they are not posted. Houses may have numbers, most do not.

An address in Costa Rica will read, “25 meters north of POPS, Curridabat”. POPS is a very popular ice cream place (like Brahms). This was the address to which I had mail sent while in Costa Rica. I always got it. Directions were given by referring to a well-known place.

I know you’ve had the experience of asking directions in some small community and were told,

“Oh, sure. You go down this road to the corner where the old Kearny place used to be, turn left and head down to the Garner place and it’s about a half mile beyond that...”

Wade Watkins told me that they had a particularly difficult time traveling in Macedonia because there simply were no signposts anywhere. Nothing to tell you what road you were traveling, or the distances from one place to the next.

Signposts are important. Landmarks help us to set our directions or locate something important.

When Joshua had his priests set up twelve stones, it was more than just to mark where his own ‘Red Sea’ experience had occurred. It was a sign for the people then, and anyone to follow, that God had been with them on their journey, guiding them and taking care of them.

In the church we have signs and symbols all around us to remind us of important moments in faith history. Every week we gather around a table, on which are placed bread and grape juice. Also on that table stands the cross, once a symbol for shame and death, now a sign of grace and life.

Joshua told the people,

“When your children ask, ‘What do these stones mean?’ you will tell them...”

Passing on the faith story is important, and signs and symbols are a way to remind of us what things are important in our story.

What are some signposts in your particular journey?

Tuesday, March 17

Read Joshua 6-7:24

Two Out of Three?

I like the story of Gideon on several counts. First, there is a little humor in it. Second, it is a story about the real power of faith and about overcoming overwhelming odds.

Gideon gets the call from God to fight the kingdom of Midian. Now, he's not real sure of this venture and strikes a bargain with God. *"Make this fleece I lay out overnight wet with dew, but the ground around it dry."* Sure enough, the next morning there's enough water in the fleece to boil a goat.

Is Gideon satisfied? Nope. He says to God, *"Ok, let's try two out of three..."*

Then the fun really begins.

Having been finally convinced, Gideon is able to raise an army of thirty-two thousand. This is going to be a snap.

But God realizes the predictability of the human psyche. God understands the power that pride can have, and rightly determines that if Israel wins with such an army they are going to begin to think that they can do anything they want, all by themselves, and aren't going to find the need to trust God any more..

So God says to Gideon, *"Send anyone home who's nervous about the upcoming fight."*

Over two thirds leave. A blow, but he still has a sizeable army.

Then God says, *"Have them get water from the stream, but send anyone home who kneels to drink."*

When the dust settles there are only three hundred left.

Three hundred against an army of thousands.

What is God thinking?

Sometimes the odds seem overwhelming. Trouble and problems look like mountains. Life just isn't going the way we want.

This story reminds us that we are never alone. That whatever power we have within us is supplemented by the power of the God of all creation, and as available as our next breath, our next whispered prayer.

Never take for granted the power of that small thing.

Three hundred, with God's help, routed Midian and won the war.

The Responsibility of Fame...

All too often our newspapers and tabloids are filled with stories of politicians and sports celebrities and others admired by millions, doing such stupid and 'unheroic-like' things.

If we think that the stupidity of celebrity is a new thing, we need look no further than Judges where we find the story of Samson.

Samson was a child of promise, as are many of the characters in the Hebrew scriptures. Samson had been given a gift as a result of the fervent prayers of his mother. He had strength beyond the likes that any had seen in his day. He had it in him to be a real hero for his people and a champion in their ongoing struggle to finally be able to claim as their own the land to which God had led them.

In their way to that promise were the feared and powerful Philistines. Samson had a couple of encounters with their armies, and usually ended up on the winning side of that argument.

If he had kept to his task, and focused on fulfilling the promise within him, things might have turned out a lot better for him.

But if he was a man of great strength, he was also a man with a great appetite for self-satisfaction. He had great strength, but he wasted it too many times just being a bully.

When things didn't go the way Samson wanted, he just beat someone up and took what he wanted anyway.

Samson could be an example for nations as well as individuals. Great wealth, great resources, great strength, carry with them the responsibility to wield those gifts with compassion. Carrying the biggest stick doesn't always make you are the smartest one in the room, and using the big stick all the time usually winds up with us being in deeper trouble than when we started.

Samson finally came to his senses after his pride and stupidity landed him in a terrible place. His final act of selfless sacrifice accomplished the original purpose. In death he finally lived up to his potential.

But what a waste. And how different it might have been if he had wielded his power more responsibly in the first place.

He Just Looks Like a King

It begins with the clamoring of the people, “Everybody else has a king. Why can’t we have one?”

Does that sound familiar to anyone? Anyone who has children will recognize that cry. It comes from the depths of a child’s soul. It’s the whine that pierces to the heart of every parent.

