

Inner & Outer Journeys

I. Self Examination in Lent

- A. During these 40 days of Lent we follow Jesus in the Gospel readings as he makes his way toward Jerusalem and the Cross.
1. Every year in these days before the Feast of Easter, the church invites us to a season of self examination. --How are we doing on our own journeys?
 - a. both the inner dimension that we experience in our inner lives, our hearts, souls, and bodies? --
 - b. and the outer dimension that we travel on the roads of the social/political world, our loved ones, our communities, the nations and this planet Earth, our island home?
 - c. Do we need to make some re-alignments within these journeys, or realignment between the inner and outer dimensions of the way we travel through these brief years of our lives?
 2. We ask these questions as people of faith with help from some of the great figures and stories of faith in our scriptures.
 - a. Today we hear some of the accounts in the lives of Abraham, -- Paul, -- and Jesus.
 - b. What insights can we glean from their experience as it has been passed on to us?
 - c. How can we better read our own stories from within these great stories of our faith heritage?
- B. One of the prominent Christian theologians of recent times, H. Richard Niebuhr (Prof. of Christian Ethic, Yale Div. Sch.) repeatedly maintained that the first response of humanity toward God is distrust.
1. All about us is such extraordinary abundance that divine generosity would seem overwhelming but we dispute it.
 - a. Maybe it's because we feel ourselves unworthy.
 - b. Maybe it's because of a patriarchal image of God where we are subordinate to a superior as a child to a formidable parent.
 - (1. God provides and we accept, gratefully, humbly, but with no room for reciprocity or mutuality.

2. Trust in a relationship with God is not easy for us.
 - a. This theme of trust is one of the threads we can follow as we mine the treasures of some of our greatest guides.

II. Abraham, Paul & Jesus: Trust in God

- A. Abraham is held as a towering figure of trust in God, one who knew the abundance of God and accepted God's promises.
 1. Abraham trusted God to leave his homeland of Ur and go to a land God promised to give him.
 2. But as an example of the readiness of the Hebrews to be honest about their heroic figures - now, much later in his years, Abraham is afraid.
 - a. He and Sarah have no child and his only heir to be is a child of a slave.
 - b. He has no idea of how he will possess the land that God promised.
 - c. The story is a dialogue between God patiently affirming the original promises and Abraham's impatience, his doubt and anxiety.
 3. In vss. 13-16, left out of our reading, God fills in details for Abraham about the struggles to come of which he probably would rather not know.
 4. But the major move of the story is the Covenant making ceremony where animals are cut in two and the parties of the covenant must pass between the severed animals.
 - a. It was a way of saying that if one broke the covenant agreement, then the same death would be upon you.
 5. When the sun had gone down, a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon Abraham.
 - a. He has a vision of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passing between the pieces.
 - b. God was making a unilateral covenant, a one sided agreement, as an affirmation of God's promise to Abraham to give him this land.
 - c. Abraham is invited beyond his need for evidence and proof into a deep relationship of trust, a different kind of knowing.
 - (1. God commits to the promise at such depth that God considers an experience of suffering and even death to show divine faithfulness.
 - (2. God becomes vulnerable for the sake of the promise.

- d. God's revelation to Abraham is a knowledge of relationship.
 - (1. Abraham trusted God without a tangible sign.
 - (2. The new found trust enables Abraham and Sarah to continue to be faithful,\ to inform,\ empower\ and bless their progeny as the community of the future.
 - (3. Abraham's God is intimately personal, responsive to believing faith.
 - (4. What we take away from the story is that *this is where knowledge of God begins.*

B. The Christian community at Philippi is one of Paul's favorites that he describes as "*my joy and crown...my beloved.*"

- 1. As yet there was no sign of the divisive forces that were so common in other communities.
 - a. But in this era, the vast, dispersed Roman Empire was in early decline, as others voices too expressed warning.
 - (1. There were signs of decadence which would increase and eventually contribute to its demise.
 - (2. Old disciplines were beginning to slip. Cynicism was creeping into people's attitudes.
 - (3. Fear,\ anxiety,\ and insecurities from the outside can trigger neurotic responses in our bodies such as alcoholism,\ food addictions,\ demanding sexuality.
 - b. Paul sees dangers, warning them with tears that "*many live as enemies of the cross of Christ,*"
 - (1. "*their god is the belly... their minds set on earthly things.*"
- 2. Paul gives an impassioned plea to the Philippians to be imitators of the "*example you have in us,*" speaking of himself, Timothy and Epaphroditus.
 - a. In this 3rd ch. Paul builds on the template of Christ which he introduced in ch. 2, with the magnificent hymn of the self-emptying of Christ (2: 5-11).
 - b. Speaking of how this applied to himself as an example, he says in vss. 4-7:
 - (1. "*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:-- circumcised on the 8th day,\ a member of the people of Israel,\ of the tribe of Benjamin,\ a Hebrew born of Hebrews;-- as to the law,\ a Pharisee;-- as to zeal,\ a persecutor of the church; -- as to righteousness under the law,\ blameless. Yet whatever gains I had,\ these I have*

come to regard as loss because of Christ...For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ."

