

FILLING OUR BIBLICAL BACKPACKS FOR THE JOURNEY: EXODUS

A sermon preached at Broadview Community UCC

March 9, 2014

Rev. Gail Crouch

Scriptures: Exodus 2:23 – 3:14; John 1: 1-5, 10-17

As you entered church today, perhaps we should have asked you to stow your luggage for you, for all of us, are beginning two journeys today. The first journey is one we in the church take every year around this time. It is Lent, those 40 days (minus Sundays) leading up to Good Friday and Easter, where we pay particular attention to our spiritual lives and how we are called to be Christians in this world. What does it mean to follow Jesus and how can we recommit to him?

The second journey is being made by this particular church, Broadview, as you begin a journey without Dan, your pastor of 14 years, and decide who and how you want to be church in the coming years. This interim journey and eventually the call to a new pastor can seem a little scary. But it too is a time to pay special attention to your spiritual life as a Christian community.

As I thought about taking a journey, taking a trip, I also thought about one of my favorite kinds of trip, hiking. As a child of the mountains, going on hikes was something I have done since I was about 4 years ago. And part of traveling those trails was learning the 10 essentials to take on each hike. You heard and saw our time with the children as we talked about those important items.

Just as hikers have learned about the ten essentials, so I would suggest that of the 66 books, 1189 chapters and 31,000+ verses in the bible, some are absolutely essential in understanding ourselves as Christians. The Bible is a major resource for us and learning some of the essential scriptures is important to living our faith. For the few weeks I am with you I want us to consider some essential scriptures that help define us as Christians. My list is not all inclusive so I have an assignment for you: during the coming weeks think about which scriptures are essential for *your* faith; where in the Bible do you find comfort, challenge, guides by which to live your life? And I hope that we can share those with each other perhaps during Holy Week.

*

*

*

Before we begin with actual scriptures I want to talk briefly about an important aspect of biblical study. We all know folks and churches who talk about the bible and it sometimes seems as if they are talking about a different book than we have. The book is the same. What may be different is the over-all message we believe the Bible has for us. It is important to understand the window, the filter, the lens through which we view the bible. It is crucial that we understand about our lens which may be different from others. (Highlight sinners, Jesus died for us, accept as savior.) In the tradition of the UCC and I would say, Progressive Christianity as a whole, here is a way to describe that lens, that window through which we view the Bible.

God loves us and came to us through Jesus to show us how to love that we all might have life and have it abundantly.

As we read and study our scriptures, it is important to remember that context.

* * * *

So the first essential I would put into our biblical backpack comes from our Hebrew scriptures. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says we cannot begin to understand our Judeo-Christian faith without understanding that the *Exodus* of the Hebrew people from Egypt gives roots and definition to what it means to be a people on a journey. We have all felt, from time to time, that we are wandering through a wilderness and sometimes that wandering feels empty of God's presence. The concept of being in exile, of being lost in a wilderness helps describe our human condition and sometimes, our faith journeys. The Exodus scripture is a great story which has been made into terrific (and not so terrific) movies. All those details we learned as children – plagues sent to Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, manna in the wilderness when there was no other food; the reception of the Ten Commandments; golden idols and lots and lots of battles. The Exodus story has it all. But the importance of it is more than all the individuals and actions. The importance is what this scripture says very clearly: we do not travel alone; God has heard our cries and will be present, caring for us on our journey.

Verse 24 of the 2nd chapter of Exodus states: God heard their groaning and God remembered God's covenant, looked upon the Israelites and took notice of them. From the beginning, we have been in covenant with God and even when we are in distress, perhaps especially when we are, God notices us and does not disappear from our lives.

There is that miracle, that burning bush that Moses cannot walk away from, the bush that is on fire but not being consumed. It is one of those seminal images in the Bible for the presence of God. This God is an irresistible Being whose energies cannot be contained. This God, when asked for a name, self-describes as "I am who I am." This is not an It or a He or a Her. No pronoun is adequate; this God is beyond ordinary descriptions.

But this God, indescribable, is nevertheless a God who cares about the suffering of the people. "I have heard their cry....I have come to deliver them." This God of the burning bush cared about Israel, about justice, about protecting those who couldn't protect themselves. And that makes all the difference. Remembering our lens through which we read the bible: "God love us all and wants for us to have abundant life" that promise shines clearly through this Exodus passage.

- God listened to the groanings of the people
- God remembered the covenant with Abraham
- God saw what was going on with Israel
- God understood and would not abandon them.

When we place the story of the Exodus into our biblical backpack, we also place a promise there: God remembers the covenant and God will not abandon us, either in the wilderness or when life is calm and sure. We will be lost at times in our lives; we will feel alone, unsure, - and God will be there.

*

*

*

So God's love for the Israelites is evident in our Hebrew scripture; God's love for humanity did not begin with Jesus, but was there from the beginning. But as Christians, we see Jesus in a special way – part of God and yet not God – embodying God but not the totality of God. In our Christian theology we call incarnation: God coming to human beings as one of us so the love of God for us is crystal clear. In Jesus we meet nothing less than a revelation of God.

We should all be distressed when we hear people talk about the angry God of the Old Testament and the God of love in the New Testament or our Christian scriptures. Peterson is clear in his translation of this John passage: “We got the basics from Moses, then this exuberant giving and receiving...” God's love was there from the beginning! The one who was God's partner in creation has made God concretely known by becoming flesh – just like us. God's love is available to all. As Christians we believe it is best known and understood by the life of Jesus.

I love the words that Eugene Peterson uses in John 1 in speaking of The Word: “The Life-light was the real thing.....and The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” Another translation says: “And the Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us.”

So we place two important scriptures in our backpacks. The Exodus one that helps us connect both with our Judeo heritage and our understanding of life as sometimes being wilderness. And the John scripture that reassures us God loves us so much that God became one of us, living and breathing, eating and drinking, understanding what it means to be human because God was human in Jesus.

And although many rejected Jesus, many also trusted him and, giving up all, followed him. It was a rag-tag bunch in many ways: Disciples who often did not “get it;” a man born blind; a Samaritan woman; extravagant Mary of Bethany. They were an unlikely group to become the community that eventually was the Christian church. But the fact they were such an unlikely bunch tells us something about God's character and who Jesus was. And that will lead us to next week's essential scriptures which are all about justice.

During Lent some folks give up chocolate. Others, instead of giving up something try to take on something. Perhaps a Lenten practice we can all observe and do during these weeks before Easter is to prayerfully meditate on what it means to follow a Jesus who shows us God's love; and then to find ways to model that love so all of us can have abundant life.

God loves us and came to us through Jesus to show us how to love that we all might have life and have it abundantly. Thanks be to God!