

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 28, 2010 (II Lent, Year C)

These are the types of lessons where I *really* wish I had a curate. They're obscure, they're confusing, and they're complex. In other words, the perfect Sunday on which to delegate the preaching duties. We've got the blood sacrifice of several animals in the Old Testament; evildoers eating flesh in the psalm; enemies of Christ in the epistle; and a lament over the city that kills the prophets in the gospel. Good times.

But occasionally, as in poker, you must play the cards you're dealt. And this is the beauty of our three-year lectionary cycle of readings: I can't just pick and choose what I'd like to preach on. It doesn't work that way. Which is actually a good thing; because as a community of faith we can't ignore the difficult passages of Scripture. We must confront them, wrestle with them, and engage them. And through them we're often challenged with new insights. Though I still wish I had that curate this morning.

As I spent some time with these lessons I did begin to see an emergent theme. And it's a theme appropriate to the season of Lent: wandering. This passage from Luke is part of what's known as the "Travel Narrative." Jesus and his disciples have begun their journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Jesus has "set his face to Jerusalem" and is on the way toward his arrest and crucifixion. As readers who know where the journey will end, part of us wants to cry out "Stop! Go somewhere else! Anywhere but Jerusalem!" Even Jesus laments over the city saying, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." But we also know that Jesus must finish what he started and this Travel Narrative slowly but surely pulls Jesus toward the fulfillment of his earthly ministry.

He even makes a veiled reference to this when he proclaims, "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work." A cryptic statement to his initial hearers but perfectly clear to us who stand on this side of the resurrection; who know that Jesus will be raised on the third day. But as focused as Jesus was about both his mission and his travel plans, I'm sure the disciples felt less so. At times it must have felt like they were wandering; it can be difficult to distinguish between following the Lord and wandering aimlessly. At times it feels like we're following God but we're actually wandering aimlessly; at others it feels like we're wandering aimlessly but we're actually following God. I doubt I'm alone in my ability to identify with this.

Then there's Abraham, a man not unfamiliar with wandering. Just last week Jacob said of him in our reading from Deuteronomy, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor." In this section of Genesis, God has promised Abraham that his descendents would be more numerous than the stars in the sky and that they would live in a land of their own; a rich land full of promise. But it hasn't happened yet. He and Sarah have no children and they aren't getting any younger. At this point Abraham's sole heir is one of his servants. As to this Promised Land, they're still living in tents. Hope remains but it must have been ever diminishing.

We tend to do a lot of wandering in our own lives; both of the physical and metaphorical variety. Statistics show that the average American moves 11.7 times over a lifetime. I was taken aback

when I did the math on my own life: I've moved 19 times already; nine times since graduating from college. If Abraham is a wandering Aramean I guess that makes me a wandering Baltimorean. And no, I don't plan on moving anytime soon.

But we do live in a fairly nomadic society. Sometimes it's wanderlust; sometimes it's job related. Sometimes physical wandering masks an emotional wandering. Sometimes wandering is exciting; sometimes it brings out the fear of the unknown.

When it comes to our own wandering in the wilderness, you could argue that Abraham is the perfect Lenten guide. Despite a lack of tangible evidence; despite any visible sign; his faith endures amid the uncertainties of the present. And Abraham's example challenges us to embolden our own faith in the face of uncertainty and doubt. That's not an easy thing to do, mind you. But no one ever said faith was easy.

Some of you know that my mother, Lois, had a stroke last week. I flew down to Baltimore for 24 hours on Thursday morning. Fortunately it was fairly minor as these things go; the biggest issue has been her speech. After a few days in the hospital she was moved to a rehab place and is doing some pretty intense speech therapy along with some physical therapy. I share this with you for a couple of reasons. First, as a community of faith, I ask you to keep her in your prayers. Prayer is important, prayer makes a difference, and prayer is something people with stiff upper lips rarely ask for. I'm not saying it's just Episcopalians or just New Englanders but that's a pretty potent combination.

As I watched and listened to my mom struggling to communicate, I was proud of her. She would get frustrated, she would get discouraged; but she would continue until the thought was communicated. One of the things we talked about were the lessons for today. As we chatted about Abraham, it became increasingly clear to me that there were some parallels between her situation and his; which is the other reason I'm sharing this with you. Abraham was promised that his descendents would enter the Promised Land. Of course there was a pretty long period between the promise and the realization – 400 years to be precise. I'm not suggesting that it will take my mother 400 years to get her speech back; nor am I suggesting that someone promised it would ever be perfect again. That's the hope, of course.

But my mother *is* in a transitional time right now. She's wandering through a wilderness of uncertainty; she's scared; despite all the promises of faith and wholeness she's feeling, at times, hopeless and vulnerable. We would all like instantaneous results but they are not forthcoming. It will take a lot of hard work and dedication and even then there are no guarantees about the end result.

Abraham's example reminds us that a faithful life is not about immediate gratification. Like Abraham we don't always see the fruit of our labor in this life. Rather it is about living faithfully and moving forward toward the vision God holds out for us even when we cannot fully grasp it ourselves. That takes a deep and abiding faith. Some may have achieved this level of faithfulness; most of us are still wandering. Wandering in the right direction but wandering nonetheless. The good news is that, as with Abraham, wherever we may wander God is with us at every step of the journey.