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“The Journey”

A sermon by Ingram P. Hedgpeth, Jr.

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year B)

March 15, 2015

John 3:14-21; Numbers 21:4-9

This morning we are going to talk about journey.
We are in the midst of a 40-day Lenten Journey.
Last Saturday, many of us were helping out, running or walking the 5K or 10K leg
of the Florence Forth Journey
Many of men’s and women’s NCAA college basketball teams
are preparing for the March Madness Journey.
Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, is meeting with Jesus on a nocturnal journey.
Israel is in the wilderness on a forty-year journey.

In July 2014, I embarked upon the first two months of a ninety-day gift
from the Session of Mt. Bethel Presbyterian Church,
a journey into a previously unexplored, yet very commonplace realm
for clergy and academics: sabbatical.

Throughout eighteen years as a minister, I had heard from colleagues
of the benefits and blessings of an extended Sabbath,
but for this extrovert, the mere thought of intentionally withdrawing from community
for candid contemplation and pastoral pondering
was daunting beyond measure.

Of course, if I had only known then what I know now—that kite-flying
is a highly-recommended Sabbath discipline,
at least according to one Presbyterian preacher in a downtown congregation—
my attitude may have vastly improved... perhaps to “approach-avoidance.”

While my sixty-day sabbatical calendar reflected a compromise
between scheduled activities and open-ended blocks of time
in the event the Spirit should choose to throw me into the wilderness,
the one enterprise that I looked forward to with keen anticipation
was to locate and visit all of the churches served by my grandfather.

My grandfather was born in 1858 in Robeson County,
which, traveling south on I-95, is the last county in NC
before crossing over into the land of sandlappers, roosters and tigers,
and an opportunity for sojourn at that whacky asphalt oasis
the billboards hound you about: South of the Border.

At the age of 29, he enrolled at Wake Forest College,
leaving after only two years due to, as he said, "weakness of eyesight."

Two years later, in 1889, he was called and ordained as pastor of a Baptist Church,
beginning what would turn out to be a lifetime of itinerant ministry,
meaning that he lived in one town, in his case Lumberton,
and preached and ministered to many churches on a rotational cycle,
a vocational journey that kept him on the move for sixty-five years.

For the most part, these churches were small and unable to afford a full-time pastor,
so he traveled between locations in the early years by horse
and later by car, though always in the passenger's seat.

His ministry covered a four-county area: Robeson, Bladen, Columbus and Cumberland.
He served a total of 20 churches.

His first church was Back Swamp Baptist, where he ministered five years.

His shortest stint was a single year at Hog Swamp Baptist,
which by now should give you some indication of the lay of the land:
rivers, streams, bogs, canals, marshes
yielding frequent opportunity
for encounters with elongated, legless, carnivorous reptiles
who lack eyelids and external ears:
Cottonmouth, Copperhead, Coral, and Eastern Diamondback,
if not "Hercules and a hog-nosed snake." (*JT Copperline*)

My grandfather served five churches for more than twenty years each,
one church for fifty years.

And his longest pastorate was in Orrum, NC,
where he served the same church for sixty-two years.

(And you thought Joe Harvard was here a long time!)

My grandfather served that church in Orrum until his death, December 1, 1952,
at 94 years, 8 months.

Retirement? What's that?

It goes to show what a good cigar and a glass of homemade wine will do for you.

I never knew my grandfather as he died less than two years before I was born.

So, very early on the morning of July 16, our younger son Stuart's birthday,

I left Durham, drove to Robeson County,
and beginning with the place where he was ordained,

I visited all of the churches (that I could locate) where my grandfather pastored
in the four-county area, snapping pictures and, to my utter surprise,
meeting members and distant cousins
who remembered him, and shared stories about him.

I didn't return home until about 10:00pm that night.

It was a long, serpentine voyage

through rich farmland, timberland, down dirt roads, through cornfields,
crossing countless small bridges over swamps and branches of swamps.

I have never been so thankful for Google Maps in all my life.

I have never been so thankful to God, for this fifteen-hour Sabbatical journey,
sacred and sacramental, beyond imagination.

My grandfather received an honorary doctorate from Wake Forest College
in 1951, eighteen months before his death.

In the articles I have read about him, and in the comments
from those who knew him well, this "Dean of Robeson County Preachers"
as he was known, was an humble man, kind to everyone,
and greatly, greatly loved.

What stood out for me was the almost unequivocal response
of my grandfather's sure and certain faith and trust in God
which inspired others to trust God.

There was an implicit, unspoken, but very real covenant at work,
his trust in God and the people's trust in God, and in my grandfather
to walk along beside them in their spiritual journeys.

I don't know what else God could have done to inspire Israel's faith and trust.

You remember the story:

Slaves in Egypt, God parts the waters of the Red Sea,
creating their path to freedom.

Israel's immediate response is faith and trust in God and Moses
for one shining moment.

