

Companions on the Way



Worship Resources

Lent Year C The Path of Descent



Daily Reflections: Week 1
Letting Go of the Familiar

Day One: Monday

Read: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

The central story of the chosen people, the Israelites, is that the Lord their God had rescued them from hard work and oppression in a foreign land and led them on a journey of liberation to their own land. And the remembrance of this was the story, the lens, through which everything was seen and understood. It was a story that informed every practical part of life and kept them humble.

And because they were the offspring of a “wandering Aramean” they gave their tithe, their offering to God, their first and best, for the Levites (the priests and their families) and the aliens, orphans and widow in their midst.

The phrase “wandering Aramean” most likely references Jacob who became Israel and the father of the twelve tribes. Part of looking back to their ancestral stories was about remembering the spiritual and cultural underpinnings of who they were and what made them the people they were. What does it conjure up for you? In what way are your ancestors wandering Arameans: migrants, slaves or convicts, semi nomadic first people? Who won your security and sense of place? What are the liberation stories in your family, culture, profession, personal journey? And what are the more troubling stories of the suppressing of others? (I come from pioneering farmers so that means my sense of place involves the displacement of others.)

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How do you view tithing? Is it about your relationship with God and all God's creation or is it more of a duty toward the church? Does it make a difference to be reminded that tithing to God is meant to lead to feasting and rejoicing for all including the priests and the poor?

What would happen if for the season of Lent you gave thanks for all that contributes to your wellbeing and shared your tithe with gratitude for being in a position to share? Even if you cannot increase how much you give try giving thanks and tithing with a different attitude. And what if for the season of Lent you acknowledged the meandering story of how you got to be you and where you are?

Day Two: Tuesday

Read Psalm 91

Some of you will recognise this as one of the most popular psalms that can be said at Compline, as part of one's prayers at the end of the day. Read in it's entirety you can understand why it is so comforting before closing your eyes and handing over your self to God while you lose consciousness and control, while you are unable to defend yourself. Many of us will not only have prayed it for our selves but will have prayed it with the sick and dying. It speaks so powerfully of God's love and protection that it brings great comfort.

And we are hearing it at the beginning of Lent knowing that Jesus the Beloved Son of God is about to be driven into the wilderness and tested, that ultimately he will be led to the garden of Gethsemane and tested even more profoundly and that he will then be led to Calvary and tested to death itself. Knowing that is where we are going, as witnesses to our Lord's passion for us and that we too must one day journey to and through death, how do we hear the words: "Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation." ?

We may want, and therefore should ask freely and passionately, for physical protection and comfort and yet we know that this is not being guaranteed for there has never been any suggestion that we shall be spared a creaturely death. And most certainly Jesus was not spared

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death. Maybe the prayer that many of us were taught as children “Now I lie me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” has much wisdom to it. We ask for protection and that includes that when our time comes we pray for safe passage into the embrace of our God and creator. The love and protection we are being offered is not supernatural bypassing of natural processes such as death but the divine companionship through life and death’s journey. We are being reminded that nothing falls outside the loving embrace of God. And this is a very good place to begin our Lenten journey. Nothing that happened to Jesus took him beyond the love of his Father – indeed it only took him deeper into that love. And nothing that might happen to us or our loved ones can take us outside of the circle of the love of our God.

Day Three: Ash Wednesday

Read Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 6:1-21

If you are unable to attend church today you may like to take last year’s palm cross and burn it (carefully). If you do not have a palm cross you might like to write on a sheet of paper the good intentions, aspirations and dreams you brought into last year and burn the paper. Watching the flame and smoke and then the small amount of ash. Reflecting on what is passing, what is past.

From dust you came and to dust you shall return. A meditation on dust.

From dust you came and to dust you shall return. We are all sons and daughters of the first ones made from dust. We all have a common material beginning – star dust, primordial mud, the dust of Eden, the plains of Africa – however we understand our origins they are in physical matter. We are of the earth. And to the earth one way or another we return. A physical cycle of life like all other living matter. No matter how light our spirit our bodies tie us to the earth and physical being. And the more we know of the human body and mind we learn there are no neat divisions between matter and spirit. Dust is gift and limitation, blessing and banishment.

