

On Our Lent Journey: Not Alone (#3 in series) – 1 Corinthians 10:12-13; Luke 13:6-9
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 3rd Sunday of Lent (March 3) 2013

¹² So those who think they are standing need to watch out or else they may fall. ¹³ No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people. But God is faithful. He won't allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it.

⁶ A Jesus] told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' ⁸ And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Lent: We're on a journey. Two weeks ago, as we began this journey, I learned that I was carrying far too much. Do you remember that great big suitcase I was carrying with me? The Tour Guide convinced me that I needed to keep it simple and carry less. Carry less, but carry more important stuff: carry the parts of my story that are real, valuable, and that connect me to the larger story – the story that began with Jesus' journey up the road to Jerusalem.

Last week, we learned the importance of GPS: keeping our eyes on the destination, not getting distracted by the creature comforts that take our eye off the prize.

This week, as we travel together on this Lenten journey, **the lesson is that we don't travel alone. We travel it together.** Come. Listen in on the discussion as our group follows our tour guide.

I said to our Tour Guide: **"It sure is helpful, Mr. Tour Guide, that we are not carrying all that weight, like when we started."**

And he replied back to me: **"Indeed, sometimes all the stuff that you thought would make you safe and secure actually becomes a prison for you. So often we hold onto, and try to carry, far too much. And sometimes, it's not just physical baggage. Have you noticed how much knowledge is carried around, but how scarce is wisdom? And that's OK, if your life is nothing more than a television game show. But fewer bits of trivial pursuit and more wisdom will make your life better."**

How do you respond to that? I decided to just chew on that for awhile in silence, as we continued our journey together.

After we traveled on for awhile, with everyone apparently chewing in silence, I discovered that I was growing more comfortable with sharing quietness together. We've come along together far enough that I've let go of trying to fill all of the air with noise.

Then the Tour Guide broke the silence, as we passed along a little stream. We had stopped for a rest and the Tour Guide pointed to some activity just a few steps away, there at the edge of the running water.

“What on earth are you doing?” he called out to a monkey. We looked and saw what the monkey was doing: he put his hand into the water, caught a fish, and then put the fish up into the branches of a tree.

“I’m saving this fish from drowning,” replied the monkey.

We all laughed at his response, but the Tour Guide retrieved the fish from the tree and put it back into the water. Gently, he said to the monkey: **“The sun that gives light to the eagle will blind the owl. Come, travel with us. We will learn together.”**

“Sometimes,” the Tour Guide continued, **“one of the most important things about traveling together is to learn from one another. None of us ever faces a temptation that someone else has not already encountered and learned from the experience. Together we can see life from different perspectives and learn that none of us has a monopoly on the Truth. Together we can learn wisdom.”**

Again we continued on our way, thinking upon what the Tour Guide had said. We also enjoyed the lively companionship provided by our new traveling partner, the Monkey.

We had gone a few miles further when we saw a young farmer working in his garden. We stopped and the Tour Guide hailed him: **“Hello! Pray tell, what sort of tree is that?”** He turned slightly and winked at us. I wondered what was going on.

The young tree farmer was exasperated. **“It’s supposed to be a fig tree. But you sure wouldn’t know it to look at it. See: NO FRUIT! Three years now I’ve waited! I’m just going to chop it down.”**

“Oh, I don’t think I’d do that,” said the Tour Guide. **“Tell you what: cover up the ground around the trunk of the tree with manure. Then, for the rest of this year, keep the manure evenly spread about 4-5 inches thick. Work it with your hoe regularly and keep the weeds out. Then, when I come by here next year with another group like this, if it hasn’t borne fruit by then, I’ll cut it down for you, myself.”**

The young farmer shrugged his shoulders. **“Well, if you say so.”**

As we continued on up the road, one of our group asked the Tour Guide why he had given that advice.

And the Tour Guide told us:

“Sometimes a companion on the journey can help us to see that HARD TIMES ARE NOT ALWAYS BAD TIMES. Sometimes the manure in our lives help us to grow deeper roots.

“Manure in life has a special quality. When manure comes into our lives we can have three responses:

“(1) We can get angry and fling it, because we don’t think we deserve it, i.e. we can let it hit the fan.

“(2) We can convince ourselves that we must deserve it and so we just wallow in it.

“The first response hurts other folks; the second response hurts ourself. Neither one does much good at all, particularly if it becomes a habit.

“(3) The third approach is to recognize that often times God allows some manure into our lives to keep us occupied while God is doing something important in our lives that God does not want us to interfere with its happening.

“Like with that young fellow back there who was so frustrated, because the fig tree bore no fruit in three years of waiting. I taught him how to occupy himself with manure for another year just to keep him from cutting it down. Truth be told: fig trees quite simply just will not bear fruit until they are four years old. Patience comes with manure.”

That evening, as I wrote in my Lenten Journal what I had learned from the day, I realized that I have much to learn in life. Not just knowledge of facts, but wisdom. I think I’m learning that I’ve got a better chance doing that when I don’t go it all on my own.

And ... so our journey continues. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.