

Walking

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 Luke 4:1-13

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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Let us journey together through the season of Lent: Walking, standing, turning, returning, and perhaps, as we near the end, even running. This is a season of spiritual nurture. Spiritual disciplines connect us with the core elements of life. So during this Lenten sermon series we will use the basic posture and simple movements of our bodies to remind ourselves of the way we relate to God.

We begin by **walking** with God. We are on a journey with God toward the blessing of creation. We walk with Abraham and with Jesus. We walk at a steady pace, growing and loving along the way.

At any moment on this journey we can plant our feet and **stand** on the promises. How firm a foundation this is. However rough the terrain or deep the valley, the future is light and hope.

From time to time on this journey we must make course corrections. Sometimes we find that we have been going in the exact opposite direction, away from God. So we must **turn** around in order to bear fruit.

Along the way we will hear again the story of the prodigal son. It is a story about turning again, **returning** home, forgiven and welcomed into the arms of grace.

Then, as we near the finish line of our Lenten journey, gaining strength through discipline, we will pick up the pace. Paul likens our Christian journey to the long distance athlete, **running** to catch the prize.

There is a very old joke that comes from the time when the biggest sign of the generation gap was the length of boys' hair. So when the teenager asked his dad if he could borrow the car, he was told he couldn't use the car until he got a haircut. The young man replied, "But Dad, I've been reading the Bible and I've seen paintings of Jesus and the prophets, and all those guys had long hair!"

"Yes," said his dad. "And did you also notice that they walked everywhere they went."

Yes, our ancestors did a lot of walking.

"A wandering Aramean was my father." Thus begins the thanksgiving prayer of the Hebrews after their first harvest in the Promised Land. They themselves had wandered on foot for 40 years. They remembered that the journey began even long before Moses led them out of Egypt. It began in the land of Ur with Sarah and Abraham: "A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou hast given me."

We are walking with God on a journey toward the blessing of creation, toward that place where the earth bears fruit abundantly and each family is blessed with their own place in the sun. Abraham and Sarah began this journey on foot, and we journey on at a walking pace toward God's promised land.

Ours is an age of trains, planes, cars and spacecraft, and yet we are not so far removed from those who mostly walked. I remember visiting the Stoner farm that is still in Kay's family in Ladoga, Indiana. Her cousin owns it now. We were there when Uncle Paul owned the farm. He showed us iron wagon wheel rims leaning up against the barn. They had come from a handcart that Kay's great-great grandfather had pulled from Virginia when he came to homestead this land in Indiana. Uncle Paul showed us those rims 33 years ago, when Kay and I had been married a year and were driving from Boston to our new home in Phoenix. We looked at those wagon wheel rims and had a sense that somehow we were part of the same journey.

When my sister was collecting information about our family she tape-recorded my mother's mother as she told her life story. My grandmother Lula Veach Richards died in 1985 at the age of 96, and this is part of the story she told:

"[From Tarkio we moved} to St. John's, Kansas, then to Drumright, Oklahoma where Venita (my mother) was born. Dad was working in the oil fields. It was awful hot there and Venita got sick and the doctor told us we had to get her out of there. When we got on the train in Drumright she was so sick I had to give her drinks from a spoon. I was afraid we were going to lose her. By the time we arrived at Wamble, Arkansas, where Dad had bought 40 acres of timber, she was sitting-up drinking from a cup. In Wamble, Dad was going to raise cotton. We didn't know how hard it was to clear land. We never got it cleared. Dad rented a place and put out 10 acres of cotton. He planned to raise 10 bales of cotton but we didn't get no rain and he only got 1 bale. Dad had bought a new team of horses and wagon. He knew he had to pay for it in the fall, so he set out for Nebraska to shuck corn and me and the kids were left to pick the cotton. But the team got paid for. ...

"Dad always wanted to be a farmer but he didn't have the money behind him. If a man's got plenty of money he could make good farming, but a poor man can't make no money."

Where in your journey or in your family's journey do you relate to the experience of a harsh life, the journey of Abraham and Sarah, the oppression of the Hebrews in Egypt? The stories in the Bible, ancient as they are, are also our stories. This is our heritage, our sacred history. These are our roots as a Christian people. We have been incorporated into the family of Abraham. We have wandered. We have struggled. The Grace of God has redeemed us.

We are on a journey with God toward the blessing of creation. It is Abraham's journey and it is Jesus' journey. And it is good that we remember how those who went before us walked everywhere they went. It is good for us to conceive of our continuing journey as walking with God. Walking gives us time to notice where we are, to grow along the way, to share love as we go. Love is the way of our walk, and there are no shortcuts.