From dust you came and to dust you shall return. Jesus’ own formation and ministry began in dust. In the dust of wilderness and trial and wrestling with the angelic and demonic inhabitants of wilderness. God was and is as present in the dry dusty wilderness as in beautiful holy temples. Jesus did not count it beneath him to become us, to become a creature of dust. He inhabited

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material life with the mews of an infant, the exploration of a child, and a man of compassion for all human flesh with a relish for life - for eating, for drinking, for companionship. Divinity became fully human not from afar but from within dusty form. We are holy dust.

From dust you came and to dust you shall return. Jesus did not disdain dust. He grew up in the dust of a dry land. He came to maturity in the dusty wilderness. He walked dusty roads to find his people. And at the end he washed the dust from his disciples' feet. He - the teacher - knelt at their feet and washed them, served them, taught them from below, the tasks of loving. His actions alarmed and offended and shocked his followers into new understandings of love and service. We are but dust and to dust we shall return. May Lent teach us the gift of dust. Amen.

Day Four: Thursday

Romans 10:4-13

This is a difficult passage and it is a portion of Paul's convoluted but passionate argument about the status of his Jewish brothers and sisters who have not recognised Jesus as Messiah. Paul wants them also to be saved, and recognises their faithfulness to the law, while himself believing that the law is no longer the way to salvation but relationship with God because of and through Jesus. Paul seems to be describing that terrible dilemma of being concerned with right belief (and the freedom that could come out of it for those who do not yet know Jesus as Christ) and the insight that in Christ there is already an end to such divisions!

How many of us, at some stage of our faith journey, have been worried about the status of those who we love and are concerned for because they have not believed the right things? And how many of us are worried about the spiritual wellbeing of loved ones if not because of their belief but maybe their sense of anguish or lack of direction and purpose?

In this season of Lent, on our path of Descent, let us hold our brothers and sisters in our heart. Let us keep company with the uncertain and our uncertainties. Let us err on the side of inclusion and recognition of the other even when we hold concerns. Let us give up, or over, for a time the certainty of anything save the love of God. Let us descend into the wilderness in which theological certainties and formulas are not so much disproved as irrelevant. Let us prepare

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ourselves to travel where Jesus has gone before us, into the landscape that reduces us to silence and presence to recognition of ourselves and all others as fellow Beloveds of God.

Day Five: Friday

Read: Luke 4:1-15

And into the wilderness Jesus went. And into the wilderness we go, again. Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit and then it was with the Spirit's power that he emerged forty days later and began his public ministry. What happened in the wilderness was not simply a test as in an examination that he had to pass in order to get to the start but it was a process, an experience, that was essential to his preparation, his refinement, his relationship with himself and the Spirit, in order to become most fully who he was.

The struggle that Jesus underwent was not so much between simple right and wrong, which the language of devil and temptation suggests, rather the devil, Satan, in Jewish thought is the Accuser, a member of the heavenly court whose role is to test the righteous. (Editors Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, footnotes to *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*). The process that Jesus went through was that of a righteous one being "proved" by enduring physical, intellectual and spiritual testing. Forty days, weeks or years occurs many times in the Bible and is usually about a time of testing and trial that leads to a new generation, a new order or era, and a new blessing often in the form of a covenant. If we understand Jesus as the new way of being fully human and in communion with the divine, a new covenant that we are to consume and be consumed by, then it makes sense that it took a sacred process of forty days and forty nights of being tried and refined, tested and proved, in order to become most fully who he was and ready for what lay ahead.

We cannot really know what happened in the wilderness for Jesus but we can be certain that it did not take the whole forty days and nights to argue about three Scriptures! And so it is appropriate for us to wonder if he did not experience some of what others before him and since have experienced in the wilderness. God's chosen people struggled in the wilderness - they got lost and grumbled. Did Jesus lose his ready-made bearings and feel lost, disorientated for a time? Did he feel at sea with no familiar land on the horizon? Did he feel cast out like Moses who had to leave his own people in order to avoid punishment and death, did he wander so

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long that he stumbled across a burning bush – the fire of God that did not cease but was not consumed – in order to become ready to lead his people to liberation?

Whatever did happen for Jesus he emerged filled with the power of knowing who he was and how he was to be. He may or may not have known the detail of what was ahead but he would have known that if he chose not to make bread for the people but to be bread for them, if he had chosen not to worship the law and the seeking of authority, if he had decided not to tempt God and claim special protections, I think Jesus at least knew he was on a collision course with the power and authority of his day and that it would not be easy for him – he knew what happened to prophets! Jesus emerged from the wilderness with a clear sense of his own identity and his power which came from his humanity in obedience to his highest calling as Beloved of God.

