

Lent

by Mark Nakagawa

March 1

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10,
I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1: 9-15

We begin Lent with the immediacy of Mark's gospel. Jesus has just been baptized, but there is no time for him to bask in the glory and splendor of his new birth.

Immediately, says this evangelist, Jesus is thrust into the wilderness. This is where he begins his public ministry: In desolate sparseness, confronted with challenges, risks and danger. Jesus is not on his own, however. The angels are present, in the spirit of "diacono," ministering to him in the barren wilderness.

This is also where Christians begin the season of Lent. United Methodist Christians come into Lent bearing this same historic legacy of ministering to people in the wilderness. John Wesley started the Methodist movement in the 18th century industrial revolution- era England. In this context, Wesley faced a wilderness of his own.

It was the wilderness of poverty for many of England's citizens, who were forced to work in mines and factories for a less-than living wage. It was the wilderness of suffering for children, who always suffer the most when times are bleak. It was the wilderness of indifference, created by an institutional church that was more concerned with self-preservation than with selfless giving modeled by Jesus.

Into the wilderness, John Wesley took his baptismal faith and confronted the evil beasts that threatened to destroy the physical and spiritual lives of people.

In the particular moment of this Lenten

season, the world has become a barren wilderness for many people. It has become a wilderness of danger for those who were once comfortable in their homes but who now find themselves homeless. It has become a wilderness of despair without hope for the one who has just lost employment. It is the wilderness of uncertainty for the one who is now a caregiver for an elderly and aging parent.

We go as Jesus goes, into the wilderness, in our baptism faith that leads us out of our comfort zones. We go in obedient faith, where we also will encounter angels along the way to minister to us, as we minister to those among us.

March 8

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31;
Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8: 31-38

Jesus called his first disciples many centuries ago. He has called disciples throughout the centuries since then, and he continues to call people as disciples today. A disciple is a student and a follower. A good disciple hears, obeys and follows the teacher. If the lessons have taken firm root, the disciple will follow the teacher throughout life.

The Lenten journey is an experience of following Jesus. We follow him by walking behind, and at the same time Jesus walks beside us. We know that the journey will take us to the cross, but along the way Jesus instructs us to pick up the cross and follow him.

Throughout my life and ministry in the United Methodist Church, I have heard countless

stories from my elder pastors who ministered within barbed-wire fences of the Japanese American World War II internment camps.

These camps were established in areas that resembled the wilderness where Jesus spent forty days being tempted in his faith. Those dedicated pastors had their own crosses to bear during this critical time in our nation's history. Trying to provide for their families was challenging enough for a pastor even in normal times. Yet, as servants of Jesus, they took up his cross and carried it with them inside of those barbed-wire fences.

Within those camps, life still continued with familiar issues and crises. Babies were born, children and youth needed guidance and instruction, parents and elders faced challenges and responsibilities with the added pressure of being in an exile existence. An added pressure was put upon parents of young G.I.s who voluntarily went off to war, hoping to prove their loyalty to America.

During Lent, God calls us to bear the cross for the people we serve. While the burdens of the cross may seem heavy at times, we do not bear them alone.

By bearing the cross of Jesus, these pastors bore the challenges and problems of many who struggled to live an exile existence. They gave hope and meaning to their people at times when they were tempted to succumb to despair and hopelessness.

It was "beneath the cross of Jesus" where these pastors-in-exile stood, and from the base of that cross they lived the compassion and love of God with their lives in service to an exile community.

During Lent, God calls us to bear the cross for the people we serve. While the burdens of the cross may seem heavy at times, we do not bear them alone, but with the strength of Jesus, who knows the fullness of all the burdens we carry.

March 15

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19;
I Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2: 13-22

In the Japanese American church tradition that I was raised in, an important event is the annual matsuri, or festival. On the day of matsuri, Japanese American Christian faith is shared and expressed through the diverse channels of our culture.

Delicious foods are made from a variety of ingredients, with some delicacies requiring weeks of preparation before they can be cooked and served on that day. Hand-crafted items that are made by the congregation members reflect the depth of care and precision that goes into each sewn stitch, brush-stroke and wood carving. Artists display their work through striking and subtle colors on canvas and special kami, or writing paper. Entertainment will include the resounding beats of taiko drums as well as the slow, subtle moves of dancers who re-create the atmosphere and aura of the ancient courts of the rulers.

In many ways, the matsuri tradition reflects the ancient biblical theme of extending hospitality and welcome to strangers. It is service to others that is stressed, rather than serving ones own self.

Jesus encountered a bazaar on that day in the Jerusalem temple. Unlike the matsuri tradition that focuses on extending hospitality to guests, the temple vendors were focused solely on enriching themselves. No wonder Jesus was incensed at what he saw going on. They had turned a sacred temple into a den of thieves. The "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" that we learned about in Sunday School cleansed the temple by using a whip made of cords!

Might Jesus also use that same whip on churches today? Preachers who subvert the Gospel of Jesus by proclaiming the “prosperity gospel” are like vendors selling snake oil to the faithful. Congregations that seek to “market” themselves in consumerist fashion seek to build up for themselves rather than building up the body of Christ.

