

DAUGHTERS OF THE KING
LENTEN QUIET DAY
March 11, 2010

Meditation One “Crossing the Jordan”

“He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali.....on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles.” Mark 4: 13, 15

In each of the gospels, the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry varies. In Matthew’s version, Jesus learns of his cousin John the Baptist’s imprisonment and wisely leaves Nazareth to take up residence in Capernaum. One significance of the move is that it places Jesus on the opposite bank of the Jordan, in the region of the Gentiles.

Having crossed over, Jesus begins his ministry with a familiar proclamation: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”* (Mt 4:17). It was the same message proclaimed by his cousin John. Was this coincidence an attempt to verify Jesus as John’s successor? After all, John had built up an impressive following, some of whom resisted John’s urgings to turn their attention and their faith to Jesus. OR could it be that Jesus entered his ministry a little less self-confident than we might have supposed, dependently following the footsteps of the one who had come before him? Like you or me, Jesus lived and moved among the conflicting forces of faith and doubt, confidence and crisis.

The early ministry of Jesus is marked by his teaching, healings and miracles. He moves beyond the obvious repetition of his cousin’s message, venturing little by little into his own territory. By the sea of Galilee he meets and calls Simon Peter and Andrew. Passing a toll booth, he greets Matthew (Levi). All are invited to follow Jesus. But when Jesus calls these early companions, he is terribly hazy about Job descriptions and mission statements. The relationship between Jesus and his disciples emerges as more that of friends than professional staff. He is not hiring workers or associates, but calling friends.

We don’t always have a choice about who our friends are...

Moving to the other side of our own Jordan is a move that takes us beyond control and constraints. Jesus’ selection of his own circle of companions may well have been something more than a conscious organizational plan for the implementation of a well-planned ministry. It may have been his first opportunity to choose friends freely. Like Jesus, when we are offered the opportunity of new circumstances, we find and embrace those friends who are of our own choosing.

Something else happens relative to Jesus’ relationships in his early public ministry: he redefines his family. Jesus is gathered with a sizeable group, apparently in someone’s house. His mother is outside, along with his brothers and sisters....(READ MARK 3:31-35)

This new perspective on relationship is only one step, but a significant one, in the progression that Jesus makes from the wilderness into the company of the disciples, from Nazareth to Galilee, and from kin to community.

IF, as our creeds maintain, Jesus was “fully human,” then merely to focus upon his recorded words and deeds is still to overlook the very substance of his life. It is his life that is given to us, and that gift can be helpful in our own discernment and faith formation. John’s gospel maintains that Jesus’ gift to us is that we might have life in all its fullness. God’s call, the source of our vocation in ministry, is a call to life’s fullness along a pathway charted by Jesus.

That pathway, as we see from our own life, led Jesus from the security of home and family into the lonely struggle of the wilderness temptations. It brought him into the company of chosen companions. It literally took him from the safe boundaries of his hometown to the opposite side of the very river that secured his homeland from the land of the Gentile stranger. In that unusual exchange where Jesus seems to reject his own family, the path veers away from the primary unit of association and opens Jesus to embrace in trust the circle beyond his own blood.

What we observe in Jesus’ pilgrimage of vocational fulfillment is that he experienced a series of radical changes and reorientations. Each one was essential to his formation as a person, and each was a response to vocational urging. That he found himself knee-deep in the Jordan being baptized by John, or living in Galilee on the opposing bank of the Jordan from Nazareth, or in the midst of strange but chosen companions, or broadening his notion of family to include those who were not tied to him by blood or nationality, was not by whimsy or will. He was where he was and what he was in response to his discernment of God’s will for him, God’s call to him.

Thus we ought not be surprised in our own journey that similar demands might be made of us, that the promptings of God might urge us into what can only be deemed difficulty. For to admit the reality of God’s place in our lives and to assent to relationship with God as Jesus did at his baptism, and as we all do through our baptisms, is difficult—especially for self-sufficient human beings. To leave home and take up residence either literally or ideologically on the opposite bank from where we originated is difficult.

What the gospels reveal to us in the less obvious dimensions of Jesus’ vocation is most assuredly “good news.” To see that the path of God undertaken by Jesus looks more than vaguely familiar, is to be assured in our own shaky steps.

In many respects Jesus seems to have failed in his life. He failed to fulfill his community’s expectations that he would settle in Nazareth and contribute to the economy. He must have failed political and tribal expectations when he took up residence on the opposing bank of the Jordan, in the land of the Gentiles. He no doubt disappointed his childhood friends when he left them and took up with a new crowd of his own choosing. And how could he not have hurt his mother, his brothers, and his sisters in that moment when he denied them their primary claim upon his affection by supplanting them with those strangers?

