

*Ash Wednesday* March 5, 2014  
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston WV  
*The Spiritual Geography of Lent*

*John is very still - not just quiet, but still. He listens as if his life depends on his being able to pick out and distinguish between the sounds. He'd been in this physical location before. But this time it is different. This time he is paying attention. The time he is alert. Completely.*

In the foregoing reading, what difference does the actual physical location of John make?

- 1) He is beside his wife, in their bedroom, of forty years, as she lingers near the edge of death. He and the children are waiting for what they know is to happen. They just aren't sure when.
- 2) He is at his place of work, late at night, when no one else should be there. But he hears stealthy movements out in the hallway. When he picks up the telephone on his desk, the line is dead.
- 3) He is sitting in his pew during church. It is in that time of silence allowed for confession.
- 4) He is walking on the labyrinth outside here at Saint Marks.
- 5) He is sitting on a bench in the mall.
- 6) He is in a canoe in the river at sunrise.
- 7) He is on top of a mountain, where he can see for miles.

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In all these different places, it may be said that John is in prayer. But they are all surely different because of the place, because of the geography in which John's action is taking place.

Geography – particularly when we pay attention – makes a very large difference in what goes on in what we are doing.

As some of you heard in the sermon about the Transfiguration 3 days ago, Moses and Elijah both were powerfully impacted by their geography:

**Elijah** on the mountain doing battle with the prophets of Ba'al, and later, on a different mountain, in the throes of clinical depression he truly experienced God – not in the earthquake, wind and fire – but in the sheer sound of silence.

**Moses** encountered God on the mountain, in the burning bush that was not consumed by the flames; when he went up on the mountain covered with clouds, and received the Law from God written on tablets of stone; when he was led onto the mountain to gaze across the way into the Promised Land.

Jesus, the Gospels tell us, was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to discover what He needed to know before He began His public ministry. Later, those same Gospels tell us that he went up onto the mountains to pray, to pick His disciples, and to teach.

St. Paul spent as long as three years out in the Arabian wilderness sorting out what his conversion on the road to Damascus was all about. (Galatians 1:16-17)

The Revelation given unto the apostle John on the island of Patmos, was given over weeks of time in a cave in which I was not able to stand up to walk, the ceiling was so low.

David, the shepherd king, learned the importance of geography in his walk with God, when he penned the words of Psalm 121:

*<sup>121:1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills-- from whence does my help come? <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*

*<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. <sup>4</sup> He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*<sup>5</sup> The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. <sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. <sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep*

*your life.*

*<sup>8</sup> The LORD will keep you going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.*

As my wise colleague, friend, and poet Harold Slate encountered those words:

*Look up!  
not a direction,  
a connection!  
Life sources  
Provider - Creator  
Care-taker of individuals  
and all the chosen family!  
Wide awake - on duty  
night and day  
pushing away evil -  
wherever, whenever!*

In the geography of the spiritual life, geography is more than merely direction; it is a connection.

During this season of Lent, our Lent lunches are going to focus on the importance of Geography. As we pay attention to these particular places in the Jesus story, we can be informed about places in our own Lenten Journey:

March 12    Wilderness – Rod Blackstone

March 19    Garden(s) – Bonnie MacDonald

March 26 Upper Room – Bart Thompson

April 2 Pilate's Palace – Harold Slate

April 9 Via Dolorosa – Janet Harman

Does your relationship with God need a booster shot? Do you need a season in your walk with Jesus that offers you a refreshment of your soul?

Kathleen Norris wrote about a soul-encounter in a barber's chair. She was in New York City for a number of engagements, many of which were public. She decided that it had been a long time since her last haircut – a “freebie” given her by a nun in a monastery she had visited. She looked around her friend's apartment, in the uptown west side. She saw a promising sign: “haircuts, \$8.00 and up.”

She went in and was assigned to a “middle aged man – hyper, gay, extremely extroverted” – who put her into his chair, ran his hands through her hair and exclaimed: “***Whoever did your last haircut!?***” Kathleen “shrugged and said, ‘***Ah, the price was right. It was given to me for nothing by a delightful young nun. I suspect she is a better nun than she is a hair stylist.***’”

He immediately brightened at hearing about the nun, and began to tell Kathleen a redacted version of his life story. He had grown up in the

South, where he was spurned, and made to feel unwelcome in his church. So he moved north to New York City and wrote off religion. Then he had met some monks at a monastery he visited during Holy Week.

***“’Boy did I love that,’ he said, ‘just sitting in that church, the way they let you come to church with them. They don’t preach at you; they let you experience it for yourself.’”*** He quit cutting for a moment and then said, ***“’You know, I’ve never felt so close to God ... It blew me ... away.’”***

Perhaps that is the kind of Lent journey that some of us need – not one where we fine tune our doctrines or our ideas, but a season in which we encounter a ***new song***, a ***new breath***, a ***new or renewed friendship***. ... ***Have a new experience.***

Psalm 46 is one of the more favorites, with lines like: ***“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, ...”*** and ***“Be still and know that I am God!”***

One of its lines that troubles some people, is verse 8: ***“Come behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations He has brought on the earth.”*** Oooh! “Desolations” that’s bad! That's not cuddly.

One Bible translation changes it to ***“See the marvels of God! He plants the flowers and trees***

**all over the earth....”** and another “feel good translation” has aborted its meaning and phrased it: **“Come and see what the Lord has done, the amazing things he has done on the earth.”**

These cotton candy translations take away the power of the geography. As I walked down the road from the monastery in North Dakota, where Kathleen Norris wrote, and was swallowed up by the desolation of the Great Northern Plains, I was overcome by the power and meaning of Psalm 46:8. It was in that PLACE where I was transported beyond my comfortable zone; where I understood the importance of how God works when we are in the wilderness.

But there are always some people who claim, as the bumper sticker says: **“WILDERNESS IS THE LAND OF NO USE”**

I don't know what will be your Lenten Discipline, nor what are your spiritual needs. But I am convinced that whatever the case for you, it will be helpful if you paid attention – *really paid attention* – to the geography of the place in which it happens. In it may you encounter a ***new song***, a ***new breath***, a ***new or renewed friendship ... Have a new experience.***

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.