Three days later, the people have been traveling in the wilderness
without water, and when they find it, they *complain to Moses*
because it is bitter.

So God shows Moses how to sweeten the water
and guides them to an oasis of twelve springs.

They *complain to Moses* about the lack of food, that God should have let them die
in Egypt with a full belly.

So God rains down manna.

They *complain to Moses* again that they are thirsty, reminding him
that they had water to drink in Egypt.

Moses strikes a rock with his staff, and water gushes forth.

The people *complain to Moses* about the food they have, a steady diet of manna,
reminding him that in Egypt, they dined on fish, cucumbers,
leeks, onions, and garlic.

"Give us meat!" they demand.

A wind from God brings quail, but the birds are accompanied by a plague
as God's patience continues to wane.

One evening the specific complaints become one loud and long nocturnal protest:

"Let's choose a leader and go back to Egypt!"

God tells Moses, "I'm done! I've had it with their complaints and lack of trust!

I am going to get rid of them all and start over with you!"

Moses intercedes on behalf of the people, calling into question God's character:

"God, what will the Egyptians say?"

I'll tell you what they'll say: 'You are not a promise-keeper, you are a covenant-breaker.'

What happened to the God who told me on Mt. Sinai: 'The Lord is slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression.'

Where is that God?

Forgive them, just as you have time and again since we left Egypt."

So God forgives... yet again.

But God says that none of the people who complained, including Moses,
will set foot in the promised land except for Caleb, Joshua,
and the innocent children,

and according to some scholars, God begins to administer that promise in our passage
as yet another complaint, murmur, rail, or *biting comment* is voiced,
only this time, against God.

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?
For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

The complaining has become so systemic, they’re confused
about whether they are complaining for what they have
or what they do not have.

Before Moses can pick up his staff and open his mouth,
without warning, God sends snakes, poisonous snakes,
fiery serpents, whatever you want to call them, and many people die.

It’s a very effective Call to Confession, don’t you think?

Just to be clear, God doesn’t send the snakes because the people complain.
The Psalms are full of complaints, but there is balance,
as the psalmist remembers God’s past blessings and saving power
and the hope, the trust, in the present and future.

God sends the snakes because the people keep choosing Pharaoh
and his promises of death
instead of choosing and trusting in the God who has chosen, called, and claimed them
to trust God’s promises of life.

Well, old habits die hard.

The people go to Moses and say, “We’ve sinned—guilty as charged,
we spoke out against GOD and you. Pray to GOD to take these snakes from us.”

God answers Moses, who prayed the prayers of the people,
but in a different way than anyone could have imagined.

God does not remove the snakes.

Instead, at God’s instruction, Moses makes an image of the same poisonous snake
that brought death among the people
and fastens it to a pole
so that when the snakes bite, they may look at image of death lifted up on a pole
and live.

The threat of pain remains. But death has lost its power.

Every day, people confront the frightening reality of looking death in the face.
Increasingly, in many parts of our world, there is a black flag that has been lifted up—
a threat, a symbol of death—
for anyone who claims his or her identity as Christian.

Like the twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians, poor laborers,
who traveled to Libya seeking work and were martyred.

Or the more than 250 Assyrian Christians taken hostage
from their homes in northeastern Syria,
their churches, some dating back 1800 years,
along with ancient Bibles and relics, torched and bulldozed.

When I was in Syria in 1995, we visited one of these Christian villages
where they speak a modern version of Aramaic,
the language of Jesus, or *Eeshu'a*, in Aramaic,
and all of that is in danger of being lost to the world.

It is happening in Africa, and last Sunday two members of Mt. Bethel
who were born in India told me of church burnings in their mother country
in areas near and dear to their hearts.

And then there are our journeys.
My guess is that if most of us take a moment to reflect on our journeys thus far,
the trip, as it has unfolded, does not match our itineraries.

We may be currently on the very best part of our journey,
and we can't imagine our lives being fuller and richer and more blessed.
We may be weaving through snake-infested swamps, wilderness deserts,
with the very real fear of death striking us at any moment
and cannot imagine our lives being more cursed,
or perhaps we are somewhere in between.

Perhaps we have something in our lives this very moment
that we do not want to face.

It may not be death, but it may be just as frightening.

Think of Moses, lifting up that pole.
See God's saving hand at work and trust God!

Think of Jesus being lifted up on a cross for you.

See God's saving hand at work and trust God!

Lift up your fears, not only to God, but to friends, in your faith community,

those whom you trust,

and in sharing, hear and feel the saving power of God at work

and trust God!

Where, O death, is your sting? Where, O death, is your bite?

Well, it's still here. The pain and suffering are all too real.

Yet, as Handel so beautifully wrote:

"As in Adam all die,"

"in Christ shall all be made alive."

Ingram "Hedge" Hedgpeth is the pastor of Mt. Bethel Presbyterian Church in Durham and the husband of Marilyn. They have three children, Emily, Andrew, and Stuart, and a grandson, Spencer.

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