

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
March 10, 2019
Title: The Wandering Way – A Maze
Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Luke 4:1-13

With apologies to those of you who were here on Ash Wednesday, I want to share with you a poem by Ann Weems, called “Lent”. Actually, I’m not really going to apologize, because I’ve been reading this poem at one point or another for years, and every time I read it, I hear something new in it. About these 40 days of Lent, she writes:

Lent is a time to take the time
 to let the power of our faith story take hold of us,
a time to let the events get up and walk around in us,
a time to intensify our living unto Christ,
a time to hover over the thoughts of our hearts,
a time to place our feet in the streets of Jerusalem
 or to walk along the sea and listen to his word,
a time to touch his robe
 and feel the healing surge through us,
a time to ponder and a time to wonder ...
Lent is a time to allow a fresh new taste of God!

During the Lenten season, we do take the time to look at our faith story and to be open to hearing it in new ways as we take this journey. It is a time to be open to the Holy Spirit giving us a fresh new taste of God. At the same time, as a church we are also on a journey. Journeys are a big part of our faith and they frequently involve many different legs of the journey, sometimes different kinds of roads or modes of transportation.

During the season of Lent, we will be using the metaphor of a journey and some of the different kinds of roads that we travel as a way to examine our faith journey both as individuals and as a congregation. Today we think of the part of the journey that might be described as wandering and sometimes that can seem like a maze – taking many different paths, sometimes needing to backtrack.

In our reading from Deuteronomy, we heard about the end of the forty-year journey that the Hebrew people had traveled after escaping from Egypt. They left Egypt with Moses leading them and following a dream of a promised land that God would give them. To provide them with direction, God gave them commandments to help them learn how to live as a people who were suddenly no longer under the control of a foreign oppressive ruler.

However, on the journey, they spent a lot of time complaining. Every time there was a problem, they romanticized their time in Egypt forgetting the difficulties and in their mind, remembering or magnifying the things that were good. They complained. They drifted away from God. They began to worship idols. A journey that should have taken them about eleven days, took them forty years.

After forty years in the desert, they arrived at the promised land where God commands them to show gratitude for the fulfilled promise. One part of that gratitude would be to bring the first fruits of their labors, the first part of their harvest, each year as an offering to God. But another important part was to tell the story. Each year, they were to tell the story both so that their children and grandchildren would know the story, and also so that they would remember and remind themselves that God was with them during those difficult times.

The story began, “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor”. It recounts becoming a large nation being forced to work hard under Egyptian oppression. It describes crying out to God and God bringing them out of Egypt, out of slavery, and to a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Many years later, in our Gospel, we hear about another desert experience. This time it is Jesus in the desert for forty days. Jesus had just been baptized in the Jordan River by John. On that occasion, a voice from heaven announced, “You are my Son, whom I dearly love. With you I am well pleased.”

Now Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Jesus is about to begin the public portion of his ministry. One of the big questions is, “What will that look like?” How will Jesus teach people about God? How will Jesus help people to know about the God who loves them and calls them into a new relationship?

Remember that Jesus was a faithful Jew, who would have participated in the ritual described in Deuteronomy every year of his life before he stood on the edge of the wilderness. He went into the wilderness, knowing the story of his people, and confident of the God who is shelter and refuge, protector and deliverer.

After 40 days without food, Jesus was famished. It is no wonder that he was tempted by food, by power, and by pride. It’s no wonder that he was tempted to satisfy his need with acts of magic. Thinking about and exploring what his ministry would be like, he rejected the offer of easy glory and power.

Michaela Bruzzese notes that it is ironic that the very blessings – that the Hebrew people received in the desert for 40 years – food, new land,

and protection, were the very ones that Jesus rejected here in the desert. The big difference is not in the blessings themselves, but rather in who was offering them and at what price. God gave these blessing to the Israelites in the desert and later when they entered the new land in Canaan. The blessings that God bestowed upon them were freely given so that the Israelites could discard their false idols and trust in the liberation promised by God.ⁱⁱ

As she points out, the difference was that the blessings offered to Jesus came with strings attached. They required Jesus to worship the devil; they required that Jesus use the gifts for himself and his own satisfaction which made the gifts ends in themselves instead of instruments of new life for all.

“For the Israelites, for Jesus, and for us, our desert journey gives us the opportunity to name and reject the false idols we have collected – whether they be comfort, power, or protection.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It always comes as a surprise and a gift to me when something I have been reading in the scripture for years, suddenly raises something I hadn't thought about before. This week, in reading about this passage, a simple observation caught my attention. Jesus was alone in the wilderness. There were no paparazzi following him eager to report on his every move. At this point, he did not have disciples who might have been with him. Jesus was alone with no one else to see or know what was happening.

