

Lent I

I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; I will guide you with my eye. Psalm 32: 9

Some years ago I was at a retreat for a diocesan committee. Mark Hollingsworth, who was then the Archdeacon of the diocese, said a collect to open our day with prayer. *Almighty and Everlasting God*, he intoned sonorously. (He has since become a bishop.) When he had finished praying he mused about collects, and the way they so often address God with titles that describe some attributes of God – *almighty, most merciful, everlasting*, etc. “Collects,” instructed the Archdeacon, remind us, “You are God and I am not.”

“Well,” replied a member of the committee huffily, picking at her hair with a long pronged comb, “Not if you’re a feminist theologian. Then you say, “You are God and so am I!”

This exchange came back to me recently as I was meditating about Lent, the beginning of Lent, the meaning of Lent, the purpose and point of Lent. Because, I suppose, Lent seems to me a time when we do wonder and worry particularly about this question: *who is God, and who am I? Who am I in relation to God?* Is the prayer and discipline of Lent meant to remind us that, in the Psalmist’s words, *I am a worm, and no man (or woman)?* Are we meant to dwell grimly and miserably on the vast gap between God’s divine perfection and our unworthiness? Or should we focus on the wideness of God’s mercy and the abounding grace of our salvation?

Our reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans expresses and explores that tension. ***So death spread to all because all have sinned. (Yet) much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.***

Back and forth, up and down; the seesaw of our spiritual lives; the low of self-criticism, self-doubt, self-judgment and condemnation, the high of an awareness of forgiveness, salvation, grace. *You are God and I am not. You are God and so am I.*

Now my fine feminist friend with the pick comb didn’t mean, literally, that she was God, nor do I mean that. She was talking about the God within us, the divine spark, the *imago dei* idea that we are all formed in God’s image and likeness, and maybe a bit more as well: the liberation theologians’ insistence that we are partners with God, co-

creators of God's realm of justice and peace. She was talking about empowerment – and therefore about a sense of God's abiding and inherent love and grace.

All very respectable and valuable theological points, comforting and inspirational. But are we supposed to concentrate on them during this penitential season, or are we meant to be analyzing our faults and failings, our myriad shortfalls from the image of God in which we are made?

And what about Jesus? Where is he in all this? Today we see him on the mountaintop, tempted by the devil and resisting. We know that this trial is part of the preparation for his public ministry, that three year journey of prophecy, healing, miracle working, wisdom teaching, political provocation and religious defiance that lead to Jerusalem and Calvary. That three year journey into the heart of God.

We talk – I talk, often– at the beginning of Lent, about taking that walk together with Jesus, about setting our faces, with his, toward Jerusalem. I have talked about entering into this enterprise together, knowing the outcome ahead of time.

As I prayed about this journey this year, I realized that I have been accustomed to picturing it in narrative “historical” terms, in Gospel story terms: traveling with Jesus as he changes water into wine, scolds the disciples, consorts with outcasts, heals the grotesquely ill, fights with demons, argues with the Syro Phoenician woman and the Samaritan woman, raises Lazarus from the dead – all that good, clean fun.

What I mean to say is that I had generally envisioned this journey as being a reliving of oft-told Biblical tales: compelling tales, meaningful tales, and with possible application to life today, but nonetheless, familiar and, somehow, in the past. Also my image had me- or had us–walking shoulder to shoulder with Jesus, looking and traveling all in the same direction, our faces all set toward Jerusalem.

This year, an image of the journey came to me differently, and I suspect I was influenced by Steve's extraordinary sermon last week about his encounter with Jesus. Now I am seeing Jesus traveling toward me, and me – and us – all traveling toward him. I see Jesus walking down through the centuries, accumulating not just the constellation of gospel stories that surround him, but gathering up and marching through the hopes and fears of all those years, all those centuries. Coming toward me, coming toward us, bearing with him all those wounds: wars and plagues, famines and persecutions, and bearing as well all progress in human health and progress, understanding and hope. Jesus walking toward us bearing all that sin, and all that salvation. All that falling short, and all that grace.

And I see myself– I see all of us – walking to meet him on the road. Taking not simply the swift trip through the 40 days of Lent, but traveling through all the years of our own lives, bearing the trials and tragedies that have befallen us, the burden of our sins and sorrows, and bearing as well our personal triumphs and joys, our achievements in love and work, our knowledge of forgiveness and blessing and God’s grace in our lives.

Where on the road will we meet him? How will we feel at the moment of encounter? Will we think, *You are God and I am not?* Or, *You are God and You are God in me, as well?* Will it be, *I am a worm?* Or will it be, *Amazing Grace?* Or something else altogether?

We can’t know until we get there. The answers will be different for us all. And the answers will be different for each of us at different times. Because that meeting with Jesus on that road won’t just happen once. On our journey of faith we are bound to meet Jesus, the Risen Christ, over and over again. And if we are alert, and if we are prepared, we will recognize that dear face and those dusty feet, and we will know that we have been made whole.

Amen.