

A Map for our Lenten Journey
Mark 1:9-13
March 7, 2021

Lent is a season when we focus on the Christian virtues of prayer, fasting, meditation, scripture reading, and all the disciplines that encourage us to grow in our faith. When we turn to Psalm 23 that we read this morning, we meet a person also engaged in his spiritual journey. He speaks of a pilgrim's journey through life with all its attending challenges leading to that final confrontation with death. And even in that peril he trusts God's presence to lead him through the valley of death to life eternal.

We all know what it's like to be on the move. Over time we accumulate an amazing amount of stuff. When my mother died my brothers had a difficult time sorting through all the stuff she had accumulated over the years. If we happen to move often enough, we jettison some of it. But more often than not we just carry it all to the new place. So it is in the spiritual life. The weight and burden of all these things, they, in one my mother's favourite words, trachle's us (a good Scottish word meaning a source of fatigue, being bedraggled) and only makes the journey harder.

Some of that psychic baggage we bring along is destructive. The old habits, old resentments, old hurts, all kinds of shattered dreams, continue to weight us down. Dragging all that old baggage along slows us down, sometimes even forcing us off course. I've talked to

people whose hurts are so deeply held that they have become prisoners to their past.

Jesus has just been baptized in the wilderness where John conducts his mission. You might think that the next move would be to go back home to Nazareth and celebrate with his family. But no, the Spirit drives Jesus further into the wilderness. His testing helps us to understand better the meaning of baptism for all of us. Too often we have treated baptism merely as a social rite of passage. But this diminishes the theological depth and power of the sacrament. This story helps to open up the spiritual meaning of baptism and its importance in our journey.

Having just gone through this life-changing experience of baptism, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, a place profoundly symbolic of Israel's life with God. It is a place of emptiness, quiet, remoteness; it is a desolate and dangerous place with wild beasts, as Mark reminds us. It was here that Moses led the people of Israel for forty years. In that challenging and sometimes dangerous place they were refined as a nation to be God's people. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness reminds us of Moses' stay on Mount Sinai, and of Elijah's wandering through the wilderness to Mount Horeb. These are men of the wilderness. It will hone their faith through testing, prayer, and seclusion, a place where all distractions will be minimized. Within the solitary, windswept hills and valleys Jesus would also spend 40 days and face the tests of the evil force. The test, spelled out more fully in Matthew and

Luke, came in the form of three offers of an easier route to success. Jesus is offered a very different plan for his mission by the adversary. But Jesus refuses the easy way.

But while reading Mark another visitor came alongside me this week, the medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich. She was perhaps the most important Medieval mystic in England. She lived through the black death in 14th century which killed over 60% of the population. Her book, ***Revelations of Divine Love***, has made her famous. For help I turned to a little book by Sheila Upjohn called **Why Julian Now?** I must confess I had never read much of Julian. But for some unknown reason, several years ago, I had picked up this little book at a sale while in Toronto. For this wilderness sojourn I turned to Julian to see how she could help me understand the journey. What could she teach me? That question was easily answered by the time I had joined her on her journey.

What I was convinced of, after reflecting on the story of Jesus in the wilderness, and Julian's thinking on the Christian pilgrimage, was the importance of a spiritual map for this journey we are on as Christians. Where are we to find such a map? Obviously, the bible provides a general framework for the pilgrim's journey. First however we need to look at the map that guides us. Let us allow Julian to guide us!

The human journey begins in a garden fraught with danger from a serpent. Milton wrote about this event in **Paradise Lost**. Poor Adam and Eve find themselves outside the

garden looking back after their disastrous fall from grace. No longer will humankind be protected from the knowledge of evil. This is the legacy of the Fall into sin by our representatives in the garden. We suffer the experience of evil whether we want to or not. And certainly, the world provides the evidence of this truth today.

And yet for Julian this dark forest that Eden had become is not the end of the story. After all even Milton had to write **Paradise Regained**. Julian saw that Adam's fall was necessary, in a strange sort of way, in order that God could bring good out of evil. Indeed, she argues that good cannot be fully known without knowing evil. Sin, for Julian, becomes the gate to glory. Julian is always repeating the phrase, "***all shall be well.***" It will be "***well***" because Christ, the second Adam as Paul calls him, has conquered the darkness. Christ's incarnation is God's answer to original sin and its consequences. This surely is the outline of our spiritual map. The biblical framework of the story of the Fall, original sin, incarnation and God's suffering in our place, and once again bringing us to a new Eden, forms the outline for our spiritual pilgrimage.

A popular quote from T.S Eliot's, Little Gidding, was helpful:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time...
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well...

This is so reminiscent of Julian and so instructive for our Christian pilgrimage. Our beginning in the garden, and our end being welcomed by God the Trinity at the gates of paradise, provides the outline of the pilgrim's journey. The map is provided by the framework of creation, redemption in Christ, resurrection and a new heaven and new earth. Our journey is made much clearer by this map of the territory through which we pass. We discover that the fall is no longer a final death sentence, but rather the beginning of the great reversal that God in Christ will bring about.

If you are like me you are sometimes tempted to think that you can work out your own salvation. By trying harder, by being better, by being more spiritual, or whatever, we can work this out for ourselves. This is a common confusion. All the self-help books, eastern religions, meditation gurus, you name it, offers us a way to spiritual health. All of these can be helps along the way. But ultimately they fail the crucial test. None of these can save us. None of them use the map God has provided. None bring us back to Eden.

In the course of my reading through the thoughts and visions of Julian this week, I stumbled upon this amazing thought. I must confess I hadn't thought of it this way. She suggests that not only did Adam and the human race suffer a huge loss that day when we were beguiled by the serpent, but God lost something huge as well. When humanity was exiled from Eden, God lost a soul mate and spiritual companion that God found precious.

I know we find it difficult sometimes to think of ourselves as precious in God's sight. But over and over again in the Bible we are reminded of this truth, that God finds us desirable. So precious that God was willing to become a servant, to suffer the burden of becoming human and experiencing first-hand the reality of evil, in order to win us back into fellowship with him. Julian slowly comes to this realization in her meditation on the incarnation of Christ. She comes to see that when Adam was turned out of the garden so too was God. For God had made our souls to dwell in harmony with God, and so when humanity became homeless from Eden so too did God. In some sense God himself became less complete when God lost fellowship with us. In the mystery of this we glimpse, however hazily, the depth of God's passion for us and the lengths to which God is willing to go in order to bring about our journey home.

Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. It's no accident that forces him into this situation. I wonder if you find yourself in a wilderness place in your life. I wonder if

you are there for a reason not yet disclosed to you. Perhaps we have been led there to discover something about ourselves, about our calling, about a corner God wishes us to turn.

Lent is a good time to re-focus on our spiritual map, to reorient ourselves in life to God's calling. We can't help noticing that Jesus was confronted by self-doubt in the empty desolation of the wilderness. The evil one kept asking him, "If you are the son of God". We too will face self-doubt in the cold, solitary wilderness times of our lives. Are we really Christians? Did my baptism really mean something? Has God really called me to do this or that? Wilderness, as a symbol of the times in our lives when our spiritual lives seem barren, can also be a time for discovery. May God grant each one of us courage, grace to continue our journey to the promised land.

Amen