

Suffering and Salvation in African-American Spirituals

(I) Walking the Lonesome Valley

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio

13 February 2005

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

It's not every day that Fairmount reverberates with hot licks and cool rhythms, but it certainly did Friday night. Lance Bryant, former music director for Lionel Hampton, and now a Shaker resident, presented a unique "info-concert" of jazz music interspersed with commentary about its roots in the African-American tradition, and its essential spirituality which expresses both the pain and joy of human life. In blues that could make your heart melt, and in exuberant praise that demands even staid Presbyterian bodies to move, African-American spirituals affirm the faithfulness of God in every human condition and every human place.

African-American spirituals are the direct fruit of the slavery experience of African Americans in this country [Gwendolin Sims Warren, *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit*]. Uprooted from their homeland and forcibly transplanted to a strange land where their basic humanity was denied and exploited, African-Americans nevertheless survived. The Christian faith that was hewn out of the rock of captivity witnesses to the God of freedom, who hears the cries of the people and liberates them into the Promised Land. Singing the songs of freedom, often using coded spiritual language, sustained hope, against all odds. These spirituals helped nurture the perspective – as noted black historian W.E.B. Dubois put it—that "God is on the side of the oppressed." And if God is on the side of the oppressed, then God has the power to transform the unearned suffering of the oppressed into their redemption. For many African-Americans, this salvation is not mere "pie in the sky by and bye" but one which frees the whole person, body and soul.

I believe African-American spirituals provide a strong witness for the Church as we make our way through Lent. I've chosen this sermon series theme for three primary reasons: First, the journey of Lent mirrors the epic freedom struggle of African Americans: both are born in the human condition of slavery, and a deep yearning to breathe free; both describe God's great dream for all humankind to live together in love, God's presence in suffering, and God's redemptive purposes in Jesus Christ. Connecting the spiritual journey from death to life, with the social and political journey from slavery to freedom and equality serves as a helpful corrective to religion that is so heavenly minded it's just no earthly good.

We need an embodied spirituality; a faith that shapes our daily life as effectively as it promises our eternal one. Second, I envision the church in the 21st century as a multi-racial, multi-cultural community of men and women, youth and children. We've come some distance from the reality that the most segregated hour in America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning, but we still have much to learn from the rich diversity among us. Finally, I chose this preaching theme because it engages both right and left brain, the creative as well as the analytical. While we Presbyterians value a thinking faith, we have been overly suspicious of emotion as a vehicle of God's living Word. Are we missing a potent means of spiritual growth by restricting sermons to intellectual discourse? Can we get us some soul? During Lent we're going to be singing and moving as well as talking and listening. And some forty days from now, we're going to come out in a garden with an empty tomb. I dare to believe that by God's grace we can get there more alive than we are now, more attuned to the music of God's Spirit, freer than we imagined possible, yet more deeply bound to the Beloved Community of God's people.

Our Lenten journey begins not in a garden, but in the wilderness, the lonesome valley: the terrifying if not unfamiliar place of temptation, of choices, of decisions that matter. We are led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and discover that Jesus has been this way before. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew in the fourth chapter at the first verse. It's found on page 3 of the New Testament portion of the chapel/sanctuary Bibles.

[MATTHEW 4:1-11]

Sing it with me: *Jesus walked this lonesome valley, he had to walk it by himself; oh, nobody else could walk it for him, he had to walk it by himself.*

The lonesome valley. The dark night of the soul. Leaving home. A mid-life crisis. Transitions. There is not a soul among us who does not understand what it means to walk the lonesome valley. Despite some common themes of loss and change, each person's suffering is also particular and unique. Which poses something of a paradox: we want to relieve the sense of profound isolation of those in the valley, at the same time respecting their distinctive experience; "I know just how you feel," heading the list of responses that are not helpful.

There is a sense in which each of us must walk that walk for ourselves.

The gospel text describes just such an experience in Jesus' life, early in his earthly ministry. In fact, this incident is reported in all three gospels as initiated by the Holy Spirit, who leads Jesus into the wilderness. Biblical commentators have long puzzled over what seems to be God's purposive participation in Jesus' temptation (and by extension, yours and mine!). The idea seems contradictory to the notion of God as the Shepherd faithfully leading the flock to *good* places—into green pastures and beside still waters, and *through* the valley of the shadow of death. I know that the theological affirmation of God's consistent goodness to God's people prompted the change of wording in the way we pray the Lord's Prayer: from "lead us not into temptation," to "LEAVE us not in temptation." And insofar as we understand that petition to mean temptation as those experiences of moral choice, between right and wrong, I'm all for it. God does not set a trap for us and exploit our vulnerabilities in order to convict us of being human.

But I'm not sure that's what's being described here. Jesus' wilderness temptation served as a kind of proving ground for his identity and mission, clarifying who he was and what he was going to do. Jesus walked the lonesome valley and came out clear-eyed and open-hearted about the work that lay ahead. He resisted the temptation to be something other than who he was; he rejected the option of choosing something other than what God had called him to do.

While I do not believe God is the author of human suffering, our own wilderness times can offer us insight about ourselves, and can reveal spiritual resources to guide us through the complex maze of contemporary life with its multiple choices, and sometimes hard decisions. I've heard many people say – and I've said it myself—that viewed retrospectively, painful times of loss and change resulted in the greatest growth. Lance Bryant made a similar point Friday night in quoting a jazz musician explaining the power of the blues: "Pain can be better than happiness. We don't learn deep things through happiness." I don't think we are often called to seek out the lonesome valley; but when we arrive at it unbidden, we can try not to avoid it, but walk into it and discover its insights. That means not choosing our actions solely or primarily on the basis of personal comfort or convenience. This is equally true for us as a congregation or as individuals. The place of discomfort and dislocation may be precisely where we find spiritual enlightenment and truth to take back into our daily lives. We are tested by fire, and not unlike in the process of steel production, are made stronger and finer, more resilient, more able to bear burdens and fortify the weak.

We must walk that lonesome valley; we have to walk it by ourselves; oh, nobody else can walk it for us, we have to walk it by ourselves.

Friends, it is true that each of us has to live the life we have been given. We must walk the lonesome valley because it is part of what it means to be human. But finally, the account of Jesus' wilderness temptation challenges the notion that we have to walk it alone. Consider again the ways in which Jesus is tempted: to change stones into bread, to seek divine protection as proof of God's blessing, and to replace God's rule with something less. In each, the devil dares Jesus to prove who he is by acting like a god instead of a man. And in each, Jesus proves who he is not by seizing power, but by turning it down. The beloved Son will not practice magic or request special protection or pursue political power. He will, instead, accept the risks of remaining human. Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. He's got our back, because he's been there. When we find ourselves in the lonesome valley, we remember that Jesus has been this way before us. *[This analysis of Jesus' temptations was suggested by Barbara Brown Taylor in her collection of sermons entitled "Bread of Angels"]*

Jokes about getting old aside, I'm grateful to God for a half-century of living, and a quarter-century of ministry. While I claim no special wisdom, one thing I know is true: God will never leave us or abandon us, for we belong to God. Our song and our prayer become transformed into an affirmation that it is God's beloved son himself who walks with us. In the lonesome valley. Amid temptations that beset us on every side. In loss and change. Even in the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus is there; a friend who knows and understands. Offering us, as he did our African-American brothers and sisters before us, the courage to walk, the strength to endure, and the vision to get to the Promised Land of freedom together.

I want Jesus to walk with me. I want Jesus to walk with me. All along life's pilgrim journey. Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me. AMEN.

Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor

