

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Holy Company”

A sermon by
Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

First Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2010

Deut. 26:1–11; Ps. 91:1–5, 9–16; Rom. 10:8b–13; Lk. 3: 4–13;

There is an ancient Sufi fable about human nature
that goes something like this...

*A Sufi master had lost the key to his house and was looking for it
in the grass outside.*

*He got down on his hands and knees and started
fingering every blade of grass.*

Along came his disciples, asking, “Master, what’s wrong?”

He said, “I have lost the key to my house. Can you help me find it?”

*So they all got down on their hands and knees,
running their fingers through the grass.*

As the day grew hotter and hotter, one of the disciples asked,

“Master, have you any idea WHERE you might have lost the key?”

The Master replied, “Of course. I lost it in the house.”

To which they all exclaimed. “Then why are we looking for it out here?”

He said, “Isn’t it obvious? There is more light out here?”

(Thomas Keating. *The Human Condition*, p. 8-9)

We laugh, because the story hits so close to home.

Let’s face the facts: we’re all a bunch of losers!

We're constantly in a state of losing things like keys, glasses, calendars,
checkbooks and cell phones,
or in a state of being lost ourselves.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Telling Secrets*, talks about his elderly mother
constantly looking for things she has lost.

"Where was her fan?

Where was the gold purse she kept her extra hearing aids in?

Where was the little peach-colored pillow, which was the only one
that kept her tray level when they brought in her meals?

'If I didn't have something to look for, I would be lost,' she once said.

It was one of her most shimmering utterances," Buechner remarks.

(Frederick Buechner. *Telling Secrets*, p. 12)

It is shimmering, because it is so true.

We comb the grass looking for a key that will help us cope
with the loss of our youth, or the loss of a family member,
or the loss of our health, or the loss of our 9-5 work life,
or the loss of our memory, or the loss of a community
that was special to us.
or maybe even the loss of a long-time pastor.

It is easy to find ourselves suddenly lost in our own world,
unable to function as before because we
can not find the key that will unlock our future destiny.

Admitting our propensity to lose things and to get lost
is part of what makes us human.

And it is at this point, I think, which Jesus
steps into the world of our full humanity, becoming fully human himself.

One could say that Jesus begins his holy ordeal in a cloud:
son of Joseph, or so it was thought,
son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi,

son of Nahum, Zerrubabbel, Judah,
son of David, Jesse, Obed, Boaz,
Perez, Abraham, Terah, Nahor,
son of Seth, son of Adam, *son of God*.

Some of them we have heard of before; some of them, hardly at all.

All males in Luke's genealogy;

the female half of each tango is implied, but not specified by name.

Seventy-six of them in all, like the trombones heralding a parade;

seventy-six of them named as the great cloud of witnesses

from which Jesus, the Son of God, emerges as an adult.

Like the bumbling disciples in the Sufi fable, a clan of wandering Arameans

precede Jesus on his sojourn,

bound by a common tendency to find themselves lost

in situations of misery, toil and oppression; or of trail and testing.

It is their common lot, this lostness – this inability to find their way forward
on their own.

But they are also bound by their dependency upon, and trust of

Yahwah God, a hearing and responsive God,

who hearkens to their every whimper and sigh,

and who has issued them a divine wild-card

whenever they find themselves in situations of trial and testing.

Even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

fear no evil, for I am with you.

Why would Luke insert such a detailed genealogy

as Jesus moves from dripping wet baptism to bone-dry bedevilment?

Perhaps it is the doctor in Luke, who feels the necessity to produce

a birth certificate for each live birth.

But I also can't help but think that Luke does this to remind each of us,

that just to awaken each day, whether to feast or to famine,

whether to water or wilderness, whether to triumph or to trial,
is to awaken each morning surrounded
by a great cloud of witnesses who have wandered this way before,
and who have preceded us with established patterns of
life-giving practices:
patterns of faith; patterns of generosity; patterns of work;
patterns of love; patterns of neighboring,
and patterns of relatedness
that help us navigate our way on any given day.
I only have to go to the grave yard, where my ancestors have been buried,
to remind myself of my own great cloud
who preceded me in their dependency and trust of God.
They are etched into stone, their watchwords from Scripture;
words made flesh day by day by my grandfather, the mill executive;
my uncle, the gentle doctor; my cousin, the advocate for higher education;
and my aunt, the intricate petit-pointer.
We are not alone, even when we find ourselves lost. Never.
A great cloud of witnesses, an army of wandering Arameans,
a phalanx of saints, are company along our way, through
trials, temptations, deprivations, bedevilments,
hunger, and hardship.
To remember them, to be aware of them and to recall their faithfulness,
is to find a key to one's wilderness wanderings.
One also might say that Jesus begins his holy ordeal with fire,
as that is how the Holy Spirit is often depicted.
As he is baptized in the Jordan, the heavens divide
and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus.
And as he returns from the Jordan and turns to the face the desert,
Luke makes a point to reiterate that Jesus is Spirit-filled

and Spirit-led on his journey.

