

“PILGRIMS”

a sermon on Genesis 12:1-4a, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, and John 3:1-17
Lent 2 – March 12, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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The book of Deuteronomy, which is the *final* book of the law, contains essentially a *summary* of what is laid out in the first four books – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The word “Deuteronomy” literally means “second law.” It is the “final recap” of the law, you might say, put before the people of Israel *at the end* of their forty years in the wilderness, as they prepared to begin actually *possessing* the Land of Canaan – the promised “land flowing with milk and honey.”

For our purposes this morning, let’s just set aside the reality that such “possession” meant that the *current* residents of the land were going to have to be run off, or conquered – and forced into Israel’s submission and service.

In the 26th Chapter of the book, the people are told that *when* they enter the land and possess it, and when they finally begin to reap the fruit of harvests, they are to:

take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and . . . put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. . . [and] when the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my Father; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Abraham, the subject of our reading from Genesis this morning, was that “wandering Aramean.” And I have to admit, until my preparations for this service, I never gave much thought to what that meant. As some of you know, our Presbytery met this past Tuesday, and as is our custom, our outgoing moderator,

Ruling Elder Hardie Frankel from Leland preached the sermon – based on this morning’s Lectionary texts – which, by the way, was an absolutely *brilliant* choice. I have never ever seen the Presbytery’s ministers pay such close attention to a Ruling Elder’s sermon!

Her sermon was titled “walkabout,” and she told the Presbytery about her father’s time during his military career in Australia, and the fact that the *idea* of a “walkabout” was therefore something very familiar in her family.

And since the term “walkabout” isn’t a Biblical term, what popped into my head as I listened to her words (as intently as every other minister in the room who preaches from the Lectionary texts, by the way!) was that passage in Deuteronomy and the Biblical idea of *wandering*.

As it turns out – to my surprise, actually (and I always love it when after all these years looking at the texts I learn something new!) – the word “wandering” is a very *pejorative* term in Hebrew. I say “word.” That should be “words.” There are actually five distinct Hebrew words that we translate “wandering” in English, and *all five* of them are negative words. The one used in Deuteronomy, אָבַחַד (‘abahd), has the literal meaning, “[to] perish, vanish, go astray, be destroyed, be terminated.”

Biblically speaking, being called a “wanderer,” in other words, is not at all a good thing. In English, at least in our common usage, that is not so much the case. A popular song we sang when I was a child was called, “I love to go a-wandering.” And of course, there’s that line from the popular Christmas carol, “I wonder as I wander out under the sky, How Jesus my Savior did come for to die?”

The point is, whatever you might want to say *positively* about “Father Abraham,” who heard God’s voice, and headed out with his family to the land of promise, he never *possessed* that land. By the end of his life, the only land he owned was the small burial plot he purchased for his wife, Sarah.

And for that matter, despite whatever riches and stature they attained *at first* in Egypt – when Joseph went down and initially found himself highly placed in Pharaoh’s service – they only *sojourned* there.

And for that matter, even after Moses led them out of their eventual *bondage* in Egypt, through a mighty act of God, as a result of the people’s *unfaithfulness*, according to the Book of Numbers, God caused them to *continue* wandering in the wilderness for forty years, until that entire generation had passed away.

Then – and only then, in the Biblical narrative – did they stop wandering, and start possessing, which is what God had first called Abraham to do.

And that understanding of Israelites as “wanderers” explains why the story of Abraham is read on the day that in the Lectionary cycle we encounter Nicodemus, in the third chapter of John’s Gospel.

Nicodemus is fascinating and *complex* individual. A teacher in Israel, a learned man, who is both fascinated and perplexed by Jesus. Nicodemus is the consummate New Testament “wanderer.” He is willing to contemplate Jesus’ authenticity – in fact, having seen the “signs” Jesus has performed, he is inclined to conclude that Jesus is who he says he is – but he just isn’t able to reach a point of faith and trust in Jesus’ message. He just can’t make sense of it all.

At the end of the encounter, poor Nicodemus wanders off into the night.

It is Lent, a time when we – like Nicodemus – are called to ponder the meaning of Jesus’ life: why he came into the world, and why it *matters*. But we are not called to do so by just “wandering about” in our thoughts and questions. So I’ve chosen a different word than “wanderer.” Maybe it’s more akin to the Australian “walkabout,” but I’ll leave that for someone else’s reflection. The word used by the faithful for a journey with reflect – and toward a definite *destination*, as is *clearly* the case in Lent – is the word “Pilgrimage.”

Of course, pilgrimages are usually *literal* journeys – for Muslims, to Mecca, for Christians in the medieval church to places with various “holy objects.” For many Christians *today*, literal trips to the holy land where the Biblical events took place.

But I would like to suggest that a Lenten Pilgrimage doesn’t *have* to be a literal journey. It can be, as was the case with Nicodemus, a *Spiritual* journey. The difference of course, and the lesson from the Scriptures, is that unless the Pilgrim begins to actually *possess* the destination, then the Pilgrim is really just *wandering*, and isn’t making any real *progress* on the path.

The Good News, which Jesus proclaims *boldly* at the end of his encounter with Nicodemus, and in words that the Christian community has cherished ever since (with the result that they are often among the first words we are ever taught from the Scriptures, and words we lift up over and over again at pivotal moments in our lives), Jesus says, “for God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, that whoever *believes* in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent His son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

God *could* have come into the world to condemn it. God knows, we deserve condemnation! Even two thousand years after he came, the world is still at war in many places. We still don't faithfully care for the poor, and live in community. We don't take good care of world with which we have been entrusted.

And yet, God *so loved the world* that He gave us His Son – and God *still* so loves the world, that even now, God invites us to place our trust in Him, and *possess* eternity in his Grace and presence.

Lent is a journey and a pilgrimage, not a time of “wandering.” So let us focus where Jesus directed us to focus – on God's love, which was and is so great, that He gave us His only Son who lived, and died, and was then raised from the dead, *that we might have life*, and have it abundantly.

Thanks be to God.