

2-21-2021 THE WALK: Walking with God
Genesis 3:8-9; Revelation 2:4-5; Matthew 4:18-25
1st Sunday in Lent February 21, 2021
First United Methodist Church of Auburn, Indiana
The Reverend Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

SUMMER NIGHTS

They were interludes. They were interludes between our trips across the sea to Europe and Africa, or half-way around the world the other way. They were interludes when things seemed remarkably settled for me. I was always, in the words of Deuteronomy, a “wandering Aramean” who was born while the family was on the way from here to there.

But there were a few years when we lived on the near east side of Indianapolis, just two doors down from my maternal grandparents. Like so many of us, I carry so many memories from those early years. I remember sound of horseshoes clanging against the metal posts in the backyard. I remember the smell of the grapes on the poorly tended grapevines in my grandparent’s small backyard. On especially warm summer nights, the smell of the grapes would perfume the air in an unmistakable way. And I remember trips a few blocks away to the Dairy Queen just across the parking lot from a Marsh grocery store.

There were times when my Grandpa would suggest to me that we head to Dairy Queen. Sometimes, we would take orders from everyone else and bring treats back to the house. Often, though, it would be just my Grandpa and me. We would take the beat up old green Plymouth that he would use to drive back and forth to work at the State House, and drive through the summer heat with the windows rolled down. We would stand outside to place our order, bending down to speak through a metal screen, with the traffic passing by and a metal bug zapper 15 yards away crackling as it did its job. My Grandpa would often be wearing an old pair of slacks, just a t-shirt on top, and sometimes he would be wearing his slippers.

I know now, I see now, that those trips weren’t about the ice cream at all. Well, maybe just a little bit they were about ice cream. What they were about -mainly- was just being together. Spending time together. Being in one another’s company. He treasured it then. I treasure it still.

THIS AWESOME GOD WANTS TO SPEND TIME WITH US?

Our God is an awesome God, the song says, and so it is so. We see that so often in the stories, people and truth of the Bible. The Bible doesn’t answer all of our questions about our God. The Bible sometimes raises more questions than it may answer with certain stories and passages, but all in all the Bible introduces us to a God who is mysterious, amazing, and awesome.

We see this in the Hebrew accounts of creation in those opening chapters of Genesis. The story of creation takes my breath away. *(And, by the way, the creation stories in the Bible are not so much to explain how all things came to be but to introduce us to the God who is behind it all and the why of creation. Those creation stories are not about the how of it all but the who and the why.)* But, even more

amazing for me than the story of creation, is the story of the God who treasures the presence, the friendship, of God's creatures.

This is a God, you know, who invented time, hydrogen, light, red-tailed hawks, and heard the notes that make up the Goldberg Variations before Bach even thought to write the notes down. This is a God who took that first dense ball of matter and spoke everything into existence out of it. This is a God who hung the stars in the sky the way you might hang a picture or put up a birdfeeder. This is a God who spun the planets into motion the way you might spin a soccer ball or the way a pitcher gets a curveball to move.

This God...comes walking in the cool of the evening to spend time with the first man and woman. This is, of course, not just Adam and Eve's story but the writer of Genesis is telling *our* story. God comes in the cool of the evening, after the sun has set and after a cool breeze tip-toes across the landscape as the stars appear, and God wants to spend time with us.

NO MENTION OF AN AGENDA

There is, in Genesis, no suggestion of an agenda. Those are the best times to be with someone, aren't they, when there is no agenda?

The no agenda times are often the best times.

God comes in the cool of the evening wanting to spend time with the man and the woman. I find that extraordinary. What kind of a God wants to sit with us...walk with us? It's a little like one of us bringing a dozen red roses to a pond and giving the roses to a waterbug or a tadpole: these is a degree of attention and delight in the act of giving roses to a such a small creature that whole idea seems rather shocking...stunning.

The psalmist, in Psalm 8, shares my wonder that God should delight in us the way God does (:3-4): *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*

God wants to take a walk with them.

WALKING IN THE BIBLE: EXODUS

Walking seems to be a big thing in the Bible.

Walking and faith seem to go together in the Bible.

Walking and new life -new creation experiences- seem to go together in the Bible.