“But all my friends... *(have one, are going to get to go to, are going to be there...)* You’ve heard it. You recognize it for what it is. The guilt trip laid on a parent by a child who wants something which you, as the adult, have decided is wrong for them.

But how difficult it is to resist. The underlying content is, “*If you don’t do this, you are a bad parent. And I won’t love you any more...*”

The people of Israel have been living under the leadership of several leaders whom God has raised up to help them discover their place and their purpose.

But they look around and realize, “*Everybody else has a king. Why can’t we have a king, too.*”

Samuel tries to dissuade them.

He points out to them that kings tend to be corrupted by the power. Kings will exact taxes. Has it been so long since they were slaves that they have forgotten what it was like to be at the whim of one ruler?

You can almost picture the people. Like children with their fingers in their ears so they don’t have to hear what Samuel is saying. And their voices rising in insistence.

But everyone one else has one!!!

So Samuel agrees to give them some choices.

They pick Saul. He’s big and good looking. He’s got the look of a king.

If they did so because they needed a king, that would be one thing. But they did it to be like everyone else.

What is it Paul reminds us,

“Be not conformed to this world, but be transformers...”

Hmmm. Maybe we aren’t supposed to be just like everyone else...

The Bigger They Are...

Oh, how we love it when the little guy wins! Such victories serve as vindication for all of us who have been picked on or put down and who have wanted for a champion to lift us up.

When Goliath fell, the reverberations of his toppling created an earthquake throughout the armies of the Philistines. They were never quite the same again. The bully who had been their champion lost. Not only lost, but was soundly thrashed by a teenager with nothing in his hands but a slingshot, but in whose heart was that courage stemming from his belief in God, and in the rightness of his position.

We are meant to be giant killers.

Every day in our world, the giants brandish their massive swords and proclaim to the world that there is no one who can defeat them.

The giant of hunger. It wipes out millions a day. Most of them defenseless children.

The giant of disease. Especially in third world countries, this fearsome giant snarls it's defiance and dares anyone to face it.

The giant of poverty. The gap between those who have so much we aren't able to spend it all, and those who have so little that every day is a struggle to survive, continues to widen. It is the grin on the face of the giant who is so pleased to create such greed and love of power.

The giant of prejudice. This grinning behemoth defies anyone to break down the walls that it has built between people. It reminds each one that anyone who is different is of little worth and deserves none of our consideration.

We need some giant killers. We need some champions.

And the thing is, you don't have to be strong, or even particularly brave. What you need to be is willing. What you need to have is the certainty that right is on your side and that there really is nothing that can stand against the light of truth and the courage of those who refuse to be cowed by the size of the problem.

David knew that when he went onto that battlefield, he was not alone. Neither are we. With God's help, giants fall!

Too Big for Your Britches...

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men...”

Lord Acton is probably right. There have been very few instances in which we do not discover that somewhere in the lives of those who are our heroes, there are times when the temptation to use power for their own gain overcomes their better judgement.

David fell for Bathsheba. But she already had a husband. David's solution: Send Uriah into battle. He knew that Uriah would never shirk his duty, and if sent on a suicide mission, would never back down.

Then David was right there, johnny-on-the-spot, to comfort the poor widow.

He might have gotten away with it, too, had not he had a man in his employ who had the courage to face up to this one who could easily have him permanently silenced, and declare to the King that he was nothing more than a lustful despot.

To David's credit, he listened to what Nathan had to say, and admitted to himself, and to his nation, that he had, indeed, wielded his power without regard for what was right.

The giant-killer had become the giant.

He needed to be taken down a peg or two.

Nothing was quite the same after that. Once you have given in to the love of power, it's hard to go back.

Court intrigue began to be the order of the day. Even though he had repented, the damage to his kingdom and to his ability to lead had already been hurt. The consequences of bad decisions are never limited to the moment.

He tried, from then on, to be a better king. And among the people he was always remembered more for the good he did.

As a matter of fact, people began to hope that someday another would be raised up who would be as good or better than David. They even thought that such a one might be born in David's own city, little Bethlehem.

It would be a fitting redemption, after all.

All I Want...

“Since you have freed me from the prison of the lamp, I will grant you three wishes...”

Haven't we all wished for just such a miraculous possibility in our lives. And the question always is, “If I had the chance, for what would I wish?”

The story of Solomon reads a little like the story of Aladdin and the Genie. Only it is God who offers Solomon the chance to receive his heart's desire.

Perhaps it is because he had seen the shambles left in the wake of his father's decisions that Solomon did not ask for power or wealth or long life. He asked, instead, for wisdom. The ability to reign wisely and to govern fairly.

