

Go to the Land That I Will Show You
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United Church of Strafford, Vermont
March 5, 2023, Second Sunday in Lent
Psalm 121; Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-12, 19-21

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Second Sunday in Lent. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online, and welcome to the Cantornote Church Musicians from Boston and Strafford.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. Our congregation has voted to establish a reparations fund for the hardships they have had to endure from colonial times unto this day. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it.

Jesus taught that the Spirit that created and still flows through all the earth is about nurturing and evolving life and ultimately bringing new life out of death. It is a Spirit of mercy, justice and peace, of healing, compassion and love.

We just heard a painfully beautiful expression of grief and remorse in the Prelude. Johann Sebastian Bach put all his experience of suffering into its music, and the Disciple Peter, whose voice is speaking, went on to put all his experience of suffering faithlessness into creating a community that faithfully followed the sacred way.

The Spirit helps us become a blessing to others as a result of our painful experiences as much as our joyful ones, as much through our wilderness trials as through our time in the Promised Land. Someone here today may need the very gifts of wisdom and compassion that you have to offer from your experience. So I invite you to linger after the service and strengthen this loving community by reaching out especially to those you do not know and those you know are in need of care and support.

Call to Worship— Two wilderness journeys serve as metaphors for Lent: the forty days Jesus spent being tempted and tried and the forty years Moses and the children of Israel wandered lost.

In both cases there was a place they were trying to reach, for Moses it was the Promised Land, for Jesus it was a new consciousness and way of being, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Lent is designed to help us reach a new place, an inner transformation that will help us transform the world.

Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” Jeremiah says, “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me.”

Let us worship together, continuing on our Lenten journey to a new place....

Children’s Time— Good morning! I have been talking lately about the extremely wise woman, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. She wrote, “Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship...into a sacred bond.”

Robin asks, “Do you love your garden?” And when people say yes, she asks, “And does your garden love you?”

Think of all the joy a tomato plant shows when we give it the kind of soil and water and weeding it needs. Don’t you think your garden loves you?

In the Bible’s Garden of Eden story the Creator of the earth places humans here to work with the earth to produce what we need and do it in such a way that the earth keeps on being healthy forever.

Robin is a college Botany professor. When she asks her students to name ways that humans hurt the earth, they have a long list, but then she asks them to list ways humans help the earth and they can think of nothing to say.

But we must have a role in the natural ecosystems of earth—the Spirit of life worked hard for billions of years to evolve from the first single cell wiggly things into the incredibly complex consciousness of the human brain, so humans must have our part to contribute to the health and well being of the earth. The fact that we are messing up now does not take away from the truth that the earth loves us and wants us and needs us to play our positive role in the care and evolution of life.

Robin and a student of hers studied sweetgrass used by tribal basketmakers and found that the harvesting of it in the careful way that indigenous people do it actually increases the vitality of the plant.

The earth loves us, the Spirit of the earth needs us to play our role in creating the conditions for life to flourish, conditions of sustainability and harmony and peace, of understanding, compassion and love for all people, all creatures, all plants and all places.

If we are not sure what our role is in our situation, the Spirit will gladly tell us, but we need to learn how to hear it and feel it guiding us, and there is a tool to help us do exactly that...Prayer! Especially contemplative prayer, when we listen more than talk.

Let us say together the Lord's Prayer...

Go to the Land That I Will Show You

How are we ever going to find our way out of the mess we have made of this world?

We have allowed forces of greed to rule and ruin the planet for their own profit even though like cancer cells they are killing the host they need for survival. Our culture has cultivated selfishness and violence as virtues, while marginalizing or corrupting the spiritual communities whose scriptures stand unequivocally in favor of nonviolence and love of neighbor as our self.

We are a long way from the Promised Land of the realm of God on earth, it seems, and a long way from our ideal selves.

How are we going to change?

We are not the first to struggle with that question. Religion is the collected wisdom of people who have gone through similar wildernesses seeking a way to a Promised Land.

God called Abraham to "Go from your country and your kindred...to the land that I will show you." God asked Abraham to make a courageous journey for the sake of future generations. Abraham had to leave his secure, known way of life and go on nothing but faith into a new land, a whole new way of being.

Surely God is calling us to make a similar journey of faith now.

"Go from your country...to the land that I will show you."

God's land, God's realm: we know from Jesus and the scriptures of all spiritual traditions what that Promised Land is like. It is a land that follows laws of compassion and love, justice and

peace for all, where the earth is a garden we hand on in better shape than we found it so that life may be sustained and enjoyed for generations to come.

