

*We Walk by Faith and Not By Sight*

*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*

*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*

*March 7, 2021 Third Sunday in Lent*

*Exodus 17:1-6; Verses from Galatians 5; John 7:37-39*

*to see the readings go to this service on our website under*

*<https://unitedchurchofstrafford.com/category/on-line-services/>*

**Call to Worship:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Third Sunday in Lent and Faith Sunday. The faith in the Spirit that Lent asks us to have leads through struggles and miracles. A burning bush. Waters parting or springing from a rock. The voice of God. The Spirit coming like a dove whose wings carry us in unexpected directions.

A story by George MacDonald tells of a young princess who gets lost in her palace and ends up meeting her great great great grandmother, a loving Spirit in a high tower. Goblins under the mountain want to kidnap the princess, so the old woman gives her a magic ring. If the princess gets in danger she can put it on and feel for an invisible thread that will lead her to safety.

One night the princess hears terrifying sounds, but instead of leading her up, the thread leads down into the goblin realm. It guides her to free a captured boy, and finally leads them both back to the tower. The boy cannot feel the thread, he cannot see the woman, so he thanks the princess but refuses to share her faith in the source of her guidance.

The path of faith is both difficult and the best way through difficulties, because it is the path of the Spirit that created us and is still helping us evolve. But it is hard to trust, let alone follow.

Lent is designed to free our faith so we can trust, follow and use the Spirit's gifts to transform ourselves and the world around us into the realm of God on earth.

Let us open ourselves to that possibility as we worship together...

*[The sermon begins on the next page.]*

## *We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight*

The choir sang a beautiful plainchant hymn by Barbara Bridge. Its refrain says,

“We walk by faith and not by sight,  
through joy and woe, through dark and light.  
We journey not alone, forsaken.  
You walk with us, our God and friend.”

We walk by faith and not by sight.

The Franciscan spiritual teacher Richard Rohr wrote, “You will remain largely unconscious as a human being until issues come into your life that you cannot fix or control and something challenges you at your present level of development, forcing you to expand and deepen.”

The Trappist spiritual teacher Thomas Merton wrote, “Prayer and love are learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and the heart has turned to stone.”

In order to grow we need times when we can walk only by faith and not by sight.

The Lenten theme today is Faith, and next week’s is Struggle. We would not need faith if life were free of struggle. We would not need faith if we did not find ourselves in trackless wildernesses sometimes. We would not need faith if love did not lead to grief. We would not need faith if the selfish ego did not get us into trouble, if we did not need to grow beyond our old ways of being and seeing in order to meet new challenges. We would not need faith if we did not hit rock bottom and find that only a higher power could help us survive.

So many people are in wildernesses in this long pandemic, suffering sickness, hopelessness or grief. One third of all Americans have lost someone to the disease. We all know people who are struggling.

And imagine how the wilderness feels right now to a Black person whose community is receiving far fewer vaccine doses than white communities, while having far worse health because of the poverty and environmental pollution that come with systemic racism. Meanwhile rich white politicians are blatantly trying to keep Blacks from being able to vote, and even in Vermont they feel profiled and attacked. Imagine.

Or imagine how the wilderness feels to a teenager who went on strike from school to try to save the earth from runaway climate change. Imagine how it feels now to see more

and more terrifying news stories about the worsening crisis, and far too few stories about the kind of rapid response that we need in order to survive.

We can imagine one another's wildernesses because all of us know pain, all of us have been hurt, all of us have experienced grief, all of us have felt outraged at injustice, all of us have had to find a way forward when the path was unclear and every step felt impossible.

We need faith in such times, and it makes all the difference where we choose to place our faith. Nor is it enough to have faith *in* something. We need to walk by faith the way we walk by sight.

Biblical scholars point out that when Paul's letters in the New Testament talk about faith *in* Jesus, it could just as correctly be translated as the faith *of* Jesus. We need both. We need to have faith in him in order to have the faith of him and follow his way, but it is the faith *of* Christ that really saves us, if we choose it for ourselves.

Faith opened Jesus to the Spirit's guidance and power, which is what enabled him to find his way through a wilderness of trial and transformation. He walked by faith through his ministry of teaching, healing and resistance to injustice, through his arrest and crucifixion. Faith led him through struggle to greater light.

Similarly, walking by faith led Moses into the wilderness where his people were free at last, then that same faith led them close to dying of thirst, and that same faith led him to bring water from the rock.

The late great Zulu singer and founder of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Joseph Shabalala, took a trip from South Africa to New York City in the 1980s. He entered a wilderness of loneliness, grief and fear, missing his family, feeling the pain of people under apartheid, and not knowing if he would be able to return. His courage to take that trip was walking by faith, and while there it was faith and not sight that led him to write one of his most moving songs, "Thula Klizeo," "Be still my heart, even here I am at home."

The beautiful thing is that when we choose to place our faith in the Spirit, when we choose the faith of Moses and Jesus, or the faith of our mothers or grandmothers who first taught many of us what faith is, when we turn to that faith in the middle of a barren landscape where we feel lost and alienated and hopeless, the act of faith changes everything

in that moment. Maybe it lasts only the briefest of seconds, but faith transforms the wilderness and we see that we are home, we see that we are walking in the Promised Land. We see it by faith. Faith is the sight that shows us the next step forward in love.

And as Paul said, that is all that matters—faith working through love. We do not need to know where or when the wilderness will end. We do not need to know how to transform ourselves or how to solve the overwhelming problems we face. We need only that next step of love. We need only to turn and surrender everything that we might rely on instead and let go into faith in the Spirit in this moment, for this one breath, and let it lead us on in love.

Let us do this now as we pray in silence, turning in faith to the Spirit in complete trust, open and willing to be led ...

An Uta by Mel Goertz, in the Japanese form of tanka:

As the soft call notes  
of the pine grosbeaks  
mingled with the light voices  
of the redpolls,  
I realized my Spirit was being healed.