- c. This helps our imagination and understanding of the kind of things Paul is speaking of as "*earthly things.*"
 - (1. It's the things on our journey through the world that we use to build a sense of identity and security.
 - (2. The things perhaps we are most proud of,\ that we have worked hard to earn,\ that give us status in the world.
 - (3. It's the place where we will go to extravagant length to defend ourselves from external threats.
- d. Paul had the greatest list you could put together among the Hebrews, but speaking out of his experience,
 - (1. all of that, he had to give up,\ release, --to become like Christ in his death,
 - (2. in order, he says, "*to be found in Christ and to know the power of his resurrection.*"
- 3. The dimensions of what Paul is saying are very large. He is speaking of the transformation of humanity.
 - a. It takes place in our practice, \ not in our thinking or some kind of static theology.
 - (1. Unfortunately, centuries of theologians have tried to make that of it.
 - b. To be enemies of the cross of Christ is to live in a way that denies Christ's own pattern of self emptying,
 - (1. refusing to find our security and identity in the path of the cross,\ the path of relaxing our grip,\ letting go of the things that we have mistaken as our salvation in the midst of the world.
 - (2. Transformation is to discover that these thing are not and can never be what save our lives.
 - (3. Paul communicates his own discovery, --our willingness to share in Christ's death -- is the way of we will experience our own transformation into Christ's likeness.
 - c. The Christ template is that Christ was born in human likeness and shared our death in order that we might be transformed into his likeness and share his vindication.
 - (1. This is not an easy path but the promise is that Christ is there for us as we can learn to trust.

- (2. As we examine our own journeys we may discern by the Spirit, steps along the way that we can take to relieve our distressed lives of finding salvation in the wrong place.
- (3. We can move along on the journey of transformation one step at a time.

C. Finally, how do we see this letting go, this self emptying in Jesus himself?

1. Jesus is under no illusions that his work is a threat to the authorities of the Temple -- and the authorities of the Empire.
 - a. Healing the sick,\ casting out demons,\ especially among the poor and neglected is an affront to the powers that be.
 - b. His vision is shaped by that of Isaiah 400 years earlier who challenged the predominant Jerusalem theology that held David's monarchy and the Jerusalem Temple as the final fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham.
 - c. The OT theologian Walter Brueggemann called this the "*royal consciousness*," or, God's will reified in the politics of the state.
 - (1. This is what the prophets battled against with a vision of a just and righteousness kingdom.
 - (2. Jeremiah said God would do a new thing beyond the primacy of the Temple.
2. With this new vision, Jesus looked out on Jerusalem and wept.
 - a. God's dream,\ God's compassionate desire,\ and bold determination -- is to gather God's human children closer and closer in God's embrace and love.
 - (1. This is the mission and commitment at the center of Jesus' work.
 - (2. Like a mother hen, God seeks to draw,\ embrace,\ include and welcome\ God's children into the family of humanity that God has intended from the dawn of Eden itself.
3. So when those Pharisees show up with their warning about Herod, -- Jesus sees a veiled threat, and ulterior motives to move him out of their province,\ political machinations.
 - a. But Herod, he says, has no power over him or his mission. He will finish his mission,\ not deflected by these obstacles.
 - b. He likens his rejection by his own people to the long standing rejection of the prophets.

- (1. But he will not stop out in the provinces. He is going all the way up to Jerusalem.
- (2. Their judgment will be their own self destruction.
- (3. But the day will come when Israel will acknowledge the One who comes *“in the name of the Lord.”*
- 4. The image of a brooding hen can be seen as a connection to the beginning of creation when the Spirit of God brooded over the face of the deep and a new creation came forth.
 - a. Jesus sees God acting through his work to bring a new creation,\ a new human community,\ even in the face of these obstacles and rejection.
 - b. Nothing can stop the completion of what Jesus is about, not even death itself.
 - (1. *“Today, tomorrow and the third day I finish my work.”*

III. Facing the Obstacles that Threaten our Lives

- A. As we look at our journeys, how are we navigating the paths of our lives,
 - 1. whether we encounter obstacles complicating our inner transformation or obstacles to overcome on the exterior paths God has for us?
 - 2. The lives of these great models, Abraham, Paul and the template of Christ that we find in Jesus, all speak to us about trust.
 - a. Trust in a relationship with God that goes beneath our need for hard and empirical clarification as Abraham discovered.
 - b. An experience of transformation into the likeness of Christ through the letting go of our small plans of self-salvation as Paul discovered, a radical and vulnerable kind of trust.
 - c. An inner vision of God’s reaching out through our own lives as we trust that God is bringing about a new creation.
 - 3. These are large markers along the way for us in this time of self examination, and our life journey.
 - a. We can be confident that God is with us to hold and protect us as a mother hen compassionately gathers her young.