

Everything We Need

The first sermon in a Lenten series entitled *Journeying to Jerusalem*

Mark 1.9-13

The First Sunday of Lent

March 1, 2009

The treasure we seek requires no lengthy expedition, no expensive equipment, no superior aptitude or special company ...the reason so many of us cannot see the red X that marks the spot is because we are standing on it. All we lack is the willingness to imagine that we already have everything we need.

- Barbara Brown Taylor

The Reading

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

An Exciting Year

My senior year at college was exciting. It was exciting, firstly, simply because I had gotten there! I don't want to share from the bountiful store of my youthful transgressions, so suffice it to say there was a time when it didn't look like I would ever graduate. The year was exciting, secondly, because after years of studying voice, I was invited to sing a senior recital. Voice has never been a particular strength of mine, so it was gratifying to have my efforts recognized.

This recital was unique, because I shared the hall with a friend; she sang the first set, I sang the second, and then she joined me on stage for a final set in which we sang duets from several Broadway Musicals. This had never been done at my school, and the final set came as a pleasant surprise for the audience. While I awaited my first turn on stage, however, I made a

serious mistake. I was nervous, of course, so in order to while away the time, I decided to rehearse the lyrics to my opening song. Piece of cake, I thought. But, no, despite my best efforts, I could not pull those lyrics from my memory. Perhaps, I thought, I needed to get away from the sounds streaming from the recital hall; so I went into the hallway where all was quiet; still no lyrics. By now I was in a real tizzy, not sure of what to do next. Then I heard the final song of the first set, and knew it would soon be my time to sing. I was scared to death, and had no idea what I was going to do; but I walked onto the stage and took my position in the crook of the piano; still no lyrics. Buying time, I cleared my throat; still no lyrics. Finally, I realized there was nothing to do but trust the moment. I nodded to my accompanist – the signal to begin - she played the introduction, and I sang the song flawlessly, effortlessly. I'll never know exactly what happened; all I know is that I trusted the moment and sang. I didn't know it at the time, but there is a spiritual lesson in that experience. At the time I was grateful simply to have avoided an embarrassing situation; but as we begin our Lenten journey toward Jerusalem, there is a lesson to be taken from an experience like this; living fully in the moment, recognizing that we have everything we need. After we pray together, I would like to chat about that for just a few minutes.

Gracious One, today we begin a journey of the heart that will take us from here to Jerusalem, and beyond to an empty tomb. We pray that all along this journey - at every stage and with every encounter along the way - we would be present to the moment, that we would live in the moment of your presence, of your life, of your love. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

What Do We Want from Lent?

This week I changed the name of the sermon series we're beginning today. I had initially planned to call it *Journey to Jerusalem*, but that title tends to put too much weight on the destination, Jerusalem; and Lent is not so much about the destination as about the journey itself. So I changed the title, which now reads *Journeying to Jerusalem*, and we will focus our attention on the journey. If we look too much to the past, we will miss its unique meaning. And if we look too much to the future – a future we're not ready for – we will again miss its unique meaning, and the blessings and benefits it has in store for us. It's not the past that we need to consider, and it's not the future; it's the moment, it's this moment, it's this phase of our journey – where we are right now - that we need to consider.

This is certainly emphasized in the biblical stories that undergird and inspire the imagery of Lent. Consider, for example, the Exodus and wilderness wanderings of the Hebrew children; an enslaved people liberated by God through Moses. The forty days of our Lenten experience reflect the forty years of their wanderings, and we need to glean from them the same lessons. For their journey to be successful, they had to let go of the past. You would think that a bunch of liberated slaves would be thrilled to let go of the past; but this seems easier said than done. At the first sign of difficulty, they began whining and crying to go back to Egypt. Theirs had been an oppressed, miserable existence; but that seemed preferable to an open ended journey on which they would be forced to depend exclusively on God.

The Hebrews also had to let go of their journey's destination. After some time they began to anticipate the good life available in the land of milk and honey promised to them; but they weren't ready to receive that promise. They weren't ready to live a life of spiritual freedom and maturity. Only by staying the course of their journey would they be prepared to inherit the promise. The success of their journey depended on leaving the past behind, allowing the future to lie ahead undisturbed, and living in the moment under God's leadership and care.

Again, the imagery of our Lenten experience is undergirded by the forty days of temptation and testing that Jesus underwent at the beginning of his public ministry. Spiritual growth always begins with a time of reflection, testing, and self examination; this has been affirmed by spiritual giants in all times and places. And Jesus was no exception; he, in fact, provided us with a model of Lent as a time of reflection, of meditation and prayer, of finding the courage to be honest with ourselves, seeking to identify those places in which we need to be open to God.