God comes walking in the cool of the evening, looking for the man and the woman.

God shows up, later in Genesis, and asks a couple by the name of Abram and Sarai to pack up, leave their home behind, and walk with him to a new land...a new life. God says that God will be with them. God promises himself to the man and the woman and their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

God shows up, in the book of Exodus, speaks to a fugitive from Egyptian justice who has taken up sheep ranching with his father-in-law, and asks Moses to lead the people towards something new. God asks the shepherd to go back into Egypt, where he is wanted, face down one of the most powerful empires in the world, and then bring

the people out. They'll walk together through a wilderness. And, step by step, walking with God, through times of faith and times of doubt, through times of failure and times of success, through times of crisis and terror and confusion and holy mystery, God and the people will get to know one another with each step. As they work through each crisis. As the people learn how to make good decisions by taking to heart lessons learned the hard way by making bad decisions. Step by step, the people will stop thinking like slaves and acting like slaves. Step by step, they will learn how to live free. Step by step, with God in the wilderness, they will learn what it means to live by faith. Step by step, the people will learn who God is and discover the joy of intimacy with God.

Walking seems to be a big thing in the Bible. Walking with God seems to be a big thing in the Bible.

BELIEVING ISN'T NECESSARILY WALKING BY FAITH

The Bible puts less of an emphasis on believing in God. Faith, you see, is about not only believing but walking. Faith, you see, is about not only trusting but going.

Too many people make the mistake of thinking believing in God is all that really counts. The mere act of intellectual assent to the proposition that there is a God, a Creator, somewhere loose in the cosmos, can be irrelevant and nearly meaningless. Some real rascals believe in God and still storm through life wrecking themselves and others as they live selfish, greedy, unforgiving, immature, carnal, racist, sexist, unjust lives. They believe in God but that belief is disconnected from the decisions they make about how to treat their neighbor, how to handle their money and possessions, what words they will speak and how to respond to the injustice and violence in their world. In short, the wires are down between their belief in God and their everyday lives. One apparently has nothing to do with the other.

James 2:19, near the back of the Christian Testament, makes the observation that if we believe in God we have done well. Then, the early Christian writer of that small letter to the early Church says this: *"Even the demons believe - and shudder."*

Faith is more than believing.

Faith is more than sitting around and talking about God.

Faith is walking.

Faith is going.

Faith is moving from where you are to where God wants you to be.

Faith is accompanying God down the road that is your life.

Faith is building a relationship with God one step at a time.

Faith is becoming a new creation, stepping from slavery into freedom, one step at a time with God.

WALKING AT THE SEASHORE

Jesus, Matthew 4:18 tells us, is walking by the Sea of Galilee. He sees two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, casting a net into the lake. The two brothers are fishermen. It's what they know. It's what they do for a living.

I've read this story many times before, and I've come to the conclusion that these two -Simon Peter and Andrew- have met Jesus previously. They have heard Jesus before. They know him. How well they know Jesus, I wouldn't presume to guess, but I believe Jesus wasn't a stranger to the seashore. His home was not far from the

Sea of Galilee, and during his ministry his “home base” ended up being a town called Capernaum up on the north shore.

Some of us can't get enough of the water, we long to be near water, and I believe Jesus isn't an unfamiliar figure to those who fish that freshwater lake. Jesus is - to be direct about it- a “lake person.” Jesus is walking along and sees these two brothers. Jesus asks them to go with him. Jesus says to them, *“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”*

The imagery of “fishing for people” has always struck me as odd. Especially, if you have ever watched a fish flipping around fighting to breathe after having been pulled out of the water. *We are to do this...with people?*

What Jesus is doing, though, is using language those two understand. Jesus is letting them know that God is going to use the patience they have as fishermen, the way they have of reading the water and going where the fish are, the courage they have in sailing when the weather isn't easy and the water is rough, to catch people in the net of God's love and truth.

This is amazing, isn't it? Jesus shows up and lets us know God can use what we know how to do. God can use what we have learned along the way. We don't have to give up the good and strong and beautiful parts of who we are to go walking with God, living life with God, but God can use who we are and all of our experiences in the cause of love. We don't have to be totally someone else to accompany Jesus.