The only way that this account could have appeared in the gospels was because at some point, Jesus must have told his disciples about what happened. I imagine, that they must have been consoled to realize that in a moment of crisis, even Jesus suffered temptation.

This can also be a source of comfort to us as well. When we are in the desert of life, it can be comforting to know that Jesus spent time in the desert. When we are trying to figure out what to do and may be tempted to choose the easy way, it can be comforting to know that Jesus was also tempted.

“Lent presents us with the fundamental questions of identity: Who am I? Who are We?” In Deuteronomy, the people claimed their place in the lineage of a sacred story. But claiming this identity as wandering, as aliens in a foreign land, as those who left their land dreaming of something better, and as those who entered into another new land doesn’t mean much unless they, and we, embrace the stranger, the other, because we are all in this together as descendants of migrants.^{iv}

For Jesus, he had to go through a time of stress and temptation, to be able to really know who he was and what direction his ministry would take. Think about it, it would have been so easy to get people to follow him by healing everyone who came to him. It would have been so easy and so tempting to get people to follow him by providing enough food to the hungry people of Israel so that they would never have to worry about being hungry again.

Jesus was certainly a miracle worker, but there was so much more to his ministry than that. Don’t forget that his miracles, his healings, did initially bring people to follow him and that was what scared the authorities. That’s what made them afraid that he was going to upset the status quo for those in power and authority. The real question, was would Jesus “win people by granting what they immediately desire, or would he invite them, and us, to share in his suffering and resurrection.”^v

In this maze, in this time of temptation, Jesus response was always to turn to scripture. The temptations were always “If, you are the Son of God, then ...” These can be understood either as “If, you are the Son of God... prove it by turning stones into bread” or “Since, you are the Son of God... you have the power to turn stones into bread, use your power.” This kind of temptation continues to come to us today. “If you are a Christian, prove it by ...” or “Since, you are a Christian, you are expected to do...”

In our daily lives, we find ourselves needing to answer again and again, who we are, and how we will be those people. Sometimes the path seems obvious to us, but there are other times when we can't figure out where we are, or which way we should be going. It is at those times that we find ourselves caught in the middle of a maze, trying to make sense of where we are and trying to find the best path.

Many individuals, churches and conferences in the United Methodist Church are in the middle of a maze right now, trying to figure out which way to go and bumping into walls and sudden turns. At General Conference there were voices challenging, If you are Christian, prove it by Since you claim to be Christian, then you have to do... You have to agree with us, or you aren't really a Christian.

Since General Conference there are more voices asking us to really examine whether our discussions and debates are focused on loving and including all those who God loves or if they are more focused on unity for the sake of preserving the denomination. They are asking if preserving the denomination has become an idol for us.

There are speculations all over the place about what will happen and whether we will split into two or more new denominations or whether we will find a way to continue to live together and if we do whether that will be for

the security of the organization or because it is the most faithful way to follow God and be in ministry. Mazes can be very complicated and when we turn a corner, we can't always see what is around the corner, whether it is a path leading forward, or a dead end.

As a church, we are also facing questions about where God is calling us to be in the future. What are the ways that God is calling us to live out our faith together? I was talking with a pastor this week whose church is located next to a college campus with students walking past their building. On Thursday mornings, they have a ministry called "Spirituali-tea" T-E-A. They set up outside their church and offer fresh brownies and tea and other beverages to the students walking past. This has led to some good conversations with students, but primarily it has been a way to witness to God's love.

That's not something that would be easily translated here given our very different geography. But still, we are called to look at the ways that we are sharing God's love with those who never walk in the doors of a church. What are the ways that God is calling us to walk through this maze and to better be witnesses for God?

As individuals, we are always facing the questions of what to do, how to live out our faith in our daily lives, how to share God's love, how to live into the fullness of all that God calls us to be.

Lent is a time for us to sort out and refuse the other offers that try to lead us away from God. Lent is a time for us to embrace again, the only reliable gift of well-being. Lent is a time for us to be aware of others who would try to define us, and not allowing them to do so, or to manipulate us to certain actions. We are invited to identify and defeat the false gods that

we have accumulated and accept God's promise and direction that guides us through the maze and out the other end.

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ⁱ Weems, Ann, “Lent” in Kneeling in Jerusalem, p.20

ⁱⁱ Bruzzese, Michaela “Journey to Freedom” in Preaching the Word <https://sojo.net>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Smith, Martin L. “Who Are We?” in Preaching the Word

^v Nangle, Joe “Temptation and Suffering” in Preaching the Word

^{vi} Weems, Ann, “Lent” in Kneeling in Jerusalem, p.20