All of this begs the question; what do we want from Lent? It's a time of journey, to be sure; it's a time of introspection and prayer, but what do we expect to get out of this Lenten experience? Let me stop for a moment and offer you an 'out.' If you are satisfied with the status quo, if you are satisfied with your spiritual life as-is, if you are satisfied with the mission and ministry of our faith community as-is; if you are satisfied, you may excuse yourself now and go grab a cup of coffee while it's still hot, because you don't need to hear anything else that's

going to be said this morning. But if your heart hints that there is more, that there has to be more than the surface appearance of family life, professional life, or the spiritual life; Lent is for you. If your heart tells you there is more, and you yearn for that more - for that treasure that we call God - then Lent is for you. The purpose of Lent is to find and identify with that treasure – God’s presence – to find the X that marks the spot as Barbara Brown Taylor says, and to examine our lives in its light.

Many have sought this treasure – this *more* - on exotic journeys to the mystical East, on their ascent of the ladder of professional achievement, or on the back of good works in the community that bring respect and admiration. Many have sought this treasure through the accumulation of more: more wealth, more toys, more influence, more power. Within the church, many look at the programs, meetings, and ceaseless maintenance of its institution, and long for something more as well. Sitting through worship gatherings is no guarantee of finding more; no guarantee of finding vitality, meaning, and purpose in life. Living an upright and moral life is no guarantee of finding more. Thoreau once said that we shouldn’t try to be *too good* because we might cheat ourselves out of too much life. Aim higher than good, he said, be *good for something*. I think he is right. We can be moral simply out of fear; we can do the right thing out of mindless repetition or blind obedience to authority. Thoreau, I think, rightly suggested that we aim higher than that, that we find ourselves in the realm of more, that we be good for something or someone.

Earth’s Crammed with Heaven

We will not find the treasure we seek simply by attending church, being good, or accumulating the most power and possessions. We will find the treasure of God’s presence when we awaken to the reality that God *is* with us. We need not journey toward God’s presence, but simply open ourselves to the presence of God within. Karl Jung was fond of saying, “Bidden or not bidden, God is present.” To be sure, we have the freedom to ignore God’s presence - which is why we find ourselves traveling around the world or trying to accumulate more and more – we have the freedom to seek the red X anywhere and

everywhere; but we don't find it – we can't see it - because we have been standing on it all along.

Wherever you are on your faith's journey, you are standing on the red X. If you are a novice in faith, you are standing on the red X. If you are mature in your faith, you are standing on the red X. Even if you have made detours on your journey and find yourself with a weak faith, a suspended faith, or no faith at all, simply trying to deal with serious issues in your life, you are standing on the red X, because God is present if you will simply awaken to that reality. I know it sounds crazy, but the journey of faith is not a journey toward God; rather, it is a journey in God's presence. Marcus Borg goes so far as to say that the spiritual life is a journey toward God in God's presence. I know it sounds crazy. It's counter intuitive; but the accumulated wisdom of saints in the faith for millennia affirms this to be true. They tell us in no uncertain terms that they fought, they sought, they studied, they experienced disappointment or ecstasy, joy or despondency, they traveled, they searched, they roamed; yet, finally, when they found the more – the treasure that is God - they realized that it had been there all along. They simply had not been open to it.

So it is with us, we're standing on the red X, and can recognize it if we will allow ourselves to awaken to that reality. The experience of Jesus teaches us that we're pulled by temptation in many different ways. We are pulled simply to ignore God's presence. And we are pulled toward thinking that we actually are self sufficient; that we can take care of ourselves, so instead of searching for the presence of God we seek to accumulate wealth and knowledge and power and on and on and on. We're pulled by temptation in so many ways, but the life and ministry of Jesus show us that we can live fully and faithfully in the moment; this moment. The life and ministry of Jesus show us that we can let go of the past with its attachment to what was and will never be again, and live fully in this moment, because X marks the spot. We can let go of the future as well; we are not ready for the intimacy and intensity of the experience of God we will know when, as Paul says, we see face to face. Our focus can – and should – remain in the moment; our focus should remain right where we are, because X marks the spot. God is with us, present to us, and we simply have to awaken to the reality. Our focus can – and should – remain on the journey itself; because wherever we are on that journey

we're standing on the red X. Elizabeth Barrett Browning once observed that earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush alive with God. This is precisely what we discover when we let go of the past with its longing for what was; when we let go of the future for which we are not yet ready; and we live in the moment ...earth is crammed with heaven. God is present to us, in us, and through us to the lives of others. God is present in nature; and if we will awaken to this reality, a walk through the garden can become an experience of faith. God is present in our encounters with each other, and if we will awaken to this reality all of our encounters - with family, with friends in the faith community, or at work - can be holy encounters.

Earth is crammed with heaven. God is present. This should be our goal during Lent, simply to awaken to the fact that we are standing on the red X. The treasure we seek, the God for whom we long, the peace, the comfort, the challenge, the empowerment; we're standing right there. All we need do is awaken to the reality that for this journey we call Lent we have everything we need. Amen.