A friend of mine was a very good rock and roll drummer. Playing music gave him joy. When he became a Christian in the middle of his life, he gave up the drums. He thought that Jesus didn't want any part of his old life, and so Chris gave up the drums. Disciples shouldn't be rock and roll drummers, he assumed. When he and I crossed paths, and he told me how much joy he had found in playing rock and roll, I asked him, “Why did you think Jesus couldn't use a drummer...hang out with a percussionist?”

Jesus invites the fishermen to accompany him. And they don't have to use their fishing skills and instincts behind. God can use who they are and what they have learned in life!

Jesus calls Simon Peter and Andrew to follow him, to walk with him, to accompany him, and they go. A little while later, the Galilean sees two other brothers, James and John, mending their fishing nets as they work with their father, Zebedee. Jesus calls to them and they follow. They go with him.

THE INVITATION AND WHAT WORKS

We're beginning our Lenten series “*The Walk*” this weekend.

Some of you may have picked up a copy of Pastor Adam Hamilton's book [The Walk: Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life](#). Some of you have signed up for Pastor Nikki's Sunday morning in-person class or the Zoom small group I am leading on Tuesday nights. We're excited about this sermon series but even more excited to think that you might join us in this adventure, reading the book, praying, and exploring with others what it really would mean to walk with God.

Here are two things God wants me to say to you today.

THE INVITATION

God is inviting you to walk with God.

God is inviting you into a deeper relationship with God.

Step by step, you may find yourself getting to know Jesus as you have never before known him. Step by step, you may find yourself moving out of a quiet, nearly invisible kind of slavery into the wide open spaces of God's grace.

So that is the first thing God wants me to tell you: God is calling you -right now- to walk with God. Accompany God. Travel with God.

SOME THINGS WORK (AND SOME DON'T)

Here is the second thing God wants me to tell you: there are certain practices that can help our walk with God be real, powerful, joyful, and life-changing. John Wesley, the founder of the renewal movement known as Methodism, knew this. It was one thing to give yourself to God, give yourself to Jesus, but to really walk with God meant to adopt some soul practices that helped you connect with God and grow in God.

Worship, prayer, learning the deep truth we can find in scripture, fellowship with others in community, serving as we give our time and money away, and sharing the good news -the joy- we have found in God with others: these things help us keep walking. They keep us on the road. They lead to a more joyful, genuine and life transforming walk with God.

There are things that work and there are things that don't work. It's the same in the rest of life so why shouldn't that be true in our spiritual life...our faith walk?

I remember driving golf balls at a Fort Wayne driving range. A man in the church I was serving then happened to be driving by, saw what I was attempting, pulled into the parking lot and came over to me. He asked me what I thought I was doing. He told me I was going to wreck any chance I had of developing a decent swing by using the club I was using, and he asked, "What club do you feel most comfortable with?" I told him and he pulled that club out of my bag and put it in my hand. "Use the club that feels right. Who are you trying to impress?"

There are things that work and things that don't work.

Have you ever watched someone who doesn't know how to drive in snow, try to drive in snow and ice? They think that if you're having a tough time getting traction you just step on the gas a little harder. You and I know that doesn't work. You and I know you straighten out your wheels and go light on the accelerator. Gentle is the word. Easy and slow works better than spinning your wheels.

There are things that work and things that don't work.

Last winter I tried, for the first time in my life, to dredge chicken that I was going to bake in the oven. I had good intentions but things went terribly wrong. It looked like I was baking bread instead of baking chicken. I started laughing outloud. I called a couple of friends for advice. They described how you dredge chicken, and I kept laughing...because there is a right way that works and I wasn't doing it the right way.

There are things that work and things that don't work.

The other day the beautiful amaryllis plant in the office suddenly looked like someone had turned a death ray on it. It sits in the south window of the office, adding color and beauty to the church office, and almost overnight it looked awful. I asked

Cathy if she knew what had happened. Had we over watered it or forgotten to water it? She looked as panicked and lost as I felt about the plant. Then, she talked to someone who knew what we should do, and help us understand the life cycle of the plant, and we were good.

