

Wanderers: Finding Home
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
March 10, 2019

Jesus sits in the wilderness contemplating his future mission to the Jewish people. He has fasted, suffered loneliness, physical and emotional disease amid the barren rocks and hills, and fought the desire to take the easy way out. A voice in his ear has offered him a romantic pathway, a shortcut that will end his suffering and make him a success. But his spiritual centre is strong and his faithfulness to Yahweh undiminished. He remains true to his calling, experienced afresh at his baptism in the Jordan. He resists!

This is the Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent. It is a fitting introduction to the season marked by repentance, reflection and renewed commitment to the journey of faith. For all of us there was a beginning of this path. For me it was a November night in 1960 when an old preacher invited me to come forward and accept Jesus as my Lord. I will never forget that beginning step. And here I am almost 60 years later still on that path. O yes, there has been stumbles and sidetracks on this pathway, but here I am, still moving forward. How about you?

What will be our experience of Lent be this year? Will our small gestures, giving up chocolate, rich food, and other pleasures help us on our spiritual journey? Thousands of Christians will talk about what it is they are giving up for Lent as if this will prove to deepen their faith and restore a relationship with God.

One can quickly add that giving up some of these things will probably be good for us. I'm sure my doctor would be exceedingly happy if I were to follow this trend and give up something that would help lower my cholesterol. But just how much it will help me in the discipline of the Christian journey toward my true home in God, I am skeptical.

There is a popular saying that life is about the journey not the destination. The beauty of the Christian faith is that while it is a journey, it also has a destination. It seems to me that the story of God's people has always been one of journeying in response to

God's call. The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament looks back at the Patriarchs as inspiration for us:

By an act of faith, Abraham said yes to God's call to travel to an unknown place that would become his home. When he left he had no idea where he was going. By an act of faith he lived in the country promised him, lived as a stranger camping in tents. Isaac and Jacob did the same, living under the same promise. Abraham did it by keeping his eye on an unseen city with real, eternal foundations—the City designed and built by God. (Hebrews 11:8-10)

Memory is so important in our spiritual journey. While our eye is ever trained on our destination in God it also looks back. Our passage from Deuteronomy this morning captures this two-fold emphasis. Moses final sermon addresses the people who have survived the wilderness journey. Once in the Promised Land they are to bring an offering “of all the fruit of the ground” to the priest. They are to put it in a basket and take it to the place where God has chosen as a dwelling on earth. The priest takes the basket and sets it on the alter and the person is to give this response: *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.*

By way of clarity the phrase “wandering Aramean” refers to Jacob rather than Abraham, for it was Jacob and his family who took refuge in Egypt. But in fact Abraham wandered far more than Jacob, so their identities fuse here.

In addition, the Hebrew word translated “wanderer” (abad) almost always refers to someone perishing and desperate and fading away. It is used elsewhere of strayed sheep, which when they do often end up dead. Furthermore, the term Aramean had a derogatory connotation. An equivalent expression today would be, “A destitute vagrant was my ancestor.” So we are not merely wanderers or pilgrims. The passage means that our ancestor was an ailing alien, one threatened by death. Thus we have the interesting confession that it is a sort of dying man from whom all the great descendants of Israel have come. Our wandering ancestors in the faith were men and

women who were often burdened by their helplessness in the face of great odds and their brokenness as human beings

Most of us are no longer farmers living off the land. But we are just as dependent on the Lord for our food and possessions as the farmer. All we have has come through God's gift and love. If these early settlers in Israel were to bring the first fruits of the land God had given them, should not we also bring our first fruits of our income to the Lord. Moses instructs them to bring the first fruits of their labour to the priest as an expression of thanksgiving and worship. This basket of the fruit from the ground represents, not what was left over after all their bills were paid and their chosen lifestyle supported, but what is taken off the top. So yes, to follow the path of a spiritual alien today, one who doesn't accept the idea that "possessing more" is the path to happiness, is to swim against a powerful current. Instead we are generous to those who have little or not enough.

Moses tells them to look back to their ancestors in the faith. Look back at Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who were wanderers, nomads in the land. They had no place to call home other than where their tents were pitched. They walked by faith, not knowing where they were going. They trusted the one who had promised them a land to call home one day. So they continued to follow God's call. Speaking of these patriarchs and what motivated them the writer of Hebrews says:

They saw it way off in the distance, waved their greeting, and accepted the fact that they were transients in this world. People who live this way make it plain that they are looking for their true home.

In other words, these pilgrims, Moses reminds his people, looked both ways. They looked back to their calling which they could trace back to God's promise to Abraham. And they looked forward to the realization of the dream, the promise to Abraham that had been rehearsed, no doubt, over many campfires through many generations, the promise of a homeland. They didn't look back with longing to be back where they came from. Their only backward glance was to the promise of the God. While they may have interpreted this somewhat materially as the promise of land, we who look through Christian eyes know that the promise was much richer

than that. And to those who listened to Moses' final speeches and whose parents had experienced the Exodus from Egypt and slavery, they knew the promise was much bolder than merely land. It was the promise that God would be their God and they would be his people.

During this Lenten season we are being reminded that we too are wanderers, pilgrims on the path Jesus forged for us. It is not a popular pathway through life, as Jesus himself reminded us. The easy road, he tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, is the broad, broad path down which the majority in our society seems to be headed. But does it lead home? I don't think so!

But on the other hand, there are many who are wanderers in the sense that they are seeking a path. There are many who find the postmodern way to be rather shallow and increasingly unsatisfying. These are people, possibly like friends, family, and co-workers we know, who are searching for a different homeland from the one advertised. Such people, that we bump into every day, are searching for another path that will lead them to inner wholeness and peace. Ought we not point them in the right direction?

So yes, this Christian journey that takes us down the path marked by Lent is one that always looks back to our Lord who promised never to leave us or forsake us. It is a journey we don't always feel strong enough to take. We, like our ancestors in the faith, often feel like ailing wanderers beset on every side by offers of an easier path. But we also keep looking to our brother Jesus: *who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God. (Heb 12:2ff)*

Amen