John’s Gospel places this story towards its beginning, rather than towards the end. This is a fitting place for us in our faith, as the life of Jesus calls us first and foremost to serve others rather than ourselves, and to enrich the lives of people with the truth of the Gospel.

March 22

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22;
Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3: 14-21

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, under the cover of darkness in the temple. In its simplicity, this scene is dramatic as so many scenes in John’s gospel are: Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well; Jesus feeding the 5,000; the arrest and trial of Jesus. It is also an ironic scene: Nicodemus, a learned Pharisee and Jewish leader seeks out an itinerate preacher who was born in a horse stable.

Why was Nicodemus afraid (or ashamed) to be seen with Jesus in the light of day? What was it that Nicodemus needed from Jesus that his own intellectual capacities could not answer or satisfy?

This passage contains the great news that Martin Luther once called “the Gospel in miniature”: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” It also contains a sad truth about humanity: “The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.”

The season of Lent is the time when God’s judgment and grace make themselves known to humans. The judgment comes in the “darkness”

of sin, death, and human limitations, symbolized in the ashes we received on Ash Wednesday. The grace comes in the “light” of Jesus, who not only exposes our weaknesses and frailties, but gives us the conviction to acknowledge and confess them.

God’s judgment and grace are not two separate entities, as is often believed, but rather two sides of the same divine coin.

After asking his final question of Jesus, Nicodemus fades from this scene without uttering word. That is God’s judgment. Later on in this gospel, God’s grace will allow Nicodemus to participate in the burial preparation of Jesus’ body. The one, who came seeking our Lord in the darkness of night with questions, will now take part in the final act of his life that gives light and new life to all the world.

March 29

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 51:1-12;
Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

In contemporary North American Christian churches, a popular trend has been to offer “seeker-sensitive” services. While these worship services are designed to appeal to Generation-X, the implication of these services is that those who are seeking to find God will have some success in these tailor-made services for them.

I know people who are continually seeking God. They seek God in coffee shops. They seek to find God in one of the *New York Times* bestseller titles. There are blogs and websites that cater specifically to people who are seeking God.

While I applaud the sincerity and honesty of those who claim to be seeking God, the Bible tells a somewhat different story. It is about a God who seeks people, rather than waiting for people to seek God. If anything, human beings have a history of trying to avoid God rather than seeking God!

The Exodus story includes Moses’ running away from God for a period of roughly 40 years,

before God brings him back to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Perhaps the most famous person in the Bible who was known to run from God is Jonah, who tried to evade God by heading away from Ninevah. The tax-collector Zacchaeus wanted to both see Jesus but avoid being seen by him, so he climbed a tree in order to try and accomplish both tasks.

Today's words from the prophet Jeremiah, assure us that God will always seek to care for humanity. Jeremiah speaks of a "new covenant" between God and God's people, that will be written on the people's hearts. This passage is the only stated Old Testament reference to the New Testament, and it is a fitting one for us as we approach the end of a season that emphasizes spiritual preparation for something transformative in our lives.

These words from Jeremiah were written in the context of the Babylonian exile. Yet, for us, the context is the same. In the same way that Jeremiah spoke the divine words that would transform the hearts of God's people then, the message for God's people during Lent carries a similar emphasis. They speak to a particular aspect of Easter, in which God will transform human hearts with the good news of resurrection.

April 5

Isaiah 50: 4-9; Psalm 31:9-16;
Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47

We enter this week in high dramatic fashion, with Jesus riding into Jerusalem. This final week of his earthly life and ministry will be played out in a dramatic way, with unlikely characters filling the important roles.

Those who have been closest to Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, the twelve, will now become the most distant from him during his greatest hour of need. Indeed, they will all but disappear from the stage. Time and again throughout this Gospel, they don't fully under-

stand the meaning of Jesus' identity as the Son of God. They fail to understand the words of Jesus at the Passover meal. They fall asleep at Gethsemane, and one of Jesus' own disciples betrays him. As if to add insult to injury, they all desert him when his trial begins.

Where the 12 fall short of standing by Jesus, others who might be the least expected to figure in this drama now appear on the scene, more than making up for the disciples' vanishing act.

A Roman centurion who is present proclaims, "Truly, this man was God's Son!" These words foretell another experience between a Roman centurion and the Holy Spirit, which will result in the first Gentile convert to Christianity in the New Testament.

Women disciples are also present; they have not fled from the cross but instead have gathered around it. These bold women have been strident followers of Jesus throughout this gospel, and they seem to understand (more than the 12) the significance of this event. These women will still be there to witness Jesus' body being laid in the tomb. And, they will be among the first witnesses to resurrection on Easter.

As we begin this Holy Week with Jesus, what part will we take in the drama? Will we be among the crowd who shouted "Hosanna!" one moment, and then disappeared the next? Will we be among the 12, nowhere to be found when our Lord needs us the most?

Will we follow the example of faith as modeled by the centurion and the women? What part do you choose to play in this drama? What role is God calling you fulfill today?



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