

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 2/17/13
Christ Church, Tarrytown, NY
Text: Luke 4:1-13

A movie came out a couple of years ago called “The Way,” starring Martin Sheen and written and directed by his son, Emilio Estevez. Martin Sheen’s character, a doctor named Tom, travels to France to identify and claim the body of his young adult son, who has died in a freak accident. Tom discovers that when his son died, he was walking the Camino de Santiago – or the Way of St. James. This is a network of ancient spiritual trails that end on the northwest coast of Spain at the Cathedral of St. James – where the remains of the apostle James are believed to be buried. In his grief, and in honor of his son, with whom he’d had a conflicted relationship, Tom decides to walk this route himself, as have hundreds of thousands before him over the centuries. Along the way, Tom encounters people who are making this journey for many reasons – from losing weight, to trying to break through writer’s block, to seeking clarity, purpose, and peace for one’s life.

People of faith regularly embark on pilgrimages – journeys to sacred places. A Jewish friend returned from a trip to Jerusalem, telling me that being there changed her life. So many travelers to Mecca, the spiritual center of Islam, or to Iona, the center of early Celtic Christianity, experience an encounter with the holy that is life-giving and transforming.

Jesus himself undertakes a pilgrimage, according to the story that we’ve just heard from the Gospel of Luke. Upon beginning his public ministry, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. Then, according to the text, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days ...”

What was this pilgrimage of Jesus in the wilderness all about? Matthew, Mark, and Luke report that after Jesus’ baptism, he spent an extended period in the wilderness. In the tradition of the people of Israel, the wilderness is a place of both hardship and revelation. The Israelites understood the story of their forty-year wilderness wanderings as the crucible in and through which they heard and received God’s call and became God’s chosen people.

In today’s text, Luke writes that Jesus fasted for an extended time in the wilderness, following in the tradition of the great prophets of Israel, Moses and Elijah, who did the same during their pilgrimages to Mt. Sinai. There are many faith traditions that suggest fasting as a spiritual discipline. For most people who undertake it, fasting – for one meal, or for one day, or for a couple of days – initiates a physical, emotional, and spiritual cleansing.

But after several days without food, one's body chemistry changes such that consciousness can be affected, and visions can occur. I wonder if Jesus, in the midst of an extended fast, might have had a series of visions that came to be understood as face-to-face encounters with the devil.

Whatever it was that happened in that desolate place, Jesus apparently emerged from the wilderness experience knowing God, and himself in relationship to God, better. He returned from the wilderness with a clear understanding of his purpose. Each of Jesus' three encounters with the devil concludes with a response from Jesus that becomes a theme informing and pervading his subsequent ministry. Jesus proclaims that only from God do we receive that which is ultimately life-giving and life-sustaining. He says that the real power of this world is not that which rests in political, religious, or economic systems, but that which is of the kingdom of God. And he understands lived faith as trusting God's promises; not using them for one's own purposes.

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent is always the story of Jesus' pilgrimage into the wilderness. And during the season of Lent, the church invites us to embark on our own pilgrimage. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could journey during these forty days to a special, sacred place, like Iona or the Cathedral of St. James, where the holy has traditionally been very accessible?

The reality is that the holy is just as accessible to us here, where we live, work, play, and serve as it is in Jerusalem, Iona, Mecca, or the Camino de Santiago. The Spirit of God is as real in every ordinary moment of our lives as it is in the most sacred of pilgrimage destinations. Our forty-day Lenten pilgrimage is intended to remind us, yet again, there there is no better place than our day-to-day life to know God, and ourselves in relation to God, more intimately. But we constantly forget that, and so we undertake Lenten disciplines and practices to help us experience these forty days more intentionally.

I receive a daily email from a Franciscan priest and theologian named Richard Rohr, of the Center for Action and Contemplation. On February 4th, he wrote: Christianity is a lifestyle – a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, and loving. However, we made it into an established “religion” (and all that goes with that), and avoided the lifestyle change itself.

Christianity is a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, and loving. It seems to me that that's a perfect description of the life that Jesus led when he returned from the wilderness. As followers of Jesus; followers of the way of Jesus, our deepest hope and intention is to live as he did. So for my Lenten discipline this year, I've written the words “Simple, Non-Violent, Sharing, and Loving” on a note card, and I'm carrying it with me. I'm trying to be intentional about making choices and decisions during the day that reflect the life that Jesus lived.

In some ways, this feels like a ridiculous practice, because the context of my life is so very different than Jesus'. He practiced simplicity by living on the road, owning virtually nothing. That isn't my situation. He didn't meet violence with violence when he was arrested and executed. I'm not likely to face that test. But still – I can make choices that reflect, in a small way, what Jesus' life looked like. And if, as Christians believe, Jesus is what a life full of God looks like, who knows how I might encounter God when making those choices.

I can practice simplicity by choosing not to buy something I want but actually don't need. I can go through my closets and shelves and scale down, giving away what's more than enough. I can buy lettuce that doesn't come packaged in a plastic box. I can practice non-violence by choosing to go without meat for a meal or a day or a week, or by participating in a campaign against gun violence. As an extreme introvert, I'm most comfortable when I'm alone. Sharing my time and my space with others is a challenge for me, but sharing builds community, and that's what Jesus was about. For me, much of the practice of making loving choices is an internal process, because what I tend to show people is kindness and care. Inside, though, there's too often judgment and resentment.

Right here and right now, we're all on a Lenten pilgrimage where we can experience God, and ourselves in relation to God, in a new way. That place is our ordinary lives. During this holy season, I hope to encounter God by imitating, as best I can, what I understand to be the way of Jesus – practicing simplicity, non-violence, sharing, and loving. Would you encourage me in that, and ask me about it? Might you want to join me in that practice? Or is there a way of encountering God in your life during this holy season that I can encourage you in?

May we fully expect to meet God right where we are during these forty days, and may we be open to new life as a result. Amen.