This has been humanity's wisest, highest vision for thousands of years, and many over the centuries have been as brave and faithful as Abraham to try to get us there.

Now we need to make our own journey to the land God is showing us. We know full well the inner and outer obstacles, and yet we also know that the survival of life on earth depends on us making this journey.

So how do we get there?

Martin Smith wrote in his classic Lenten book, *A Season for the Spirit*, "The Scriptures speak of a breaking down of the old way of being a person and the discovery of a completely new one. They speak of our need to be born again. They speak of crucifying the old self with Christ. Nothing milder than these expressions will do justice to the radical change in our living meant by 'metanoia,' the repentance Jesus proclaimed after he emerged from the wilderness." (p 37 f)

Go to the land that I will show you, the scriptures say, the land you will find by completely changing your life and your mind.

Albert Einstein said, "The release of the power of the atom has changed everything except our way of thinking. Thus we drift toward a catastrophe of unparalleled magnitude."

The American General Omar Bradley said, "If we continue to develop our technology without wisdom or prudence, our servant may prove to be our executioner." He said, "We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount."

It is understandable why our society has made gods out of technology and militarism and turned away from the God of the Sermon on the Mount. Technology and weapons change things quickly, and with some degree of certainty in the short run. Faith, on the other hand, has uncertain results by definition, and often leads us more deeply into the wilderness rather than straight to the Promised Land.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jewish establishment, who came to Jesus by night. Night represents confusion in the Gospel of John, being lost without vision, but there is hope in the night for those who long for the light and keep seeking until they find it.

Nicodemus clearly has the longing. Jesus understands this and begins, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the realm of God without being...” and we can picture Nicodemus leaning forward. Yes? Yes? Being what? Make it clear, tell me the steps.

And Jesus finishes the sentence, “without being born anew, born from above.” Nicodemus is dismayed. This is absurd. He responds, “How can anyone do that? It is impossible.”

Jesus answers even more absurdly, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

It seems as if Jesus is intentionally confounding Nicodemus’s mind, like a Zen koan. He is leading Nicodemus not by a clear path of light, but into a wilderness or dark night of soul. Thomas Merton wrote about it this way: “The spirit enters a wilderness and travels blindly in directions that seem to lead away from vision, away from God.” (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, p 235)

Merton says that the way through that wilderness is to maintain “a blind, groping...desire of God.” (p 241) We need to allow silence and emptiness and longing to work on us the way a chrysalis works on a caterpillar, breaking it down and reshaping it into a butterfly. In Zen Buddhist tradition the way to solve a koan is to wait in stillness for it to work a change in our consciousness.

Nothing is going to change in this world, nothing is going to change in ourselves unless we change our thinking, unless we abandon our old way of seeing reality and let the Spirit lead us in new and unexpected ways. This is what Jesus wanted for Nicodemus, and what he wants for us.

The good news is that it is happening. Social scientists are documenting a rising evolution of consciousness toward oneness. Its greater wisdom and capacity for love may change the world in ways that seem impossible now.

Michael Nagler wrote the book, *The Search for a Nonviolent Future*. In it he talks about the people who founded the community in Columbia called Gaviotas as a model of self-sufficiency and sustainability, bringing a pocket of nonviolence into a war zone and bringing healing to a damaged, barren landscape.

Miracles happened because they followed the Spirit through that wilderness. For instance, they found a certain pine tree that could survive in acidic, dry, shallow soil, and they planted

millions of them. The pines changed the micro-climate, increasing annual rainfall, and then in their shade a richly diverse primordial rain forest sprang up, “evidently from seeds that were hiding in the shallow soil, waiting who knows how many eons for the right conditions to bloom again.” (p xxi)

The seeds of the Garden of Eden are waiting everywhere, dormant in earth’s sacred ground. We cannot know for certain what pines the Spirit will have us plant, but we can have faith that God’s realm is within and among us waiting for people who believe in its possibility, who seek it with all their heart, who open to the Spirit’s guidance and power, and who give their lives to the journey.

This is the role that we were evolved to play, to serve the Spirit of life so that the earth may flourish for generations to come.

“Go from your country and your kindred to the land that I will show you and I will bless you so that you will be a blessing.”

Let us pray in silence, making clear the intention of our heart to seek that land and that new day, giving our life to the journey...

Haiku by Herbert A. Goertz:

Unseen—yet we know
Skunk and coon were here last night
Tracks in the snow