The Gospel message spread dramatically across the known world in the first century after Jesus' birth. It did so at a walking pace. Paul occasionally got on a boat, and we hear that once he fell off his horse, but for the most part he walked through the lands that we know today as Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece and finally to Rome.

Jesus walked from Nazareth to Jerusalem, and from Gethsemane to Golgotha. He did not walk nearly so far as either Abraham or Paul. Yet in another sense he walked the farthest of all, closing the gap between God and humanity. In this season of Lent, it is our spiritual discipline to walk with Jesus.

Traveling by car or plane we tend to focus on destination, as if we were wearing blinders to keep us from noticing all that is in between. When walking we by necessity have more interaction with our environment. A family on vacation in the southwest came to the Grand Canyon and pulled into the parking lot at one of the scenic lookout points. This was a somewhat hurried vacation, with a lot to see in a short amount of time. "Stay in the car," the father instructed his family as he jumped out with his camera. "You can see the pictures when we get home."

We spend much of our lives being in too much of a hurry. Walking is a steady, fast-enough pace to get where we are going with God. Walking is a metaphor for our spiritual journey with God, but it is also can be a spiritual discipline in itself. Walking and praying can go together. When we get in our cars we usually hurry to the next destination. But if we walk to the post office or the market, when we walk the trail in the Redwoods or the coastal access trail to see the sunset, we pay more attention to what surrounds us during the journey. Along the way we may discover that our prayer is not for the purpose of getting something, and our walk is not really about getting somewhere, but instead it is about experiencing the presence of God along the way.

Tom Weakley has adapted a poem by Ruth Harms Calkin into a story about a walk and a gift:

Once, far away but not too long ago, there lived a woman in a house made of mud with a roof of straw. A few miles away, in a small village, there lived an American woman, a Peace Corps worker. The American woman had been kind and helpful when the native woman's husband died suddenly, leaving her penniless with two small children. She knew the American woman's birthday was coming soon, and she wanted to present her with a gift to show her love and appreciation. But she had no money and few possessions beyond her bedding and cook pot. Oh, yes, and her crochet hook. *That's it!* She thought. *I'll make her a gift - some work of my own design.*

She began to save thread, pieces of string, anything she could work into the pattern - a piece found on the path to the well, another from a bird's nest built on her roof, and more from neighboring women who learned of her gift.

Before long it was time to deliver the birthday gift to the American woman. The crocheted mat was not large, only as big around as a breadfruit, but it had been made with determination, And love.

The woman wrapped her crocheting in a leaf, secured it with a thorn from an acacia tree, slipped it into the folds of her wrap, and began the journey across the bush to the village where the American woman was staying. The morning sun rose quickly to bake the earth dry underfoot. The sand was compacted into patches of foot-burning concrete. She crossed dry riverbeds of tumbled rocks, picking her way, stumbling and bruising her feet as she caught herself.

The hot wind cracked her lips, causing her to pause often to drink from her water skin until, less than halfway there, it was emptied, hanging limply from her shoulder. Ripples of heat rose along the ground ahead of her, mocking her eyes with visions of rain-covered earth always out of reach.

At last she reached the village and stumbled to the open doorway where the American woman looked up to see her - dust-covered, empty water skin, bruised feet, and all.

The American woman reached for her friend's arm, led her to a chair, poured a cool drink, and wrapped her feet in a moist towel. When she learned of the woman's mission that day and the crocheting was brought out from under the folds of her wrap, the American woman cried with gratitude and wonder at this love offering drawn together from discovered pieces of thread and string.

The relentless sun was slanting through the doorway a short time later as the woman unwrapped the towel from her feet, rose from the chair, and made her way to the door.

The American woman followed. Together they walked to the village well and refilled the water skin. The women said good-bye, and the native turned to make her way back home. The American woman said, "Just a minute and I'll get the donkey cart and give you a ride back to your house."

The woman stopped and turned back to her friend. "I hope you will not take offense," she said, "but please understand, the walk is part of the gift."

And then she was gone.

The devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ... 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

Jesus walked in the wilderness for 40 days. He was offered a ride on angels' wings, but he didn't take it. He walked from Galilee through Samaria to Judea. He carried his cross from Pilate's palace to Golgotha. The devil suggested that he take a shortcut. Go directly from pinnacle to power and skip the cross. But Jesus' journey is not about power. It is about love. The walk is part of the gift.

Let us walk with Jesus. Amen.