The choice, itself, was a wise one, because what he discovered was that wise rulers are such a rarity that people will flock to them and they will end up with much more than they ever imagined or desired.

In the opening chapters from the book of Proverbs, supposedly the distilled 'wisdom' of Solomon himself, Wisdom is renowned as being more precious than gold and more costly than diamonds.

If we could pray for one thing for the leadership of our country, I would ask that we pray that they have wisdom.

People who are wise tend to see the big picture and do not limit themselves to the things that effect only them directly. They see beyond the desire for their own good, and focus on what might be best for the good of all.

Wisdom is indeed rare and precious.

Pray for it for yourself. Work for it as you study. Search for it among the other treasures that would call you.

If we would be the best that we can possibly be, we must first find wisdom.

It just may be the best of all possible gifts.

Monday, March 23

Read II Kings 17:19-41

A House of Cards

Every four years I have hope rekindled within me. Every four years, in our country, there is an exchange of power. It is done without bloodshed. It is done with the understanding that every person in our nation, regardless of race or religious preference or color of skin or economic status - every person has a chance to cast his or her vote and stand up and be counted for something.

I may not always agree with the outcome of our elections. But every four years, because it happens the way it does, I am proud to be part of such a country, and my hope is rekindled that we will, once again, grow toward our better vision and our wider calling in the world of nations.

Nations tend to go through cycles. They may start out strong and well-meaning, but eventually the love of power corrupts their better purpose and eventually they fall into the ruin caused by their own greed and self-destructive tendencies.

This happened to Israel. Called to be the ones who bless the world by their existence, they began to forget their purpose and to see themselves as just another nation among the nations of the world.

Instead of trusting God for their leading, as Abram had done in the beginning, and others had tried to do following, they began to form alliances based on power and turn away from their more noble purposes to become just another nation among the nations.

And, of course, they fell, like a house of cards hit by a strong wind. Little by little, the edges of their kingdom were whittled away. Little by little the center of their power was corrupted until it rotted from within. Little by little they let their more base instincts rule until they were, indeed, nothing but a nation among nations - without purpose - without meaning.

Of course, thankfully, God was not yet finished with Israel. There was yet a part for them to play. Their story was not yet done.

Every four years my hope is renewed. Maybe this time we will live up to our calling. Maybe this time we will grow into our purpose. Maybe this time we will become who God would have us be.

Maybe this time....

In the Cave of the Winds

I remember, as a child, visiting with my family at the Cave of the Winds in Colorado Springs. It was summer, and outside the cave it was hot. But inside the cave it was a rather nippy 54° and the winds whistling through the stalactites and stalagmites sang an eerie kind of song, like ghosts whispering their lost-souls cries. It was a fascinating experience.

Elijah found himself in a cave when he was on the lam from Ahab and his vengeful wife, Jezebel. He'd had a little contest with the priests of Baal, and it hadn't gone well for his competition. Now, having summarily disposed of them, he was hanging out around dry gulch, hoping that he was far enough away as to be beyond the reach Jezebel, who did not take kindly to having a bunch of french-fried priests on her hands.

And Elijah was in a complaining mood.

When God asked him why he was hiding out, Elijah was quick to let God know that he, Elijah, was absolutely the only one upon whom God could count. In essence he was saying to God, *"No one likes you, you know."*

I imagine a heavenly chuckle at that point. Elijah might be faithful, all right, but he was also a little naive to think that he was the only one. God lets him know, in no uncertain terms, that there are lots of others who have been faithful, and who remained faithful.

You see, Elijah let his fear keep him from his task. He looked at it as though no one else was around to do the job. And it was a big job.

You and I are called to faithful action. Paul reminds us later on that we are not given hearts of timidity, but have been given, through our association with Christ, hearts of courage.

The task of building the kingdom in the face of the world's love of power is indeed daunting and sometimes seems overwhelming.

But there is that still, small voice, that whispers to us in our fear-frozen inactivity and reminds us that we have never been alone, and that God still counts on us to get the job done.

The wind we feel on our face is the very presence of the Spirit of God. Don't be afraid.

In the Gardens of Babylon

Near Bagdad in modern-day Iraq, there once stood one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were built by Nebuchadnezzar II for one of his wives. The gardens were built at the cost of the lives of many slaves who labored for several years to build these marvelous gardens.

They were a delight to the eyes and to the senses.

But for the Israelites, they were just another symbol of their captivity. Babylon itself was a wonder, with its massive cities and wondrous palaces. Its rivers flowed through lush valleys.

But how can you enjoy the view when you have lost everything you consider important? The Psalmist asks, *“how can we sing songs of Zion in a foreign land?”*

The exile was a black period in the history of Israel.

