

Walking in a Foreign Land

Walking in a foreign land is not a comfortable experience. Wayne and I liked to travel and visit the national parks here and in Canada...in Quebec we discovered that although that province is just over the border geographically, historically it is a great deal further than you would think. At least in the late 1970's when we visited, because of their history, although every citizen knew English, they refused to speak it using only French. It was surprising for us to discover about a decade later to find the same experience in Texas. We were camping in the Big Bend National Park in Texas when we sought to buy groceries in a small town and could find no one who spoke English and we didn't speak Spanish. You might wonder what these experiences have to do with Lent and our scriptures but in thinking about Paul's declarations about the "new" man and the "old" man he describes when he tries to present what Christ came to do to restore humanity into a proper relationship with God, he describes two realities. The "new" man is one who has been claimed and redeemed by Christ to become a citizen of God's reign—to have citizenship in a new kingdom where the life lived is different. There is a theological concept that declares that as Christians we are living in an alien world, a world to which we do not belong. Yet when we begin to seriously think about what Lent means in our life it seems that the purpose might be to examine our lives and whether or not our actions demonstrate that we are living in the reality of God's reign or the one which has always been present around us. Do we view the world around us as being foreign—or do we fit rather well and comfortably within the values and cultures present here—especially since when looking at our Lord's teachings the world's reality does not seem to match them. Our scripture readings today cover two examples related to how we act in relationship to our God and to the world. Although I did not read the Genesis passage it is one we all know—a description of that garden scene with Adam and Eve interacting with the serpent who represents the source working against God. In the gospel lesson from Matthew describing the temptation of Jesus the force has been given the name of Satan—which often is Hebrew is given a name meaning related to one who tests like in the book of Job. The Letter to the Romans brings these two narratives into conversation with each other...relating that "sin" came into creation with the choice made by Adam and Eve while "sin and its consequence death" were overcome by the one man Jesus who was God's anointed. The one describes a failure, the other a triumph. People looking at these narratives recognize that the first choice made was wrong and allowed death to enter creation while Jesus' choice was life giving promising eternal life. Sin is often described as what is evil but nowhere in the Genesis story are we told where evil came from or what was "evil" about what happened. That interpretation came later after the writing of the scriptures. Sin is also described as separation from God and the choice made in Eden did definitely cause separation from being able to live in the Garden of Eden, yet God although God banished them from the Garden, he did not kill them but provided clothes for their nakedness which suddenly embarrassed them. It is clear that what the serpent did created the issue, but what exactly was the real issue—I have heard some say the issue was pride, the desire to become like God which was the implied promise of the serpent. We often read this story as the serpent lied to get his way, but truly what he said was true. When they ate of the fruit, they did not die then but instead their eyes were opened and they knew the difference between good and evil. The serpent's approach was to cause them to doubt God—to thus draw them away from their

current relationship with God...to make them lose trust. The Genesis story does not tell us the origin of evil—where the serpent came from or why it wanted to destroy their trust. The serpent opens the conversation asking what God said, and then uses the response to insert doubt into the truth they had been given. The serpent tells them eating from that tree will not cause them to die, essentially saying God is lying and you can't trust God. So it does tell us that lack of trust in God's word to them was the cause of their disobedience which led to their expulsion. They sought to establish their own identity apart from God. Trust in God is a defining part of faithfulness throughout our revealed scriptures. In today's gospel passage the connections to the whole history of God with the chosen people are numerous. The wilderness experience of the people in Exodus was primarily about God forming those escapees from slavery in Egypt into a community which trusted. Shortly after the journey began, God gave them an instruction manual for how to live according to a close relationship with God's self and each other but they spent forty years in the wilderness trying to develop that trust. The image of a wilderness in scripture always presents a time of testing. In Exodus God provided all that the people needed to survive, but it took forty years before they began to accept the truth of God's steadfast presence with them. And the lesson didn't stick for long which led to the exile in Babylon and other issues. When Jesus began his ministry among the people, he went to John the Baptist and was baptized and his identity was declared by a voice from heaven. Immediately after, the Spirit led him into the wilderness for a time of testing. In the gospel accounts where this experience is described there are three "tests" described, not in the same order or detail but basically the same tests are given. Taken together the three rejected tests are not only demonstrations that Jesus is righteous according to the law which he used to reject the temptation, but they also prove his identity as God's divine and beloved Son. Satan's temptations get immediately to the core question of Jesus' identity, calling into question his relationship with God by beginning with the provocative, "if you are the sign of God..." Just as the Exodus time in the wilderness was a time of preparation so God's people would trust, this time was a time for Jesus' preparation demonstrating his trust. This close relationship just declared a few verses earlier at his baptism is now confirmed by Jesus' unswerving trust in God. Jesus enters into a scriptural debate with Satan which functions as an assessment or perhaps proof of his readiness as God's beloved Son. If we examine each of the propositions Satan makes to Jesus we find the content of those temptations include the capacity to turn stones to bread, call upon angels for safety and the promise of power and dominion, each again is primarily about the identity Jesus has just been given. They each begin with that challenging "if" which calls that identity into question. Satan seeks to rob Jesus of his God-given identity and replace it with one of his own manufacture. Notice that Jesus' refusal is not through an act of power or brute force but rather by taking refuge in an identity founded and secured through his relationship with God. These responses are founded and secured through his relationship with God, a relationship that implied absolute dependence on God and identification with all others. Jesus will be content to be hungry as others are hungry, dependent upon God's Word and grace for all good things. He will be at risk and vulnerable as are all others, finding safety in the promises of God. And he will refuse to define himself or seek power apart from his relationship with God, giving his worship and allegiance only to the Lord God who created and sustains him. During Lent it is appropriate for us to consider this passage because it is not just Satan that seeks to destroy our identity as God's children. Each day we are besieged by

countless advertisements that seek to create in us a sense of lack, insecurity, and inadequacy, undermining our God-given gift of identity with the promise if we buy this car or use that deodorant or make our teeth brighter we will then be acceptable. The message of our consumer-consumption culture is simple: you are not enough. Not skinny enough, smart enough, pretty enough, strong enough, rich enough to deserve respect, love and acceptance.

Although we don't often think about it, identity is relational. We tend to think of it as our own, but we define it by our relationships...with family, with environment, with all those whose lives interact with our own. These temptations Jesus faced presented him the opportunity to differentiate himself from what was life-giving...trust in God to trust in self. By denying the goodies he could have, he articulates the parameters around who God is. In other words, what is truly life-giving resides within certain boundaries. It doesn't feed itself at the expense of its proper allegiance. What gives true life does not take a short cut to wisdom or grasp at power. To make food appear when one is famished is a primary hunger, as it were. To let go of one's sensibilities in a situation where falling from a great height means death like the top of the temple would be to abandon God's word by taking it literally. To take power over others feeds the ego. Food, simplistic thinking and self-importance are the tests presented here. Jesus sees through the attempted traps. He will not let the Tempter make himself give up his self for the sake of assuaging his physical desires, his hunger. He will not let the Tempter narrow his understanding of God's word so that it becomes a litmus test for faith. He will not yearn for or grasp influence in the way of human beings who find themselves unsatisfied unless they have status that is admired by other humans. In short, Jesus will not yearn primarily to be given what feeds the physical body or hunger to know fully what God's means or grab importance for himself. The questions for our Lenten journey is how to understand these tests and their rejection in our lives. The answers to these questions lie within the strength of our trust in God's vision for the world we inhabit. Answers like Jesus gave tend to yield lives that live within this world as one living in a foreign land. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.