That he did not and could not fulfill everyone's notion of perfection, that his own confidence in himself was not rock-solid, that he was somewhat tentative and shy in that less than stunning exhibition of trying to get the healing of the blind man right... "Can you see anything?" (Mk 8:23). Thinking about these things, my love and admiration for Jesus only grow.

In his open healing, Jesus crosses the boundaries of touch. Jesus touched over and over again—he violated quarantine. He frightens me by including strangers into the intimate circle called family, accepting the hospitality of unknowns, and eats what is offered, he challenges all the customary boundaries that define us. Have we ever violated customary boundaries and, as a result, experienced the inbreaking and indwelling of the holy? The way to God is through all that separates us from our earlier experiences with the first gentiles we met, when we could taste the Jordan in our mouths, and shudder with the pleasure of having made the crossing.

Meditation Two “Out in the Open”

(READ Mark 9:2-8) Transfiguration

In each version of the transfiguration story as told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus begins by ruminating openly upon his impending suffering and death: *“He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly”* (Mark 8:31-32).

There can be no doubt that something significant happens in the life of a person who confronts personal mortality. We tend to trivialize this important event with glib references to “mid-life crisis.” But Jesus was very frank in his meditations upon mortality; scripture insists that he shared his intimations “quite openly.” I believe that there came a time in his life—as comes to most of us—when Jesus was acutely aware of the cost of seeing his call to completion, and painfully aware of the death that concludes this mortal journey. Such an awareness has a very sobering effect upon a person.

When Jesus first began his work of preaching, teaching, and healing, he resorted most often to parables, cloaking his message from all except those who actually listened thoughtfully and critically. He told stories of farmers whose seed fell in different soils and suffered varied ends; he likened the life God desired for us to a rare pearl, an abundant catch of fish, and a mustard seed.

But when Jesus moved beyond parable to outright critique and condemnation of those in power, even people who had only half-heard the parables sat up and took notice. He tossed all politeness and poetry aside and openly denounced injustice, wrongdoing, and religious malpractice. As the people responded more enthusiastically to such naked truth, Jesus drew more attention to himself. After a point, this attention elicited the interest, then concern and examination, of the Pharisees—those who ruled over church and political affairs and were, in short, the makers and keepers of the boundaries.

It was no secret that the dominant religious parties—Pharisee and Sadducee—were growing intolerant of Jesus’ denunciations. Nor was Herod amused by anyone who disturbed the peace and order of his territories. The reality was plainly evident: Jesus moved irresistibly toward trouble. He moved steadily into danger with his frank appraisal of the state of affairs around him. His reflections upon mortality were not the product of despair—they were simply an honest appraisal of where things were headed. Only genuine friends can tolerate such honesty. Evidently, he had a few friends, even among those he denounced. Two Sunday’s ago we heard in Luke’s gospel how some Pharisees who came to Jesus warned him to get out of Jerusalem, assuring him that Herod did want to have him executed.

In adhering to his own vocation, Jesus made it difficult for those who wished to help. Ultimately their paths separated from his when he surpassed their understanding. Jesus’ comments on death

may have been nothing more than the open expression of his comfort with the truth of his own mortality. An essential component of our Christian vocation is this personal appropriation of the truth of our own end, and a willingness to openly embrace it in our public life. This is not fatalistic, nor is it suicidal. It is simply truthful. No one in Jesus' company wanted to hear of such realities, and we know they protested when he brought them up.

But it was particularly on these occasions that Jesus invited companionship. *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"* (Mt 16:24). This is perhaps the clearest invitation to discipleship in all of Christian scripture. Extending beyond the close circle of twelve, this general invitation includes all of us. At this moment in Jesus' life our vocation and his intersect in a special way.

Why did he not make this invitation earlier? It is not part of those vast scenes when there were huge multitudes around. It does not accompany his healings or his miracles. It does not come in any of those instances when those gathered near him would have been most likely to respond affirmatively. At no other time was he so forthcoming. Only now, at the moment of his own reckoning with mortality and singularity of his life, does Jesus issue the invitation. What Jesus determined to do on this occasion was to embrace the mortality at the heart of every human vocation.

For, indeed, Jesus invites us into a radical reality. He invites us to cross the boundary we have erected against this truth. He invites us to into the openness of a life that imposes no boundaries between living and dying. But we are not so quick to follow. For us, death is an enemy. We fortify our lives against it. We bargain with it. We attempt in every way we can to circumvent it. Some of us spend a lifetime running from the inevitability that awaits every human life, never once considering that this universal experience is itself a part of what it means to be Christian, to be human.

In calling us into being, in calling us into life, God also calls us into death. This is what Jesus surely recognized, and into this vocation Jesus determined to live. Father Richard John Neuhaus adds clarity to this when he writes, "We are born to die. Not that death is the purpose of our being born, but we are born towards death, and in each of our lives the work of dying is already underway. The work of dying well is, in largest part, the work of living well." Jesus, then, submitted to an open life which, in turn, made him vulnerable and accessible to human will. To use Sam Portaro's words, "Death was merely the instrument of human social, religious, and political entities, delivered in the foolish belief that death really is a boundary that can separate us." Those who killed Jesus had no investment in his death; it was an impersonal, institutional act. For them, death and the sealed tomb were but one more way to clearly and definitively mark the boundary that separated them from Jesus and his truth.

Jesus made family of the enemy even as he had earlier made family of strangers. He looked across the boundaries and saw death not as something to be denied or defeated, but embraced. He reached across, stepped across the boundaries, and embraced death as a companion on the way. Being thus reconciled, all those energies of the human spirit that one might give to resistance were immediately accessible for offering as a gift to God.

About a week after speaking of his own death and inviting others into an open life, says Luke's account, Jesus withdrew with Peter and James to pray. While he was in prayer, his appearance changed. It was perceived that Moses and Elijah stood to either side of him and talked with him.

The appearance of these figures is not nearly as interesting as Luke's statement that they actually talked with Jesus. Could it have been that through this poetic vision and conversation Jesus made peace with his own history and found affirmation of his true vocation? For after this transfiguring experience, Jesus left Galilee and began the journey to Jerusalem. This decision was yet another crossing of boundaries. Herod had drawn a line in the sand. The religious officials had done the same.

But there were other boundaries, too. There were all the bonds of society that connected Jesus to those around him. He could capitulate to the demands of his friends and supporters; he could remain safe with them and within their bounds. He could remain forever in Nazareth, tending to the shop and caring for his immediate family. He could conform to political wisdom and common expectation and thus save his life. But to have done so would have been a death of a different kind: the stifling of a life and the denial of a call.

And yet, through his decision there is a universal opening: from this very place Jesus issues each of us an invitation to follow. Our following will take us down a different path. While Jesus' path leads to death on a cross, he assures us that each of our "crosses" will be different—no less challenging or difficult, perhaps, but certainly different, unique. Contemplating this experience, Annie Dillard asks:

“Why do you never find anything written about idiosyncratic thought you advert to, about your fascination with something no one else understands? Because it is up to you. There is something you find interesting, for a reason hard to explain. It is hard to explain because you have never read it on any page; there you begin. You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment.”

(The Writing Life, p. 67-68).

Each of us ultimately arrives at that solitary place where decision and consequence are uniquely ours, a point that is both end and beginning. But others have stood in this place; Jesus has stood here. With him, we are alone, together.

Meditation Three “Jesus was a Cross Maker”

(READ Mark 11:12-14)

On one matter, the several records of Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem are consistent. From the moment he enters the city, everything runs out of control. At least one sector of the population greets his entrance into Jerusalem with near hysterical abandon, literally paving his path with the clothes off their backs in token of their support for him, and with branches of palm that were normally reserved for military victory.

Jesus shows up in the temple, the very precincts of danger itself. There he plainly throws a fit, losing his temper and flinging furniture and epithets with an uncharacteristic vehemence. He said to them, “*It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’: but you are making it a den of robbers*” (Mt 21:12-13).

Jesus seems unbounded. He is perhaps no less centered, but he is plainly no longer self-possessed.

Not surprisingly, as Jesus grows more prominent, questions about his authority are raised. Jesus replies to those questions rather tersely or not at all. He specifically denounces the teachers of the law and he dares to speak of the destruction of the temple itself.

In Bethany he is anointed with costly perfumed oils, an act which proves to be the last straw for the most zealous of his closest followers. Then Judas, acting on personal convictions, takes his own step, uniting himself with those who seek to put Jesus away.

By the time Jesus sits at table with his friends and disciples in that room apart, everything is in chaos. Up to the final entry into Jerusalem there had been a reasonable semblance of balance and order to their lives. But from the moment they enter Jerusalem, there is a palpable difference. Jesus seems oddly distant, or at best, distracted and aloof. On the night of his arrest, at table with them, the breakdown is so pronounced that words are insufficient. Jesus realizes that the disciples do not understand what the evening is about. They argue about preference and status. Perhaps in their eyes Jesus is finally taking on the characteristics of the leader they desire him to be.