They ended up there, for one thing, because they forgot who and whose they were and allowed themselves to be enticed by the worship of foreign gods and indulge in practices that fed their egos rather than the poor and needy in their land.

They became fat and contented with a secularized society and lost their true calling and purpose. Exile may seem a cruel punishment.

But, I would contend, it was a necessary one.

Having lost everything they were once again moved to understand their dependence on God.

Having lost their center of worship, they were forced to redefine the meaning of sacrifice and find a new center, not in Jerusalem, but within the family and the community, where they established synagogues and began once again to really study the scriptures.

It took years for them to reform their thinking and become revitalized in their faith, and they did it in a foreign land, as exiles and outcasts.

Finally they understood what was truly important, and were ready, when the time came, to return home with a renewed sense of purpose and a faith, not in themselves and the power of their own arms, but in the ever-present power of God.

A necessary lesson, well-learned.

New Highways

I watch with interest the preparation and the progress that takes place in the building of roads.

Once, in New Mexico, I watched from a distance as portions of a mountain were blown away to allow a highway to be built encircling it.

Things have to be made different when a highway is built.

Rough places smoothed over. Mountains leveled. Tunnels carved. The landscape is changed for a highway to be built.

Thus it is in our lives, in our societies, in our communities, as well. For progress to be made in important areas, change has to occur. Sometimes the change is painful. Usually it takes years of hard work and, sometimes, ultimate sacrifice.

But the results are worth the cost.

I watched the inauguration of our new president with a sense of awe and pride. To realize that a person of color has risen, in my lifetime, to be the chief executive officer, elected by a majority of the votes in our country, still amazes me.

The struggle to get to that place has been one that has claimed the lives of brilliant and talented people, and has been a black chapter in the history of our nation.

But change has happened. Necessary change.

In the words of Richard Wilbur, former Poet Laureate of the United States:

*“...Praise to this land that her most oppressed
Have marched in peace from the dark of the past
To speak in our time, and in Washington’s shadow
Their invincible hope to be free at last.*

*Great God almighty, free at last
to cast their shackles down and wear the
common crown of Liberty...”*

Richard Wilbur, On Freedom’s Ground

“...Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength...” Isaiah 40:31

Friday, March 27

Read Micah 4-6

On Subway Walls

“...the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls, the tenement halls, and whisper in the sounds of silence...”

Simon & Garfunkle, The Sounds of Silence

If the people had learned their lesson, there would be no need of prophets.

We mistake the role of the prophet as one who tells the future. This is not their role. It never has been.

The role of the prophet is to be a voice for God to speak to the people, to recall for them their relationship with God, and call them back to their responsibility. The prophet also lays out some possible consequences of their actions.

We may think that there are no longer prophets in the world. But we would be wrong.

There are still those who speak a prophetic word, and who remind us of our place in the purposes of God.

I think Simon & Garfunkle are probably right in that some of those voices may be those whom we might otherwise dismiss.

If you think the prophets of the Hebrew Testament were revered and held in high esteem, then you haven't really paid attention.

The prophetic word was often spurned, and the prophet exiled, tortured, or killed for their trouble.

Jeremiah was ignored because of his youth, and tossed down a sewer drain when the people became tired of listening to his constant yammering about their responsibilities.

Jesus lamented as he entered Jerusalem in the final week of his life,
“O Jerusalem, you have killed the prophets and stoned those who have been sent to you...”

And then, of course, they proceeded to kill Jesus.

The words of the prophets are sometimes hard to hear. But unless we pay attention, we might never hear what God has to say to us, and might never open ourselves to receive the grace available to us.

Saturday, March 28

Read Chronicles 34:14-33

Finding the Map

An old joke:

If a woman had been in charge of the Exodus instead of all those men, she would have asked directions and saved Israel wandering in the wilderness for forty years."

The map had been lost for a lot of years. Buried within the ruins of the temple, the books of the law had been completely forgotten while the people languished in exile.

When they returned, and began the daunting task of rebuilding, some workmen, clearing the rubble, found a book. Instead of discarding it, they brought it to the king, Josiah.

When he read it, his eyes were opened to new possibilities and his mind enriched with new direction.

The map showed him the way home.

*"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet
and a light unto my path..."* Psalm 119:105

We have a map, a book of instructions, a how-to manual, assembly instructions.

Sometimes we act too much like 'men' and think that we don't really need directions because the destination, seems so self-evident.

The Word would not have been given to us had not God deemed it important for us.

Spending time in it makes a difference in how we see things, and how we respond to God and to one another.

I am reminded of the story of Leon Uris, who was a writer of particular skills and an avowed atheist. His friend encouraged him to write a major work debunking the stupidity of the scripture. His friend was certain that such a work would propel him to the highest level of his profession.

