



Sermon

February 21, 2010
First Sunday in Lent
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Edges and Ledges

Google Jesus. Click on "Images" and you'll see him embracing a child or standing with big-hearted open arms. You'll see Sallman's famous headshot that hangs somewhere in every church. You'll see him standing strong in the bow of a boat staring down a storm, with a lamb over his shoulders, crosses of gold or thorns cocked across his brow and radiance glowing over his head.

For all the pictures of Jesus I've seen, I haven't seen one where Luke depicts him today. Step off this ledge! Go ahead, you can do it. I dare you. Step off! You always land on your feet. C'mon, step of this ledge. God will rescue you. Step of this ledge.

Of the trifecta of temptations ritually read from the gospels the first Sunday in Lent, the one where the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says "Go ahead and jump" is the one that gets me.

I get the willies when I get up high. Taking the elevator to the cat walk on top of city hall, I'm in a cold sweat. I'll bet the vista is much better when you're not hugging the floor or pinned to the wall. I've lived through vertigo with a loved one and can relate to the dizzying, nauseating, helpless effects.

But maybe it's none of that. Maybe it's that our lives are always coming to the verge of something – positive or not. Possibilities and projections spin around in our heads. Here at church to. Our congregation is growing. We've tried new things – like having church with the Gloria Dei/Old Swedes Episcopal and last week

Mother Bethel – new things that take us past well established edges. We've worked with architects envisioning an addition to the church building that would allow full accessibility to all the buildings, a new entrance without all the steps, improvements to serve our ministry as an active community church and historic shrine. But it is risky and scary to come to an edge and take the plunge. All kinds of things whirl and swirl around our heads.

Looking down or out from a towering building or tall challenge there are uneasy, eerie sensations. Fear and palpitations. Energy, exhilaration anxiety, thrills, chills. All at once. You want to take a step but you're uncertain, your feet are concrete blocks. You try to release but hold-on more tightly.

Someone has written that vertigo is a friend to death – more life-taking than life-giving. Living the experience of holding-on and letting go, the precarious edge between presumption and despair the only question that matters is: "When I fall off, will anyone catch me?"

Do you know the old joke about the person hanging-on for dear life? Holding-on by finger tips, looking down a steep drop to certain death. The person looks upward and cries out: "God help me! If you're up there, reach down here and save me." A voice from above replies: "I hear you my child. I hear you. All you have to do is let go." After an awkward silence, the cliffhanger calls out: "Anyone else up there?"

Here's a question from the edges and ledges. What gets us through testing, testy times?

The readings from this Sunday remind me how stories steady us. We need to listen to them. We need to tell them. They help us remember things that bring life into balance.

I loved my father for this reason; the way he would recount stories from his childhood and youth, from his time at sea or surviving The Great Depression. His adventures hitchhiking across the USA, a Merchant Marine stiffed in San Francisco. The stories got old and we would roll our eyes. But his telling *his* stories steadied him and steadied us. It was a gift he had to give, reminding us of the grace and surprises that saw him through.

The day he died was like that. Or better said, the day he passed from this life to the next. Fading from us as we sat by his bed, my brother, mother and I remembered family stories. He told them. We told them. "Remember that time in Cub Scouts...remember the time I almost took the new job...remember the time Mom was so mad at me that she ...remember the time Mom and I went to Hawaii, our first plane ride... remember when we sent you boys off to college, we were so proud... remember all the times we hounded you because we thought there weren't going to be any grandchildren.

Stories bring life back into balance.

Something to love about the Bible is all the stories. The Hebrew's stories brought their lives into balance. Moses believed remembering where they'd been, how they'd come into the Promised Land, what they'd been though to get there, and how they'd experienced God along the way would keep them faithful as individuals and people. So, when the people come together to celebrate the harvest, the reading from Deuteronomy says, this is what you do: "... make this response to the Lord your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor, he went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.'" (Deut. 26:5)

Who'd a ever think that no account Aramean relative of mine would turn into anything but trouble and heartache?

What our forebears in faith heard in these stories became their confession of faith, a community story shaping their thanksgiving into a framework, providing a boundary and purpose for their life together. No wonder Moses said, "Tell it again and again."

So how's this for a take on the temptation of Jesus story. Or for times we're teetering at some edge, where whirling dizziness or off balance instability stops us in our tracks. How's this for a temptation you may not have considered alongside the big three (bread from stones, grabbing for power AND testing God). The temptation? To forget the stories which shape faith and tell us who/whose we are.

