

March 20, 2011

**The Second Sunday in Lent**

John 3:1-17

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey, associate rector*

Our final day in El Corpus, Honduras eight of us North Americans awoke and gathered before dawn to hike up to the top of Callaire, the highest mountain in the region. We gathered sleep-eyed in the darkness. Don Hernand had agreed to lead us up the mountain, but apparently he was one of the last to leave the party the night before and feeling a little rough, had decided to stay in bed. My friend Gene had hiked to the top of the mountain several years before, so he offered to lead the group. We set off together trusting our journey to Gene's memory. It was pitch black when we started and we had to rely on our flashlights to keep us on the dirt road. We hadn't even gone five minutes before we had to stop and ask the lone other soul awake at this hour, if we were going the right way. We weren't. It was a not so inspiring start, but after a brief back-track to take a turn we had missed, we were on our way.

We walked initially as a group, but as the journey continued and the sky began to lighten, the group started to stretch out, some walking quietly alone, others babbling happily in twos or threes. As we rounded a bend in the road we came upon a house that Gene recognized. He led us over a fence and into a field. We had to stretch out along the fence to try to find a path across the field that had been there several years earlier. Once across the field, we discovered that we were positioned at such an angle that we couldn't quite see the top of the mountain – so we had to make our best guess as to how to move forward. After a period of wandering, we stumbled across something that looked like a path and began to follow it. An hour later we had almost reached the top, and we came out into a clearing.

It is probably no surprise to any of you, but at this point we realized that we had not in fact found the path to the mountain top. The path we followed took us to the back-side of the top where there was no clear, safe path to the peak of the mountain. We were hot, hungry, and very tired. Many in the group decided they had gone as far as they wanted to go. But there were four of us, who were particularly stubborn, and decided path or no – we had come too far not to reach the top.

The incline at this point was incredibly steep. I felt like a lizard climbing up a tree, gripping the mountainside with my fingers and toes, my belly pressed tight against the ground to keep my center of gravity in close. We finally scaled the last several feet and reached the top. It wasn't wide enough for us to even stand, so we straddled the top of the mountain and stared out to the Pacific Ocean in the west and the Atlantic Ocean in the East. It was an amazing view.

After a few minutes rest, we started the descent to rejoin our group. It was treacherous. The incline was so steep that we essentially tried to do a controlled slide back down the mountainside, grabbing for clumps of grass to slow down our controlled fall. At one

point a large rock became dislodged and began bouncing down between the four of us, and even though someone yelled out “Rock” as a warning, we didn’t have enough control to be able to get out of its path, and the rock hit my friend Gene square on the chest. Because of his injury he couldn’t use his right arm anymore. The three of us tried to help him the rest of the way down the face of the mountaintop and we rejoined our group in the clearing.

I took Gene’s daypack while someone else used their shirt to form a sling for his arm. It was clear that we needed to head back to our village as quickly as possible. The day was heating up. Many of us had not anticipated how long this hike would be and our water had only lasted us the hike up the mountain. The trek back down the mountain began to quickly deteriorate: muscles unused to such strenuous inclines began to shake with weakness, the high elevation and the dry heat made our bodies strain to operate efficiently, dehydration became a problem for many of us as we struggled to simply put one foot in front of the other. We limped along in pairs, distracting one another from the heat and exhaustion with stories of our lives.

My buddy Brain and I were incredibly tired - each step we took required so much physical and psychological effort, that we decided to ask each person we met if we were heading the right way. Even if we had just asked someone 10 feet earlier, we asked again. We wanted to be sure not to wander off the path, not to waste our very precious energy and resources. Between the two of us, we had about 16 oz of water to sustain us for the entire hike back to the village.

By the end our exhaustion was so complete, our bodies were so drained, that we could only walk about five steps at a time before we had to stop and rest. The entire group did make its way back to our host village and our other team members. As they worked to rehydrate each of us, our fellow team members chastised us for foolishly attempting to climb the mountain without our Honduran guide.

Looking back on it now, it was quite a foolish thing to do, but that journey itself was an amazing adventure. This physical journey for me epitomizes the journey of faith that we are all on. We followed a path that had been journeyed by others for hundreds of years, we lost our way, we relied on one another, we forged a new path, we asked help for from people we met along the way, we were cared for by others, we pushed beyond our limits, we were exhilarated and we eventually found our way.

Living the life of faith includes at times experiencing struggles in your relationship with God, maybe feeling lost, not able to see where you are, where God is. In our collect today we asked God to “be gracious to all who have gone astray from God’s ways...” We are not praying for some nameless faceless other, we are praying for ourselves. We are admitting to ourselves and to God that we are the ones who have lost our way. Lent is a time for us to stop, stop mindlessly walking and stand still - look around at where we are on this journey.

When we stop, I would guess that some of us may find that we are spinning around and around in confusion or that we have wandered off the path and lost our way. After

seeing the images of the devastation and destruction in Japan, I think many of us are thinking about how God is acting in the world. Some of us might be wondering where God is in this crisis. Or maybe your spinning is because of something more personal. Perhaps you have wandered away from God as you watch a friend or family member continue to struggle with their self-worth, their sense of place in this world as they face prolonged unemployment and you wonder where God is at work in their lives.

There are so many things that can send us spinning, send us into moments of doubt, periods of turning away from God. In the spinning we begin to feel like we are losing faith, we begin to distrust God. We feel isolated and shameful in our doubts and in our distrust. But even the descendants of Abraham, the Israelites - God's chosen people, experienced doubt. When they were wandering in the desert, they felt abandoned by God. And still God was faithful to them and brought them out of exile into the land of promise.

God is faithful to us too – full of compassion and love. Jesus called his disciples into community – a community that learns together, breaks bread together, heals together. Jesus promises us that “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matt 18:20) We are not wandering aimlessly or alone. God knows that we are interdependent, interconnected beings and we need the strength and support of one another. Because just as there are those of us who are spinning in circles right now, not quite sure which way to turn, there are also many here today who will stop during Lent and take a look around at where they are on their faith journey and realize, “you know, I’m in a pretty good place.” And they look at the devastation in Japan and hear the stories of hope and can see God at work there. They are able to proclaim “God is good.” There is balance and beauty in community. We can not strive to be faithful individuals on our own; we need God’s community. We rely on one another as companions on the journey, as interpreters of God’s word, as instruments and agents of God.

And because of this amazing community of God, we have people we can trust who will yell out “Rock” when the boulder of life’s hardships is heading our way, and if it hits us, they will be there to help us to our feet, bind up our wounds, and journey with us for a while.

As we practice living out our faith, we are not always going to get it right. It is natural to experience times of doubt, times of distrust, especially when we are struggling in other aspects of our lives. We are not always going to be able to live up to the person of faith that we strive to be. And that is okay. But the burden lies on us to stop and recognize where we are in our journey, and if necessary, to reach out for help. God has immersed us into a wonderful community filled with people of great faith walking the same journey.

So, stop, stop where you are and look around.