So Uris undertook the task. But instead of debunking the Word, he was converted by it. Leon Uris is best known for his epic story, *Ben Hur*, a story of conversion and the ultimate triumph of faith.

Like so many others, the map helped him find his way home.

Monday, March 30

Read Luke 2:1-20

O Little Town

All this wandering has led us, finally, to a very familiar place. We've always known that we would one day visit here. Pilgrimage is not so much discovering new places, as rediscovering new meaning in old places.

This is an old place.

*“...that crazy stable close at hand
with shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger place to abide and stand
than the square stones of Rome...”*

G.K. Chesterton, The House of Christmas

Bethlehem. That little town that one day was the place where a young mother and her bewildered husband, became parents to a child of promise.

You would expect, perhaps, that God might choose someplace grand and glorious for such a momentous birth.

That was certainly the idea of the astrologers who came from the East searching for the new king whose star they had followed. They didn't go immediately to Bethlehem. It seemed to them to be too tiny a venue for such an event. They went first to the palace to inquire of the birth of the new king.

Which made the old king very nervous and testy.

He pretty much wiped out the little town after that. Along with all the little towns around it. He figured that overkill would be the best bet for securing his place in history and securing his kingdom for perpetuity.

What he didn't know was that his kingdom was already lost. For Christ's kingdom would exceed everything that had gone before, even though Jesus would never be crowned with gold, in his lifetime, and never lifted to an earthly throne.

But, now, at the name of Jesus, kings and nobles and ordinary people, bow in humble thanksgiving to acknowledge him Lord of life and Savior of the world.

The little town played it's part. Jesus was born there.
And God related to creation in a whole new way.

Tuesday, March 31

Read Matthew 3

Down By the Riverside

Israel is not a very huge place. So many of the places we have already been we will be visiting again in a different context.

Here we are, back at the river Jordan. We are here this time because it is here that Jesus went to his cousin John and was baptized.

My grandmother was baptized in the Neosho River in eastern Kansas. It was around Easter, and the water was cold. But she didn't mind. It was an important day for her and for that little church community.

I was baptized in a well-warmed baptistry at Pennsylvania Avenue Christian Church in Oklahoma City. Don McEvoy was the minister who dunked me beneath the waters and made me into a new being.

I still looked the same.

Unfortunately, probably, I still acted a lot the same. Baptism doesn't necessarily have an instant effect on the soul.

But the water has a way of staying with you. And, for some, at least, it really does end up changing you.

What changes may not be your outward aspect or actions. What changes is your purpose.

It even did so for Jesus.

Up to that time he had been living at home, apprenticing in his father's carpenter shop.

After that baptism he never returned to his old vocation, but took on his new role.

Baptism was not what changed him, rather it was the sign that the change had already happened and he was ready to begin.

Baptism is an important stopping place for us in our pilgrimage. It is a moment of decision. It is an action that symbolizes a willingness to change and to begin a new phase of our lives and our life of faith.

"We are rescued, we are claimed, we are loved, and we are named.

We are baptized. We have passed through the waters
and that's all that matters.

We have passed through the waters. O thanks be to God.

Avery & Marsh, *We Are Baptized*

Wednesday, April 1

Read Luke 4:1-13

Forty Days Alone

The wilderness for Jesus was different than the wilderness for the people of Israel.

For Jesus there was no visible sign of God's presence always with him. No manna covering the ground each morning. No water gushing from the rock. No quails suddenly appearing when the hunger for meat was overwhelming.

Here there was only sand and rocks and heat and an endless silence that stretched into what seemed like eternity.

After a while the hunger got to him.

Anything looked good. Rocks began to look like bread.

It was then, when he was at his most vulnerable, that the temptation began.

Temptation to deny his purpose and take on a role that was different and more conventional.

Seize the power that was available to him and use it to cement his authority and rally the nations behind him as a conquering force.

He could do it, if he chose.

He could be that leader. He could be that king. He could be that wielder of undeniable power.

All he had to do was say 'yes' and give in to that part of his nature.

But again and again he chose 'no'.

It would not be the last temptation he was ever to have. We just aren't told about all the other times.

But those times spent apart by himself in prayer ought to be ample clue that the tempter never went very far from him. The tempter just bided his time until Jesus would be vulnerable again.

And so it is for us. The temptations are never far away. Always lurking in the shadows, appealing to our baser instincts, hoping to catch us in a vulnerable moment.

That's why we need our own time in prayer. That's why we need a loving community of faith.

That's why we depend on the ever present grace of God.

Thursday, April 2

Read John 1:35-51

Wrong Side of the Tracks

It was probably tongue-in-cheek, but it was clear from Nathanael's little jibe at Nazareth that he was going to take more convincing than several of the others who came to Jesus quite willingly and compliantly.