No doubt, Luke is drawing a parallel here to Moses

and the children of Israel, who are accompanied on their
wilderness journey by cloud during the day, and by fire at night,
as signs of God's constant guiding presence.

Two pillars, cloud and fire, are constantly present in their sojourn.

Two pillars, cloud and fire, never abandon the people whom God loves,
no matter how dire their situation becomes
or how badly they may behave because of it.

They are hemmed in by God's watchful care, behind and before,
because they cried out and because God heard them and responded.

And at this point of desperation, Jesus steps into our world of humanity
brandishing yet another key.

Because he was Spirit-filled, we also are Spirit-filled.

Because he was Spirit-led, we also are Spirit led,
and hence, never alone. God is with us.

God is guiding us. God has given us a halo of holiness
that marks us as Spirit people, people who can traverse
any bedeviled expanse through his grace.

Just as a note, in the Old Testament, substitutes for the divine presence
are called demons or false gods.

These Jesus dismisses in short order in the desert - security, power, control -
just as he refuses to give the devil his due.

The divine presence is key to crossing the hot sands and arid expanses
of misery, toil, and oppression – not these demons or false gods.

We are not alone, even when we find ourselves lost. NEVER.

And speaking of halos,

I stumbled upon a stunning art exhibit last week in St. Petersburg.

On the third floor of the Florida Holocaust Museum is an exhibit,

by Dr. Herbert Savel, a physician,
who, in 2002, began to carve and paint relief images
from photographs recovered of some of the
1 million children killed in the Holocaust.
To date he has carved 1070 of them,
in his spare time, between seeing patients, if you can imagine that.
“I would like to show that the Holocaust was not abstract numbers, “he says,
“but that these were real people.
The Holocaust was not the murder of 6 million people,
but one, and then one, and then one.”
And so he has carved them, one by one. And still he carves and paints them,
one by one in living color:
curly-headed babies, stiff-necked toddlers, dark, swarthy oppositional teenagers,
each someone’s precious child .
But the unique thing about his carvings, is that he has given each child a halo,
a mandorla, a bright yellow aura around his or her head.
Each child victim of the Holocaust, has become a vehicle of the holy
to this Jewish doctor, an icon, radiating holy light.
He says that he didn’t start out doing it intentionally;
it just seemed to come naturally,
that each would carry a symbol of divine accompaniment with them.
And I saw them, and I thought about the holy company that kept Jesus
as he journeyed through the deprivations of the wilderness;
his cloud and fire that formed a luminous cloud
of glory around his head.
And I thought of Luke, the physician, writing and testifying
to Jesus’ God presence
and of Herbert Savel, the physician, carving and testifying to the same
God presence in children lost to the Holocaust.
And I stood in awe, wowed by what I witnessed.

And lastly, there are the angels.

In Luke's account, the devil seems to think

that angels will guard and protect Jesus, just as Psalm 91 claims.

In Mark and Matthew's gospels, angels *do* attend to Jesus in the wilderness,

just as they attended to Israel in the desert, where God says

in Exodus 23:20.

"See I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to

bring you to the place I have prepared."

Thus they seem to serve as guardians and guides along the way,

ushering him through the process to his ultimate destination.

The devil does know a thing or two, it seems.

Each one of us is on a journey through this life,

and God has not promised that our journey will be easy.

I realize that each time the church doorbell rings, and someone comes

seeking help with rent,

lost because they are about to be evicted from their home.

I realize that each time I visit someone in the hospital,

who has had surgery for cancer,

emotionally lost to the threat to their mortality.

I realize that each time I see single parents trying to juggle work,

school, and recreation schedules for multiple children,

losing their own lives in the shuffle.

God has not promised that our journey will be easy, or successful,

or under our control.

But what God has promised is that we will never be alone on our journey.

Contrary to what our bulletin cover may depict;

contrary to what the song might suggest:

Jesus did not walk the lonesome valley by himself.

Jesus was always blessed and highly favored by divine companionship.

And so are we!

Because when Jesus stepped fully into the wilderness,

he also stepped fully into the wilderness of our humanity
and hallowed it with his holy accomplices.

Through Jesus, we will have the saints who have gone before us,
beckoning us on.

Through Jesus, we will have the Holy Spirit within us, filling us up,
bolstering our inner reserve, haloing our heads and hallowing
our halls.

And through Jesus, we will have angels hovering around us,
thousands at God's bidding speed, as guardians and guides.

Lent is about recognizing our limits as human beings.

But it is also about rejoicing that we are never alone,
even on our most arduous journeys.

Cloud by day; fire by night; angels overhead; haloed and hallowed.

We are not alone. God is always with us through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.