

Second Sunday in Lent – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16, Psalm 22: 22-30, Romans 4: 13-25, Mark 1: 9-15

Two men went on a journey, centuries apart. And yet it was the same journey. How can this be? The first man's name was Abram and the journey covered many years across hundreds of miles. The second man's name was Peter and the journey was accomplished in three short years and covered the distance between Galilee and Jerusalem. And yet it was the same journey. How can this be? The end of the journey for each man had not a physical destination but a spiritual outcome. It is a journey, a road we are all invited to travel. How can this be?

Last week I spoke of the invitation extended to each of us to be on a pilgrimage of faith, to go deeper into our spiritual lives and to strengthen our connection with God. This week, Abram and Sari who became Abraham and Sarah and Peter to become the Rock, show us how to participate in a spiritual pilgrimage. Spiritual pilgrimage is that which can deepen our connection with God and teach us what it means to be a disciple. The answer to the question "How can this be?" is quite simply, only through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. In this second Sunday of Lent, we are summoned to the adventure of a personal pilgrimage. Like Abram, Sari, Peter and all those who have followed God's call in ages past, we know not where this journey will lead.

Abram encountered the God of promise and covenant when he was "mature" by any standard. God promises Abram the land and children, when both seem unattainable. Abram is asked first to take a physical journey. Together with Sari, they leave behind everything, family, security, home, inheritance and all that they know to obey the voice of God. In simple language the book of Genesis tells us how it came to be. "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation and I will bless you,..." Abram together with Sari set out on the adventure. The journey was real and tangible leading them out into the unknown desert. They go simply because God asked it of them. But the real pilgrimage which they began was internal and spiritual. Abram and Sari through their experience of pilgrimage became Abraham and Sarah, two who in accepting the invitation of God came to belong to God in a new way. They set out on a journey of trust and a pilgrimage of faith. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, "Faith is not easy. It calls for a persistence which is against common sense. It calls for believing in a gift from God..." It calls for the recognition that there is always more possible in our relationship with God. And so for Abraham and Sarah began the pilgrimage to becoming disciples of the Living God.

Centuries later, Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee when he saw two fishermen, Peter and Andrew. Jesus called to them to leave behind their livelihood, their families, their community and follow him. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people. And immediately they left their nets and followed him." (Mark 1: 17-18). And so began another journey, from the shores of the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem and ultimately beyond to the whole world. With those steps taken to physically follow Jesus the four fishermen also began the interior spiritual pilgrimage toward discipleship. We are invited on our own spiritual pilgrimage toward discipleship.

Peter, Andrew and all the rest, followed Jesus and watched as he healed those who were possessed, injured or ill. They listened as Jesus spoke to the crowds who came to hear him, teaching them in parables. Those first disciples who had begun a physical journey found that they were on a spiritual pilgrimage as well. Their pilgrimage brought a new understanding to

their relationship with God. Little did they know where the journey and the pilgrimage would lead. We are invited to the same kind of adventure toward a deeper understanding of our relationship with God.

The outward journey takes those first disciples from the Sea of Galilee eventually to Jerusalem. The inward spiritual pilgrimage takes them from being fishermen to fishing for people. In spite of all of the miracles, the teaching and the crowds it is not easy. There are those who begin to reject Jesus and the message that he brings. The spiritual pilgrimage has led to a place of confusion. A place where certainty is questioned and where expectations are not fulfilled.

Jesus asks two questions of Peter and the rest. “Who does the world say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” Questions that will determine a major turn in the spiritual pilgrimage for Peter. Peter, impetuous Peter answers without hesitation. “You are the Messiah.” But what does that really mean? For Peter, the Messiah is the one sent by God the one who had been promised by God and for whom all Israel has been waiting. Messiah, the one who was expected to be powerful king like David, the one who would restore Israel to its rightful place in the nations. The Messiah, the one expected to lead a mighty army of angels bringing about God’s kingdom on earth.

The truth that would shock Peter and continues to shock those who would follow to this day is articulated best by pastor Joseph Small. “The truth is that God’s mercy is given to sinners, not reserved for the righteous; God’s strength is exposed in weakness, not displayed in power; God’s wisdom is veiled in parable and paradox, not set out in self-help maxim; God’s life is disclosed in death.”

Jesus begins to teach them, that he must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders and be killed. Peter, on hearing this is stunned, so stunned that he forgets himself and undertakes to rebuke the Messiah. Peter’s spiritual pilgrimage has come to an important crossroads. Would Peter choose to give up his ideas about how God should be? Would he accept that his spiritual path lay in discovering who God was and not how he wanted God to be?

Jesus reprimand sounds harsh to our ears. “Get behind me, Satan! Jesus is saying to Peter, you have a choice, you can continue to cling to human expectations, or you can set your mind on the way of God. We have the same choice.

Peter had gotten out in front of the Messiah, imagining the ministry of Jesus as Peter thought that it should be. What Jesus reminds us is that we are to follow Jesus, not to lead him. We are not to force his words and actions into a pattern we long for but to accept and even cherish the path of discipleship hard as that might be.

Satan in this instance is not the red, horned imp of our imagination, but literally whatever hinders us from seeing Jesus as Jesus really is. Satan is what causes us to hesitate to take up (our) cross and follow where Jesus leads. The cross that Jesus is inviting us to accept is the cross of opportunity. It is the privilege to give our lives sacrificially in service and in love, compassion and justice to those who we encounter daily.

Peter, after this shock had the courage to continue on his spiritual pilgrimage as he turned his steps to follow Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross of crucifixion that awaited. The spiritual pilgrimage continued beyond the cross to the resurrection. It continued all of Peter’s life through doubt and denial, through commitment and ministry. Where will our spiritual pilgrimage lead us? The way to discover the answer is to take up our own crosses of love and service.