When and how have you been tested and tried? How might you be going through proving at this time in your life?

Day Six: Saturday

Read all four texts

The journey of Lent can be thought of as a path of descent. Which might sound negative or pessimistic at first. And yet before Jesus can be resurrected and ascend to the highest heavens we must allow him to descend to the depths of the human condition – that of the vulnerability of human flesh and suffering and death. And the path of descent is not just the last few days. Rather there is a way at looking at the life of Jesus that says the whole becoming fully human process was one of descent: humility, limitation, physicality, letting go of protection and certainty, becoming vulnerable to all that we suffer and experience, and coming to care completely for the least and the lost ones of God. I do not mean that Jesus had a miserable life rather that he chose a humble life, a life fully present to the ordinary joys and suffering of the human lot, which he lived without losing his divine spark that fed his desire to heal, to forgive and to teach and most of all to love.

Only recently at Christmas we celebrated that Jesus did not abhor the virgin's womb and that he emptied himself and became fully human. Incarnation, birth, and the taking on of ordinary

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human flesh was the first great self emptying of Jesus the Christ, the beginning of the great descent. And the second great self emptying was the entry into the wilderness and the undoing of space, silence, and all the usual certainties. Jesus gave himself over to whatever the Spirit wanted for him and of him. And that included that the Accuser, the tester, had free access to test and to prove him. This was not punishment but process.

But Jesus did not enter into this experience as a naive stranger. He was fully immersed in his culture and religion. Jesus would have known the foundational stories from the Hebrew Bible about what going into the wilderness meant. He would have known what befell those who were chosen by God and those who believed that they were called to speak on God's behalf. And Jesus most likely knew about the Essenes and other extreme groups who withdrew from the world in order to more completely follow the teachings of the law. We don't know what Jesus did in the missing years from age twelve to approximately thirty but most speculations include some form of religious training and travel.

The Jesus who went into the wilderness to be tested and proved knew a great deal. He needed to let a lot go in order to most clearly hear the movement of the Spirit. He needed to allow the Spirit to blow where it would including through his accumulated learnings in order to discern wisdom and not merely knowledge of the law and Scriptures.

The Jesus who came out of the wilderness forty days and nights later knew who he was, knew intimately who his Father, Creator, Source was, and knew that his mission was to be so fully a Beloved child of God that all he met would come to know that for themselves also. He came to speak of love, forgiveness and healing. And Jesus came to be love in action - comforting and disturbing, healing and wounding, forgiving and convicting.

Even so come Lord Jesus the Christ, and be our companion in the wilderness so that we too might learn how to be love.

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Lent Study Group Discussion Week One:

The Path of Descent

Note to Group leaders: Group members are encouraged to participate in daily devotions as a way of engaging deeply with the readings underpinning the season of Lent and thereby to 'warm' up to the topic of each group session. However this is not essential for participation in the group. And not all questions will be of interest to the group. Choose what makes for lively and enlivening conversation in your group.

You might like to set up the room in which you are meeting with an altar like focal point. Maybe the traditional circle of chairs with a low table in the centre. Maybe the lighting of a candle can be part of starting the group session. Maybe a time of centring prayer.

So how do you come to this season of Lent? How many times have you studied, prayed, fasted your way through this season before? When you have given things up for Lent has that deepened your connection with your own soul's journey and your neighbour's welfare (or does it just distract you)? When you have taken things up for Lent such as extra study and prayer and charitable giving has that felt right?

How does the image and metaphor of descent speak to you, or not? Especially the thought of Jesus descending, being emptied out, becoming vulnerable for us? Have you looked at any of the Orthodox icons of the baptism of Jesus and the depiction of him naked, or almost naked, nearly drowning, surrounded by the already "drowned" people, and Jesus is lower than those who baptise him and receive him? Do you recognise images of descent and being lowered for a time into the depths in your own life?

What does wilderness mean to you? Have you wondered before how the prolonged wilderness was for Jesus? How does silence and space speak to you?

Does the distinction between being tempted and tested, between Satan the devil and Satan the Accuser, make sense to you? Looking back is there a time when your trials were a proving of something vital about you?

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How will you take care of yourself in this season of deep reflection, difficult truth telling, and letting go of some of your attachments? And how might you be a good companion to your fellow pilgrims?

*Blessings upon your path,
Reverend Sue*

More information:

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