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

We often dismiss people on little more than the color of their skin, or some detail about their origin.

When we find out someone is a Jehovah's witness, aren't we tempted to make a snap judgement as to the kind of person they might be.

When I was younger I remember my parents talking about people who came from *'the wrong side of the tracks.'* Usually that meant anyone of color, because people east of Classen Boulevard in Oklahoma City generally were of a darker hue, and anyone from there became immediately suspect.

Jesus doesn't seem to be put off by Nathanael at all, but rather lauds him as *'an Israelite without guile'*.

That may have been tongue-in-cheek as well. Maybe someone told him about what Nathanael said and Jesus was chuckling about how people decide about what is important.

Fortunately those who wanted to introduce Nathanael to Jesus were not put off by Nathanael's brush-off.

They invited him to come and see for himself.

Their persistence is our model for evangelism.

No one should ever just take our word for it. They need to experience Christ for themselves and it is our job to help them 'come and see'.

So when you've been turned down after inviting someone to worship with you, maybe we shouldn't let that be the last time. Take a different tack. Invite them to be part of some other time when the church gathers. Help them to find that place of their own comfort where they can 'come and see'.

Nathanael, as it turned out, grew into one of the best of the disciples. It was he who, when Jesus voiced his determination to go to Jerusalem in spite of the danger from the authorities, urged the others that they should all go.

I guess he finally decided that something good could come out of Nazareth after all. And he didn't want to be left behind.

Friday, April 3

Read John 4:1-43

Meeting Jesus Where You Are

One thing you begin to notice about Jesus if you spend any time in the gospels at all is that he seemed to almost always be available.

I remember that scene in *Jesus Christ Superstar* where the blind and lame and maimed swarm around Jesus asking to be healed until the character of Jesus is swarmed under by them, almost as though being devoured alive. It is a frightening scene.

But that's the way he was. He never backed away from an opportunity to share the love of God in whatever way was needed by the person with whom he was talking.

There was a woman he met by the well near Sychar in Samaria. That he spoke to her at all was enough to shock her into listening. Good Jewish men would not speak to a woman they did not know. For one thing, to do so risked speaking to a woman during her time of month, which would make him unclean for seven days. And every good Jew would cross to the other side of the road to avoid speaking to a Samaritan.

Then there was their conversation.

Jesus let her know from the beginning that she had nothing to fear from him, and didn't, indeed couldn't hide anything from him.

It must have been refreshing to meet someone who simply accepted her as she was, without assumptions or conditions, and without judgement.

What he offered her was the same thing he offered to the closest of his followers - living water to quench the very depths of her thirst.

Too often we have assumed that we have to make dramatic changes in order to gain the love of God. But Jesus tells us that all we have to do is accept the love that is freely given.

The theologian, Paul Tillich, says,

“Do not do anything now. Perhaps later you will do much. For now simply accept the fact that you are accepted. And experience for yourself the overwhelming grace of God.” *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 1952

You don't have to pretend with Jesus. You don't have to be someone you are not. You simply have to allow him to love you.

And he will. He always does.

Saturday, April 4

Read Mark 13:1-2

Temple Talk

I remember the first time I was in New York city. There is just no way to be cool and pretend that you're used to everything you see. I developed an almost-permanent crick in my neck from straining to look up all the time at the wondrous, massive buildings with their ornate facades.

The disciples were correctly impressed with what they saw in Jerusalem. Herod was known for his unsurpassed building program and the temple was one of the marvels of the age.

Jesus could be such a buzz-kill.

He pointed out that none of the grandeur at which they were gawking would last. Everything turns to dust.

Several years ago my grandson was telling me some of the things he had learned at school. They were studying astronomy at the moment.

"You know, Grandpa, that some day our sun will become a super nova and when it blows up, the earth will probably be blown up right along with it."

I must have had a look that concerned him because he quickly assured me,

"But, Grandpa, you don't have to worry. It won't happen for about a million years from now. So you're OK, for now."

Our mortality is not something about which we enjoy thinking. Sometimes, when we reach that age where death finally holds no terror for us, we might be less hesitant.

I saw an interview with a woman who was 102 and when the question was asked,

"Where do you hope to be in 10 years?" she answered, emphatically, *"Dead, I hope!"*

The fear of death - of the end of everything - of losing it all- these fears are supposed to be swallowed up in our assurance and understanding that death is not an end, but a new beginning.

Our assurance for that is to come shortly in our contemplations when we visit, once again, a tomb that was supposed to contain him, but didn't.

Death is swallowed up. So we're OK, for now.