Out in the wilderness, with the devil, on the edge of whether to follow his calling or not, Jesus is at risk of losing himself. The devil's questions have the same core challenge: Who are you? No matter that in the preceding chapter of the story, Luke tells that Jesus was baptized and identified as God's child, "the Beloved" or last week, how atop the Mount of Transfiguration, supernatural apparitions remind us of the same. No matter that Luke's "orderly account" of how Jesus gets to be "Jesus" is traced through the likes of David, Jacob, Noah, Adam and Adam's creator, the one God (all great stories in their own right). In these 40 days in the desert with the devil Jesus is alone, out of place, weakened by hunger. It's understandable if he were reeling. Who wouldn't?

The story begins, "Jesus full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan (the site of his baptism) and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." I'm wondering if part of being full of the Holy Spirit isn't being full of a stockpile of stories. I'm wondering if being full of the Holy Spirit isn't your and my album of stories on the edge of our hearts, souls and minds; stories that like all sacred stories move from abandonment to acceptance, from fear to promise, from unworthiness to unconditional love, from brokenness to healing, from emptiness to fullness, from death to life.

Yet, somehow a sense of Jesus' formation, life and faith is on his lips, in his heart. In a most

seductive voice, the devil says, “If you are (really) the Son of God, make yourself a feast from these stones. Or better yet, grab for it all. Look. I can give it to you. Take a dive from the heights. Angels will bear you up without a scratch.

How does Jesus respond? Not with the pat answers or pious pronouncements. He quotes stories, identifying with them. “It is written...” he says. “It is written.” He quotes stories. This is how he stands his ground.

But look out! Luke says the devil will be back.

So we come to Lent again, the devil is loose in the desert, rocketing is this year’s precipice, this year’s verge. Looking to Easter but still on edge. The journey can be disorienting. We go with the Spirit in us as Jesus did. The devil continues to watch for an opportune time, tempting seize the power to go it alone, tempting us how quiet times cultivating the souls is an unnecessary wastes of time, tricking us to turn us away from the starkness of the cross.

The deep down question to Jesus and us is “Who are you?”

Traditionally the church has said things like try fasting one day, or one meal a week during Lent. Take time or resources from such a fast and dedicate it to a hunger project. Take some time visiting someone or serving someone’s need, or getting off to a quiet place for a walk or to pray or read a devotional book. In short, change things up both to make room for remembering old stories the rut of routines drown out. Create space for new stories to develop because you’ve thrown yourself into in some new path towards God (like working with us at Grace Café’ or coming to the Wednesday Soup and Study).

The point is the stories of faith and their message about a God busy in the world bringing new life out of death, hope overtaking despair and stirring transformation in the most challenging of places – the stories and experiences of faith are God’s word near to us as memories, a word on our lips, close to our hearts, keeping us balanced.

One of my favorite jobs in being pastor here is meeting tourist groups coming to hear the hi-STORY of this church. I never get tired of telling

stories about how we Methodists are people distinguishing ourselves because we believed a religion of the heart was every bit as important as the one in the head, that putting faith into action in methodical, disciplined ways was as important as right doctrine, that one of our leaders, Francis Asbury rode 265,000 miles on horseback in 40 years of ministry to take the Gospel story to the far reaches of the colonies (how’s that for faith in action), how we came into possession of this building because of a bankruptcy (how’s that for new life out of death), how our greatest day of infamy, when we segregated the seating and moved the Africans to the edges and treated them with hostility has turned us to a vigilant consciousness about what it means to repent racism and redouble efforts to be inclusive, how when the bridge path called for demolishing this building, we came to a clear on a blueprint for what kind of church we’d be, to moving the bridge instead of the bridge moving us.

Stories carry the message of a God busy in the world bringing new life out of death, hope overtaking despair and stirring transformation in the most edgy places. Stories are tangible experiences of faith, God’s word most near to us, on our lips, close to our hearts, the word that keeps us balanced.

Are you on the verge of something? Where are the edges and ledges in your life this winter? Are there dizzying, helpless, paralyzed places you’re encountering? Hold on – not to the railing but to faith formed by stories of how we got over, how, in the words of the old gospel hymn, “how my soul looks back and wonders how I got over.”

In what’s left of Lent’s 40 days, may the Spirit meet us on the edges and ledges, ground us in God’s calling in our lives and plunge us over into more amazing experiences and stories to remember on our way to resurrection.

■■■ Amen ■■■