

Lent 1 Year B 2012

On this first Sunday of Lent I want to share with you a tidbit of a book which will be published later this year. It is written by a Presbyterian minister who became my friend on a pilgrimage to Israel in 2005. I don't think the book has a title yet but in the last chapter here is what Ruth writes.

"Abu Ghosh is a stone church built in the Crusader period. It's a large structure but nothing fancy, just great chunks of stone reaching high to a few small windows. We pilgrims enter and wander around, admiring the way the shafts of light penetrate the dungeon-like interior. There's an enormous stone altar, which our leaders set up for communion. We sit down on rough wooden pews, and the worship service begins.

Stephen asks us to think about where we've encountered Jesus during the ten days of this pilgrimage. If we'd like to, we may share our thoughts with the other pilgrims. People mention various moments: lighting a candle at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem; being deep underground at the tombs in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; floating in the Dead Sea after the cable-car fiasco at Masada; touring the Deheshieh refugee camp.

Krisha speaks up, very distressed. She had come on this pilgrimage expressly because she wanted to walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and see Jesus there. Well, we had been on the Galilee for three nights and she had not seen Jesus! She cries as she speaks. My heart goes out to her, but I am surprised. I remember the night of swimming in the Sea of Galilee. Didn't she see Jesus that night? Wasn't Jesus there in our laughter? In our unity?

One of the things I cherish ... is the conviction that we do not control the Spirit of God. The Spirit will appear when the Spirit chooses to appear.

JoAnne says, "To me this pilgrimage has been like a kid's pop-up book. It's taken all the biblical stories I love, and thought I knew, and made them three dimensional."

I understand what she means. There's something so hands-on about pilgrimage, something so unavoidably tactile. It reminds me of buying a dress with my daughters. You can look at pictures of dresses all you want, but what you must do is actually try them on. See how the fabric drapes on your body, how the colors look against your skin, how you might wear your hair with this neckline.

And at the risk of stretching the metaphor -- if you go shopping but know exactly what the dress should look like, do you know what's likely to happen? You'll come home empty-handed. Much better to know generally what you're looking for, but to shop with an open mind. You need to let the dress find you, so to speak. Pilgrimage takes a similar kind of open mind. Experiencing Jesus is not something we can order up but something that happens when we've created the space, the heart-space, and allowed Jesus to find us.....

Often we crave a certain kind of divine experience and don't receive it. Perhaps we're swamped by grief, or disappointment, or feelings of abandonment...

I sigh deeply and settle into the uncomfortable pew. We begin the communion liturgy. After the invitation to the table, and great prayer of thanksgiving, there is silence. In that deep, stony silence, ... people begin to go forward to receive the bread and wine, ...

In a real sense, all of life can be a pilgrimage. We are pilgrims when we move toward Jesus, whether Christ feels present or absent. We are pilgrims when we recognize that the seed of religious violence lies in every one of our hearts, in our passion for righteousness. We are pilgrims when we open a gracious place in our hearts, fully aware that we don't control the Spirit. We are pilgrims, and we can give thanks for every step of the journey."

On Ash Wednesday this past week we began our pilgrimage following Jesus who was cast by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days. For each of us the journey begins where ever we are and the beauty of Lent is that God simply asks us to begin. Don't worry about packing or preparing or doing it right. You've heard the directions before.

'...don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you..."

God invites us to begin where we are as the Church gives us into this time of Lent, a time to be on pilgrimage. The image I have is to allow ourselves to wander towards God lightening our burdens as we go.

During Lent there is something you may do during the week and offer to God on Sunday. As you entered the sanctuary this morning there were some rocks in a container. I invite you take one or more of these rocks and to use it as an offering up of your prayer, as a way of laying down a burden, as a way of seeking direction or discernment, as a way of grieving, or giving thanks, as a way of marking your wandering with God as Jesus did in the wilderness. When you come forward for communion you can offer your journey to God and place your rock in the font here at the altar. If you'd like to take a rock with you during the week and live with it in prayer you can do that as well. You may even... find a rock along the way during your week and decide to bring it here on Sunday. I pray for God's blessings during Lent and that you may journey with an open heart and an open mind. Amen.