Monday, April 6

Read Mark 14:10-11

Let's Make a Deal

The gospels, for the most part, seem so matter-of-fact when they talk about Judas' deal with the chief priests. Luke has the charity to say that it was when *'Satan entered him'* and so gets Judas off the hook a little bit.

Later there were speculations, of course. He did it for the money because he always was a greedy embezzler. He did it to force Jesus' hand and get the revolution started in earnest. He never did understand Jesus and was frustrated with the way things were going.

In *Jesus Christ, Superstar* the character of Judas anguishes over his decision, which seems to him to be inevitable, and there is even the hint that Jesus was the author of the whole plot.

When he appears before the chief priests and makes the deal his plea is:

"Just don't say I'm damned for all time."

But, of course, in the history of faith, that becomes his self-fulfilling prophesy. His name is the one which strikes disgust and which rests hard in the mouths of those who don't like to hear it's sound.

In the *Harry Potter* books, the name of the evil Lord, Voldemort, is one which no one wants to speak. It is too evil.

We might not have any trouble saying Judas' name, but we have, indeed, branded him for all time as the chief villain.

It is difficult to know the hearts of people.

Peter denied Jesus three times, yet after the resurrection he received not only forgiveness, but a new commission.

Judas, the story goes, hanged himself out of remorse for his actions. Had he stuck around for the end of the story, I wonder if there would be forgiveness even for him?

My faith says, 'Yes'.

As some theological wag has observed,

"Of course I believe God will forgive me. That's His business."

It may not be as simple as that - or maybe it is just that simple. I don't know. I can only believe that forgiveness is at the very heart of God.

Even for me.... Even for me!

Tuesday, April 7

Read Mark 14:32-50

The Last Temptation

If ever there was a moment – this was it.

When we last saw *the questioner - the tempter - the Satan*, there was that cryptic phrase “*and the tempter left him, for a more opportune moment...*”

This is it.

There was much about Mel Gibson’s treatment of Jesus in his epic film *The Passion* with which I disagreed. But I really liked the scene in the garden of Gethsemene, with the figure of the Satan slithering through, whispering in the ear of Jesus, causing him to question his purpose, his call, and his place in the plan of God.

If we think that staying and facing the cross was an easy decision, we have not yet understood the gravity of the situation. We have not yet understood that if Jesus was truly God *‘in flesh’* then this can’t just be an exercise done for dramatic effect. It has to be real. The temptation has to be intense and the possibility has to be real that Jesus will pack up and get out of there before the soldiers arrive.

Some of the gospel writers try to convey the intensity of the moment by talking about Jesus sweating ‘drops like blood’.

That he anguished over the moment is a good thing. Because when I find myself in those moments when I feel tempted to do something that I know I shouldn’t, or to not do something that I know I ought, it is important for me to know that the anguish I experience is something that even God can understand, and that my anguish is not something of which I need feel shame.

Every day we are faced with choices. Every day we must decide whether or not to remain faithful to our call, our purpose, and our place in the plan of God. Sometimes those decisions are tiny and seemingly inconsequential. But is anything inconsequential, really? Other times we know that something is called for within us which demands our best.

Jesus decided to stay. It was not an easy decision.

We, too, can decide to stay the course – to stand up and be counted among those who dare to say that they follow this one called Jesus.

That Look

I still remember it. The look on my dad's face that time when I had been already caught in a lie but didn't know it. Dad gave me the chance to 'fess up'. I weighed, in my child's mind, the possibility that he really didn't know, and chose to come down on the side of the lie.

But he did know. And what I saw there was worse than any anger. It was that look of disappointment. That look that said, *"You are better than this. But you have not chosen wisely."*

Peter had been given three opportunities to 'fess up' to his relationship to Jesus. But it was a tough time. A frightening time. He feared for his own life. He didn't see how getting himself caught, too, would be of any benefit to Jesus. He knew the cruelty of the Roman guard. So he chose to come down on the side of the lie. *"I told you, I do not know the man!"*

And Luke says, *"The Lord turned and looked at Peter..."*

Oh, the volumes that are contained in that look. The pain. The hurt. The disappointment. That was probably the worst. The disappointment.

He was Peter, after all. Bold. Brash. Ready to dare anything. Ready to risk it all for Jesus sake. Hadn't he been the one to step out of the boat into the raging sea? Hadn't he been the one to reach for his sword when the Roman guards came with Judas to the garden? Hadn't he been the one that Jesus renamed 'the Rock'?

But his feet were made of clay, after all. He crumbled there in the face of the chance to tell the truth and to face the consequences. He crumbled like a sand castle before the intruding waves. He crumbled and fell and the sound of his fall echoed like tears screamed in anguish to the unsympathetic stars.

Later, he would get another chance. But he did not know that, then.

Yet, I believe it was already foretold in that look.

