

March 2, 2008

4th Sunday in Lent
Communion

Title: The Lenten Path of Courage - Hold my hand.

Scripture: Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind: John 9:1-12
Spiritual Blindness: John 9:35-40

Prayer: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This is the 4th Sunday in Lent, the middle of our 40 day journey. From our own experiences we know that being in the middle of anything is when we begin to ask: Is this worth it? I'm tired. My back aches, my arms hurt, and my brain, my brain is so tired I can't concentrate any longer. Has this happened to you? Maybe when you are doing your 20 minutes of exercises, shoveling the snow, working on a major report, moving to a smaller house. Being in the middle of things is a crucial moment in our lives. Should I go on? Can I continue? Do I want to keep going? The temptation is to give up telling ourselves the task at hand isn't worth it.

This is the middle of Lent. The carbon fast is getting a bit boring. We're covered with snow, again. The cold and ice won't go away. Can't we just give up on Lent, keep busy with other things, sit back and wait for Easter to happen. Let blind fate take over.

Yep, these are the signs of living in the middle time. Complain. Doubt. Bored. Tired. And then, at this moment in time we are given a spiritual gift beyond imagination. The liturgical gift of Psalm 23.

Fifty years ago an ecumenical committee decided on the scripture readings for each week of the year and they chose Psalm 23 right when our spirits are low. Every Protestant and Roman Catholic church around the world is reading psalm 23 today so you see it isn't just us here in Machias that have the 'Lenten middle time' blues.

Other than the Lord's Prayer, this passage is the most beloved and best known of all of scripture. We know it by heart and we want our children to know it too. The images, the words, the meaning of the passage speaks to the heart in a way that no one can really describe. We just feel it. It is one of the most beautiful poems ever written. With this ability to communicate love and hope, psalm 23 has spread out beyond the walls of the Christian church and Jewish synagogues. It is now called "an American secular icon."

We hear the words of psalm 23 in the movies like Titanic, Saving Private Ryan. We find them in novels. They are used by song writers including, of all groups, the Grateful Dead. And we hear it in public speeches - President George W. Bush quoted Psalm 23 while addressing the country after September 11, 2001 attacks.

In poetic form, the psalm brings us comfort. Like a shepherd, it tells us, the Lord will care for us, feed us, give us drink and protect us against our enemies. Like sheep in the fields, we can rest knowing the Lord is watching over us. We have nothing to fear. Through these images the psalm gently affirms that God is the only necessity of life. For many, the good shepherd who is with us becomes Jesus the Christ.

Lent is the season of the church that lies between Ash Wednesday and the Alleluias of Easter morning. Ash Wednesday is a 'turn around' time. We intentionally turn away from the darkness and turn toward the light of Christ in our lives. On that day it is like our whole community is saying: "Yes, we'll go and see what Jesus is doing." Lenten begins by putting one foot in front of the other as we walk the road from Galilee to Jerusalem with Jesus and his friends.

On the road with Jesus we are captivated by the charm and charisma of this wandering rabbi. He is so charming we willingly follow his path of obedience.

This catches us by surprise. For folks like us who are spiritually diverse, inquisitive, thinking types to follow obediently is a mighty strange thing to do. We don't see ourselves as people who blindly follow without asking a lot of questions, without carefully weighing the pros and cons, making a list, doing research.

But his talk of obedience caught our attention right away. We heard it as new hope and new possibility for ourselves and for the world. The message is so simple: Obedience to the greatest commandment of all - love God and love your neighbors - our neighbors of strangers, foreigners, enemies, our neighbors the birds, trees, and ocean.

Then this nice, young preacher takes us on a totally unexpected path - the path of disobedience. Now we begin to wonder what we are getting ourselves into and the questions roll out of our heads like a giant water fall. This is the middle time of discipleship where faith in Jesus Christ calls us to change our own thoughts and behaviors:

- It was the medical and religious belief of the day that being sick, or lame or blind was the physical consequence of your own sins or the sins of your parents. But, just this morning we heard Jesus say, the man born blind "has nothing to do with his sins or his parents' sins." Disobedience of public opinion for the obedience of human wholeness.
- The community said don't talk to women, they are too emotional, too unpredictable, and they can't think straight, especially those of other religions and other nations. Yet the one we follow went right up to that woman at the well in the middle of the day. Against the law, he had a long, extended theological conversation with her and in the process gave her the spiritual living waters of compassion and forgiveness. Disobedience of prejudice and cultural hatred for the obedience of welcoming the outcast.
- The religious leaders said an eye for an eye - if someone hurts you, you hurt them back - and Jesus says: pray for your enemies and those who hurt you. Disobedience of physical retaliation for the obedience of extravagant love.

The path of disobedience can get you into trouble. This happened to Jesus and it can happen to you. Loving the world, showing compassion, standing for what is right, what is honest, what is decent bring change: change in the law, change in cultural customs, change in the hearts of others.

To walk with Jesus on our Lenten journey, there is so much discernment required - should I do this? Should I do that? What are the consequences? It's much too risky, but my heart tells me this is the right thing to do. We listen to the voice of the spirit deep within our own hearts, "We can do it. We can love God with all our heart. We can love our neighbors based on kindness and fairness. We can keep walking through the middle time."

And when we do we witness to our family and friends that compassion is the way of Christ. With our actions we testify to our town and country that love holds the ability to overcome fear, jealousy, greed, and war. With our decisions we demonstrate that we care for others and the good green earth. This is hard work - following Jesus.

When exhaustion comes. When you become fearful of what's going to happen next. When relationships get all tangled up in anger, fear and mixed messages. When you become totally confused on what to do next, which way to turn. When your heart hurts from the care taking and chores that need to be done.

In this middle time let us reach out to each other and hold hands. Let us feel the spirit of love here with us. Let us pray,

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
 he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil;
 for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen