

“Walking a Path Through Lent”

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February 21, 2010

Luke 4: 1-13

The gospel stories of Jesus tell us that after he was baptized by John in the Jordan River, he went into the wilderness for 40 days to get ready for his public ministry. This is Luke’s version of the tale. Listen for and hear God’s word to us.

Luke 4: 1-13

I’ve been to the area that Jesus would have been trodding. It is outside the ancient city of Jericho. The land is parched, dusty and hot. The only water source is within the city walls of Jericho. The mountain that is called the Mount of Temptation looks down on the city, which was an emerald green oasis, surrounded by miles and miles of parched tan, nothing.

When Satan confronts Jesus has been wandering around the desert for some time without food or water. Satan points down to the brilliant, lush city with its rich vegetation; splendid caravans with delicacies from some far off land; and the sweet smells of roasting meats and breads. The sounds of busy merchants, musical instruments and laughing children were probably carried on the winds to where they were standing. From their vantage point, Jericho would have seemed like heaven on earth. Then Satan says, “I will give you all of this, if you will worship me.”

But, we know how this story ends: Jesus says “no”. There were other temptations, both then and later in Jesus’ ministry that were pushed into Jesus’ face—that lurked in the dark recesses of his mind. Satan never stopped tempting Jesus. However, Jesus was committed to following the path that God had laid out for him—no matter what.

The season of Lent is the time in the church calendar when we get to look over our own score cards regarding our win/loss record with temptations. Lent’s a time for adjusting our attitudes and actions—for getting ourselves back on God’s path.

Are you all familiar with the comic strip Family Circus? Many Sunday mornings, the young boy, Billy is seen setting off on an errand, but instead of taking the direct route, he gets distracted and ends up going all over the neighborhood before he actually makes it to his destination.

Each time I sit down to look at my own life, I find that I am not unlike Billy. Instead of following the path I think God wants me to follow, I get distracted and go off on many other tangents, before I get to where I think I’m supposed to go. I get there eventually, but I choose my way instead of God’s.

Maybe you don’t have this problem, and if so, I envy you because staying on track can be a very difficult thing to do. Distractions or temptations, are so wonderful and appealing. If they weren’t, we’d never stray off the path.

Some of the great Christian minds have written stories about their walks with God. Hannah Hurnard wrote: *Hinds Feet on High Places*, to describe one person's struggle with following Jesus. *Pilgrim's Progress* is another. You can read the writings of St. John of the Cross, Theresa of Avilla, Agnes Sanford, Scott Peck, and Martin Luther, to name a few. The bookstores are filled with those who have struggled with faithfulness. Our book group is currently looking at the struggles of John Wycliffe as he tries to translate the Bible into English and stay true to God's call in his life.

One of the commentators says; "How silly are we to think that if the Spirit leads (us) it will be a smooth, comfortable, pleasant place. The Spirit that leads us led Jesus our brother into peril to be assaulted by Satan himself." (Pulpit Resource, p.34)

During the middle ages, it was thought that a pilgrimage to the Holy land during Lent was the best way to follow in Jesus' footsteps. But those sorts of pilgrimages cost great sums of money and so only the wealthy could find this path to redemption. And once the Holy Land was lost to the Muslims, the church needed to find another way for pilgrims to walk the path of Christ. Soon great sums of money were being spent to build labyrinths in the naves of the great cathedrals of Europe. Pilgrims could then travel to these cathedrals to walk the labyrinths as an alternative. Labyrinths became a metaphor for pilgrimage.

In the past 30 or so years, labyrinths are once again being used to help Christians re-discover walking a sacred path with Christ. There are several types of labyrinths that have been around for thousands of years and have been used by dozens of cultures. What makes labyrinths a helpful metaphor for our Christian walk is this: there is one way in and one way out; if you stay on the path you cannot get lost.

I've used labyrinths for about 20 years to teach people about pilgrimage. I also take people on pilgrimages to Israel. Walking the path with Jesus is one of the most difficult, and yet rewarding things we can ever do as Christians. Few people will ever take the journey to the Holy Land—to follow in Jesus' actual footsteps. But most people can walk a labyrinth. When it is understood as metaphor for pilgrimage, walking one can have interesting spiritual consequences. But it is not magic, it is only a tool.

Next Sunday, after worship, we will have a pot luck lunch and then explore the world of labyrinths. Through the mediums of sound, smell, art, and movement, we can take a Lenten journey with God. Not all people find meaning in the experience. But I've seen children from 4 to 84, become fascinated with the process. We'll have a labyrinth to walk, ones to trace with our fingers, and some to color. There will be materials for journaling and books to explain the meaning of the sacred geometry involved.

Jesus' 40 day journey through the wilderness prepared him for all that would lie ahead: for the teaching, the healings, the confrontations and the misunderstandings that come when you deal with people. I hope that you can find a way to use these 40 days of Lent to help you to find your way back to the path—whatever your path may be. Whether you use devotional reading, sacrificial self-denial, volunteering, pilgrimage or some other

discipline, I hope that you have a truly awesome Lenten experience so that you may appreciate the joys of Easter more fully.

Thanks be to God. Amen.