For though it may have contained disappointment, the more damning aspect was that it was still filled with love.

Peter was judged by the love that would not let him go, and he was forgiven in that same moment, even though he could not see it.

Such is the love of God who knows us and loves us, *anyway...*

Thursday, April 9

Read John 18:33-38

The Truth of the Matter

Frederick Buechner in *Telling the Truth*, paints a haunting scene:

“The man stands in front of the desk with his hands tied behind his back. You can see he’s been roughed up a bit. His upper lip is absurdly puffed out and one eye is swollen shut. He looks unwashed, and smells unwashed. His...big, fat peasant feet are bare. There is something almost comical about the way he stands there...goggling down at the floor as though he’s looking for something he’s lost...

...As if he has a mouth full of stones, he says, ‘I’ve come to bear witness to the truth.’

Pilate pushes back from his desk. Cigarette smoke drifts across the surface... and he takes a drag so deep that his head swims...He squints at the man through the smoke and asks his question.

He asks it half because he would give as much as even his life to hear the answer and half because he believes there is no answer...

...‘What is truth?’

And by way of answer, the man with the split lip doesn’t say a blessed thing...” Frederick Buechner, *Speaking the Truth*, pp. 8-14

And then he washes his hands of the whole thing.

He could have done something else. He could have stood up to the priests and held his ground and let Jesus go.

But he took the easy way out. The way that too many of us choose. He decided not to decide.

But, of course, that’s a decision, too.

Lady MacBeth tried to wash the blood from her hands and went mad from the effort.

Sometimes it’s important to stand your ground.

The truth of the matter is that not to decide is to decide anyway, so you might as well take the risk.

The truth of the matter is that life is too important, sometimes, to leave to chance.

I believe that, sometimes, God needs us as much as we need God.

And that the Truth.

Friday, April 10

Read John 19:17-18

Skull Hill

They stand out in bright array, bathed in different colored light, adorning our cities with their pristine simplicity. They gleam so brightly on our tables where communion is received each Lord's Day. They glisten in gold or silver, and we wear them so casually.

I may have disagreed with Mel Gibson, theologically, but one thing that was done for us in *The Passion* was that we would never be able to look upon a cross with such a casual attitude again.

Graphically he forced us to jump at the sound of the lash whipping through the air and digging relentlessly into tender flesh. There was so much blood!! We found ourselves panting for breath as he carried the cross beam and fell, again and again, in exhaustion, through the screaming streets. We found tears in our eyes as he looked into those of his mother, the blood causing him to blink as it streamed down his forehead blinding him. We cringed when the hammer came down and we held our own hands against the pain that we could not help but feel.

Death by crucifixion was not a casual thing. It was cruel and it was meant to be cruel.

It was not an accident that the place was called Skull Hill. It was meant to strike fear in the hearts of people. It was a place to be avoided. It had the stench of death permanently soaked into its soil and the rocks were stained indelibly with blood.

We don't like to be reminded of all that. It's painful. Maybe too painful for most of us to consider.

So we wear the crosses without thinking much about them. They have become adornment. Jewelry worn to match our clothing.

Maybe it's good to be reminded, now and then, that when we wear one, or when we see one, we ought to be moved to a different place.

Faith is not an accessory to be worn for show. He endured all that so that we might understand that Love - with a capital 'L' - is our source and our redemption.

We say it every week. Next time think about it, too.

"For God so loved the world, that God gave us the only begotten.."

Saturday, April 11

Read Luke 23:50-56

A Borrowed Tomb

It was a risky thing for him to do. Openly proclaiming himself as against the majority decision and then asking for the body of the traitor in order to give him a proper and respectful burial, would have placed Joseph of Arimathea in a precarious position.

But he did it anyway.

It is never easy to take a stand against the majority. Never easy to go against the grain and choose the way less traveled.

Most of the time fortunately, we aren't placed in that position. When we are, we know that it is crunch time.

It's always been a struggle. From the very beginning. A struggle between the love of power and the power of love.

In our world, so far, the love of power seems to have the upper hand. We haven't yet learned to trust what God has placed in us as part of us. We still think that force is the only way some people will ever listen. We agree to torture because we fear what may happen if we don't. We let power sway us because it's better to be on the top of the heap than somewhere in the middle or near the bottom.

But we're learning.

We're still growing toward it.

And, I believe, we finally will discover that it's really the way to live.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself...”

Matthew 22:37-40

Joseph believed him. He trusted that doing the loving thing was worth the risk.

So he loaned him a tomb.

He didn't have any idea when he did so that he'd get it back as good as new before he could blink an eye.

The power of love always wins over the love of power.

Whether you believe it or not doesn't change the facts.

So why not believe it?