

## **BORDERLAND**

First Sunday of Lent/New Member Sermon by Dan Stern, 2/25/07  
Deuteronomy 26, selected verses, 1-11; Luke 4:1-13

The north part of Washington State's Okanogan County where I was raised in a vast semiarid wilderness of sagebrush and dry pine forests. The entire region was, according to treaty, to have remained one large reservation for the consolidation of various Native American tribes. But that treaty was signed before white prospectors for gold. After the gold rush, over half of that supposedly permanent Native American reservation was reopened to white settlers – including my own paternal ancestors. A comparative situation today might be the way Israel has gradually come to allow Jewish settlers to live on the West Bank in previously-established Palestinian territories. The West Bank, by the way, is pretty much the same wilderness land that Jesus entered when, right after his baptism, he was 'led by the Spirit into the wild.' My theory is that Jesus went out alone to be tested in the wilderness in the same way that traditional Native peoples have done for centuries. In other words, he was on a kind of vision quest, or if you relate to it better, a kind of Outward Bound experience for the soul. I also like to think of these wild, edgy, testing kinds of times and places in our lives as borderlands. It may be because of where I was raised – near to physical borders – in the isolated borderland between the US and Canada, in-between the vast, mostly-impenetrable North Cascades and the remote, practically roadless Okanogan highlands. The border town of Oroville, so named because of once-thriving gold mines, was where my mother taught second grade, and the rival town just to the south, Tonasket, named after an Indian chieftain, was where my siblings and I went to school. My dad built our house in the early 1950's along a narrow valley of irrigated green orchards in-between these two towns that bordered the twisting turns of the Okanogan River. Tonasket seemed to us tamer, far less exotic than Oroville. Oroville, that Gold Rush border town, had a certain wild west character about it.

I could go on and on telling you personal borderland stories – about going by truck to Canada with my dad to get a haircut, about that first trip with my buddies all the way down to Tijuana, about the culture shock I experienced upon returning to the LA area after some extended travel in Mexico, about getting frisked at a European border while traveling via Euro-railpass, about hitchhiking into Guatemala from Chiapas, Mexico. Many of you could tell good stories too about borderland experiences of your own.

But I must tell you about one hard-to-find place I know of where, when I was a teenager, I could easily drive my car over the Canadian border and back, and no one would be any the wiser. It was on a tiny remnant Indian reservation that straddled the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel. The route had a long history going back to prohibition days in the 1920's of being a secret booze smuggler's path, and later, during the Vietnam War, it was a way in which would-be Vietnam draftees escaped to Canada. It always gave me a little tinge of excitement to go there: here was the perfect border adventure land for my adolescent fantasies of being a Jesse James or a Clyde Barrow. Back then, you barely knew which side of the border you were on. Now I very much doubt that one can cross the border there, and if one still can in this paranoid time of perceived terrorism, I'm sure it is a much more anxiety-producing experience.

Nowadays we know it when we cross a border from one country into another. (Some adapted *Whole People* content in next couple paragraphs.) High barbed wire fences interrupt the possibility of a casual stroll. Big signs, usually in two languages, line the highway. Border guards carry guns, custom inspectors look through our things with care or suspicion. We know we're crossing the border all right.

When we enter a new phase in our own lives, we may not know it right away. It may be confusing or unsettling. When Ash Wednesday came along in the year 2001, who could have known that an earthquake would hit the Pacific NW? Ash Wednesday is often referred to liturgically as 'the most uncomfortable day of the year', but it was hardly ever more true than when that earthquake struck. Some of us didn't know what had happened at first: it was confusing and upsetting, and certainly for those left homeless by it, it was no adventure. I think too of the so-called 'illegal aliens', who wonder about for long periods in the in-between places, the desert borderland places. Going through borderlands to get to a new place in life is hard.

And yet spiritually speaking, the borderland is necessary and good because it is the place of transition. We may even feel as if we're lost there for a while, or in a thick fog, as I suggested last Sunday. But I encourage you to be patient and to trust God in such transitioning places, and to remember that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wild. We are too at times. In our own life's borderlands, in edgy, testing times in our lives, we are being led by the Spirit through to something else, something more.

"The Lenten season is a time in our church year bordered on one side by the glory of Jesus' transfiguration and on the other by the wonder of his resurrection." (Whole People) But it was into the wilderness in-between where Jesus entered new territory both literally and symbolically. Like his ancestors who faced 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus also experienced his share of trials, as he struggled to remain faithful to God in the face of hunger, competing gods, and risky situations. All his temptations were real options that Jesus could have quite reasonably accepted. (Jesus is tempted) with good things: It's good to be fed when hungry. It's good to have the authority to bring about change. It's good to be protected from danger. Yet at the borderlands, we can't take shortcuts; we're forced to rethink our priorities, and must give thought not only to what is okay about our lives, but to what may be the very best things of all. In other words, Lent is "an opportunity to follow Jesus to the edges of all that is familiar and settled in our lives, and to open ourselves to where the border pathways may lead us."

That's also, I think, what joining a faithful church community is about. We're saying no to some things so we have room in our hearts to say yes to something else. It's said that probably 99 percent of us are addicted to something, whether it is eating, shopping, blaming, or being co-dependently mixed up with someone else. But those empty places inside that we try to fill with everything else belong to God. And that's why we're here today, including Angela, Christie, David, and Brooks. We all need to 'fill up' those empty places inside with higher-quality food, with the kind that satisfies the soul. For most people the crossing the border ritual of joining the church so clearly meaningful and joyful it will never be forgotten. If it's just a tad bit scary for you, well, that's normal too. If you don't immediately notice or feel any big changes—don't worry about that either. Change has a way of being both simple and profound: scary one moment, barely-perceived the next. Baptism is a simple ritual. Often great crossing-of-border changes in our lives happen in simple ways. But I encourage you to enter borderland places with confidence; knowing that God in Christ, and Christ's body, the church and the Holy Spirit enter those places and times with you. As of the day, you are not alone. Amen!