God is inviting you to walk with God...accompany Jesus down the road...in a way you may never have done before.

Faith is about walking.

Faith is about going.

Faith is about letting God move you from where you are to where God wants you to be.

Faith is about an adventure.

Will you answer the invitation? Will you go?

And there are some things that will help you on that walk, that will help you connect with God and get to know Jesus in a way you may never have before. There are some things that work, and over these next weeks we hope you'll join us in discovering what those are and doing our best to live them out. There are soul practices that connect you with God, with others, and change your life...turning it into an adventure with God.

No agenda. My Grandpa and I really didn't have an agenda.

Just being together on those summer nights, heading over to the Dairy Queen with the windows rolled down in that old Plymouth. Just being together. He treasured it then. I treasure it still.

Walk with me, Jesus says.

Follow me, Jesus says.

Let's do life together.

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FOOTNOTE - to be used in a future sermon?

FAITHING IS A TOGETHER THING

And, in the Bible, this walk with God isn't something you do on your own. You walk with others. You were taught that at church camp up at Camp Lakewood: when it was time to swim, you had a partner. You and your partner were watched over by lifeguards. You were taught that in the military: you weren't on your own but you were a part of a group...a platoon or a company. You were to look out for one another. You were to help keep one another out of trouble. And, if someone was in trouble, the whole platoon or company was to help them out and bring them back.

One of the crises in the Jesus community in North America is that we have too often made faith life something that is all about the individual. It's all about me. One of the great challenges about too much contemporary Christian praise music is that it

is all about Jesus and me, and any sense of a faith community is forgotten. If I am getting what I need, spiritually, I really don't care all that much about what is happening to other people and what they need. The mission of the church then becomes pleasing people, keeping the members happy, feeding them the kind of spiritual food they prefer having rather than honoring God or focusing on Christ's bigger mission.

In too many places, in too many churches, faith life has been turned into a game of religious solitaire. People sitting in the pews or standing in the worship center often know the people around them only a little or not at all. People in worship or the coffee area know one another no better than people in a condo development know the families living to the left and right of them.

Paul, it is clear, saw this tendency of people to make a faith walk with God into a game of religious solitaire. The tent-maker-rabbi-turned-Christian-apostle saw how people were tempted to make their faith walk with God into just one more expression of human selfishness. And so it is that Paul talks in his letters about how we were made to do life together, how we were each given gifts by the Spirit for the good of the whole, and how we -though many, different parts- are one body in Christ.

Some of you are Facebook friends of mine. You may have seen a screen shot a friend took and posted this week of three friends and me having our Thursday morning Zoom Bible study. Steve, Dave, Herb and I have been friends for more than thirty years of ministry. Dave and I were in seminary together at Duke. Herb and I met at a national youth workers' conference in Estes Park, Colorado long ago. We climbed around on boulders, as we walked around up above the YMCA of the Rockies, and talked about life and ministry and what might be ahead. This band of brothers -there are other names we use to refer to ourselves but this isn't the time or place to share those- has been together for more than thirty years. We've had good times and better times. We've leaned on one another when things were especially challenging. We've felt loved enough in this group that we have dared to risk honesty. And we have loved one another enough that we have said some hard things to one another that we believed needed to be said.

The other night, when the snow was flying, Herb was getting ready to head to Elkhart General for open heart surgery. They were issues with the weather, and Herb's wife -who many of you know- ended up driving his 4WD drive truck through the blowing snow to get to the ER in Elkhart from their home in Granger. Steve, Dave and I were doing everything we could to coach our friend and his wife through that storm until they safely arrived at the hospital. We were all worked up because we love our buddy (and our buddy is doing great, by the way).

I hunch that all three of us were thinking about the story in the 2nd chapter of Mark where four men carry their friend on a stretcher to Jesus. The way is blocked so they get up on the roof, tear part of the roof away, and lower their friend and his stretcher into the middle of the room where Jesus is teaching.

Walking by faith is something we were meant to do with others...in community.

Faith, walking by faith, in the Bible isn't taking a solitary hike but it is a group thing...a community thing. God knows what pilgrims who walk the Camino in Spain are told: stay in a group. Have trail buddies. Look out for one another.

