

**Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman**  
**Christ Church, Tarrytown; March 9, 2014**  
**Text: Matthew 4:1-11**

Some of you know that I had a major travel adventure in February. A friend of mine organized a trip to Peru, and twenty of us, including Pat Roth and my two sisters, spent eight days seeing the sights of Lima, Cuzco, Aguas Calientes, the Sacred Valley, and Puno.

One of the many highlights of that trip for me was climbing Waynapicchu – a mountain right beside Machu Picchu – the fifteenth century Incan site. Most of us were already struggling with the high altitude once we left Lima, which is at sea level. Cuzco, the place we'd visited just before arriving at Machu Picchu, is at 11,000 feet above sea level. Some of us were suffering from headaches, some from nausea, and most from fatigue and shortness of breath after minimal exertion.

Given how I'd been feeling, I hadn't intended to climb Waynapicchu. But my sisters, who are younger than I am, did want to, and they encouraged me (or challenged me, as siblings tend to do) to make the trek with them. We were joined by three others in our tour group, plus our guide. It was all much harder than any of us had expected.

On the way up the mountain, we were laughing and talking and joking, trying desperately to distract ourselves from the reality of the steepness of the slope, the slipperiness of the trail, and the fact that a misstep could have deadly consequences. It was the only time during the whole trip when our guide spoke harshly to us. After having asked us nicely, a couple of times, not to talk – so we could conserve oxygen needed for breathing and so we would pay close attention to each step we were taking – she finally said, bluntly, "Shut up and look where you're stepping!" We did.

When we finally reached the top of Waynapicchu, we no longer had to be quiet in order to save our breath, but we still had to be very careful. It was scary up there. There were no guardrails, and the ground was uneven and strewn with rocks. The views were astoundingly beautiful. And I felt vulnerable and exposed. I knew my face was getting really sunburned. I had hoped that there might be a cute little café up there, where I could get out of the sun, sit down and relax, and at least have the illusion of shelter and protection. But there wasn't a café on top of the mountain. Along with the sense of accomplishment I felt at making it to the top, I was also scared and shaky, and I wanted to get down from there, and to a place where I felt safer, as soon as possible.

We so dislike being exposed and vulnerable, don't we? We so quickly and automatically seek protective cover when we're feeling insecure. The nervous conversation and laughter as we climbed that mountain helped mask our anxiety about the enormity of what we were taking on. The walls of a little café would have helped me pretend, just for a bit, that I wasn't standing on a wind-swept ledge and would shortly have to make the treacherous trip back down. For us as human beings, this seems to be a universal tendency. Even in the creation myth that we heard from Genesis, Adam and Eve reach for the cover of fig leaves as soon as their eyes are opened to the reality that they are naked.

But Jesus didn't. Today's text from Matthew says that after he was baptized, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. He fasted for forty days and forty nights. In hunger and in thirst, exposed to the elements, in weakness and vulnerability, he chose not to reach out for the protective layers that were being offered to him by the devil. He chose to be fully present to reality as it was – not to distract himself from it or to try to escape it. He trusted the presence and the love of God to be enough for him in the moment, no matter how harrowing and unfamiliar that moment might be.

This particular story about Jesus takes place as he's finishing up his forty days in the wilderness. Our Lenten journey, as individuals and as a community of faith, is just beginning. We embarked on this season of Lent on Ash Wednesday, when our foreheads were marked with ashes and these solemn words were intoned: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." I would actually rather not be reminded of that. I want to talk and laugh so I can distract myself from what those words mean. I want to shelter myself from the reality that my time on this earth is limited, and that I will die.

During this holy season, let's try to be fully present to what is – whatever the specific context or circumstance – rather than distracting ourselves from it. Whatever our reality in whatever moment, God's love and presence is in, around, and through it. Let's offer all the attention we can to whatever situation we find ourselves in and to the feelings that are evoked, even – and maybe especially – if they're unpleasant.

Let's be present to God, to ourselves, to each other, and to each moment – not rushing to get someplace else because we think that place will be better or more important, or because we're scared and feeling vulnerable where we are. Let's feel what we really feel when we're feeling it, and stay there, rather than running from it. God is there, wherever we are, and God loves us fully, right then and there. Let's experience that. Let's be present to God in every manifestation of God.

When we're feeling lonely, confused, overwhelmed, scared, broken, inadequate, anxious, angry, grief-stricken, guilty, or apathetic this Lent, let's not automatically numb ourselves with alcohol, with food, with shopping, with drugs, with sleep, with blame, with sex, with busyness and tasks, with good works and people-pleasing. Let's stay sober, awake, and aware of who we are and what we're experiencing. Let's choose to be exposed and vulnerable before God, rather than defended and protected. Let's be present to God, and let's notice, and not miss, how God is present to us, all the time.

One way to be present to God is in stillness and in silence. May we take just three minutes right now, sitting silently in God's love and presence. Whatever you're feeling and experiencing in this moment of your life, hold it in God's love and presence for three minutes. (I have a timer!) Close your eyes if you're comfortable doing that, and breathe.

Be still and know that I am God.  
Be still and know that I am.  
Be still.  
Be.

Amen.