Though enlivened with wine and excited by visions of revolutionary reform, they are hardly aware of Jesus’ silence until they are startled to find him washing their feet. Peter attempts to make light of it, but the tension is palpable. The disciples are probably relieved when he suggests that they withdraw for prayer. They are oblivious to any real danger and consequently nod off. The ordeal of prayer in Gethsemane is portrayed as the loneliest moment in Jesus’ final days. But the truth of the matter is that from the time Jesus emerges from the experience of the transfiguration and sets his feet toward Jerusalem, he is alone. He may be surrounded by people, but Jesus is painfully, horribly alone.

In earlier days he was known for his ease in touching others—placing his hands on the sick, taking children into his arms, embracing friends. Now, with the exception of the footwashing, it is not he who touches, but who is touched. The crowd struggles to touch him as he enters Jerusalem's gate. A woman lavishes him with expensive oil at supper in Bethany. A beloved disciple lays his head upon Jesus' breast at the supper table. Soldiers lay hands upon him in the garden, and lashes upon him in his imprisonment.

The angry crowd begs to have him released into their hands instead of a criminal named Barabbas. Veronica is said to have stepped out of the crowd to wipe the sweat from his face along the 'Via Dolorosa' or 'Way of Sorrows'. Dutiful henchmen hold him to the wood and impale him upon it, then touch his lips with vinegared wine. His body is lowered into waiting hands and arms, anointed with experienced palms and fingers that work the embalming ointments into his lifeless skin. And after he is resurrected, all his friends want to do is touch him.

Touch is control. So long as it is our hand that makes the first move, our will that connects flesh to flesh, it is we who are in control. In that last week of Jesus' life in Jerusalem everything was out of control, including Jesus himself. Can there be any bolder symbol of resignation than to submit to the touch of others?

What we are privileged to witness through the stories of the gospel writers is the struggle of Jesus as he gradually makes his way into the fullness of his own vocation and finally surrenders to it. Above all, we see that it was not Jesus' death that vanquished the final enemy in this conflict, but Jesus' life. It was not his death alone that was his vocation; the whole of his life constitutes his response to God's call. Jesus, in his self-centeredness, gave himself over fully to life. He was in full possession of himself. And when he gave himself over fully to life, he released his life as a gift. Once loosed, the gift was beyond the bounds of legal ownership. It was—and is—free. In this offering of self, Jesus realized—made real—the fullness of God's will for us, so far as we can discern that will.

And in this offering, though his life was literally beyond his control, he was no less centered in himself. In other words, Jesus was the incarnation of human integrity. But such integrity is not come by easily, neither is it easily maintained. Like life itself, this integrity is dynamic: constantly tempted, constantly offered.

It is not the struggle to die or to face death that marks Jesus as unique. What sets him apart is his struggle to give his life—actually to make a gift of his life. This is the struggle of the Christian life—to be a cross maker. A cross is only the intersection of two lines, one vertical and the other horizontal. To live on the intersection of those lines, however, is literally to cross over the lines that separate one from the other. We want to live on either one plane or the other, but not at the intersection. We want each secluded from the other, and strict order maintained between them.

To give our life over to the chaos, to the unknown, is to cross over and become a cross maker. To give our life over to others, and to God, and as a gift to ourselves is to cross over the lines and become a cross maker. To cross our own boundaries and give life over—this is the vocation of

the cross maker, the path Jesus shows us. The ultimate vocational struggle of the cross maker, then, is to cross the final boundary of self and enter into the openness of life in all its fullness. This should sound more than vaguely familiar to the Christian who regularly prays that Christ “may live in us, and we in him.” In this eucharistic devotional prayer, we are invited to ingest bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus into ourselves.

This is our ultimate challenge: to cease our insatiable desire for control over our lives, in our lives. To step down from that place from which we attempt to rule over the lives of God and neighbor, exerting our own control—to step down from that throne of personal empire, and offer our life, our self, as a gift. And offering one’s life as a gift means surrendering it, not in resignation, but in desire. It is not an act of submission, but an act of offering.

“Only after the writer lets literature shape her can she perhaps shape literature,” writes Annie Dillard of her own profession. In describing the vocation of the artist, she gives expression to a reality we share:

“In working class France, when an apprentice got hurt, or when he got tired, the experienced workers said, ‘It is the trade entering the body.’ The art must enter the body, too. A painter cannot use paint like glue or screws to fasten down the world. The tubes of paint are like fingers; they work only if, inside the painter, the neural pathways are wide and clear to the brain. Cell by cell, molecule by molecule, atom by atom, part of the brain changes physical shape to accommodate and fit paint. You adapt yourself, Paul Klee said, to the contents of the paintbox. Adapting yourself to the contents of the paintbox, he said, is more important than nature and its study. The painter, in other words, does not fit the paints to the world. He most certainly does not fit the world to himself. He fits himself to the paint. The self is the servant who bears the paintbox and its inherited contents.”

(The Writing Life, p. 69).