

Lent 1 **“Follow the wandering bread”** Feb 17, 2013

Texts: Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Ps 91: 1-2, 9-16; Luke 4: 1-13

*Throughout the sermon I did a gesture with my hands: at first I held out in front of me, hands clenched, then I opened up my fingers and turned my hands upside down (palm down) so they could hold nothing; sometimes in that position I shook them, as if to shake out any last remaining contents, then I turned my empty hand palm up, so they can receive.*

Sometimes I have tried to imagine myself into the shoes of European Jews in the 1930's. Some of them saw the writing on the wall, and got out. Others stayed, in hope, or denial, or simply because they couldn't see any other viable option. To leave their home, to head off into an unknown future, to leave behind family and friends and possessions and a livelihood . . . what a huge decision.

It would be like emptying their hands of everything, & doing this: HAND ACTION

I have often wondered what I would do. I suspect that I might be one who stayed until the last minute, living in the kind of denial that is produced by hope. Hope is a virtue, But I have come to see that there is no virtue that can stand alone in every situation . . . hope without courage can lead a person to become passive, not facing a reality squarely. Hope without the courage to face reality can lead us to surround ourselves with nice thoughts: “surely it will get better; surely something fresh and new will break in.”

One of the notable things about this congregation of MacNab is the # of people who are 1<sup>st</sup> generation Canadians, in other words, you have left your home land and chosen to come to a new land. Some come from N Ireland; some from India, some from Ghana, some from Caribbean. Why did you come? Why did you leave your land of birth? Was it to flee violence? Was it in the hopes of a better life for your children? Greater job and education opportunity? I imagine that most of you who made this choice had to leave family behind. Was that hard? Some of you are 2<sup>nd</sup> gen Canadians, so you have lived it through the story of migration through stories of your parents, how they had to do this: HAND ACTION. So you, as a congregation, have a vivid experience of “giving up”, “leaving behind”, “letting go.” That is very very significant, when it comes to the life of faith. It is a huge strength.

Did you notice the words in Deuteronomy: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” The Israelites were a wandering, migrating people. First Abraham left his homeland to go to Canaan, and then, in a time of famine, his descendants had to go down to Egypt. That was a migration that saved their lives. Egypt was a place of bread. They did this: HAND ACTION and received food into their hands.

But after a while, the place of their salvation, the place of bread, became a place of death; they became slaves. But along came Moses, to lead them out of Egypt, into freedom. As the story goes, Things seemed to be going along ok, until they got to the Red Sea: what now? Moses the leader had no answer. Leaving behind what is known, heading off into the unknown: that is a vulnerable thing to do.

Then once they were really in the desert, the reality hit: they were in a place of no bread! What in heavens' name were they thinking? So they cried out to Moses, and Moses cried out to God.....(he was no magician, after all, he couldn't turn the stones of the desert into bread!) and whaddya know.....Manna from the sky. Was it magic? Or was it that they learned to eat a different kind of food?

But somehow in there they learned something: not that God is a magician, nor that their leader was, they learned something about themselves: that they don't live by bread alone; (they can live on manna too! J), and they learned about trusting God with their physical needs, their very bodies.

They made it to the promised land, and settle in, and once they had a temple built, and had enjoyed the high point of Solomon's kingdom, they figured they were the cat's meow.

But it seems the same thing happened: the land of bread doesn't stay that way forever. The Hebrew people in the time of Jeremiah simply couldn't believe that their beloved city would fall. And then it did, and they were carted off to slavery in Babylon: a humiliating migration.

When a remnant came back, even though they did rebuild a temple, it was never quite the same: their faith took a turn: one that focused on the Book rather than the temple.

And we have inherited that tradition: we are a people of the Book too. And for good reason, but the Book is not God. It is possible even for the Bible, a gift and source of Life, to become a god. We can use it to hurt people; it can very easily become a dead word.

So here is the crux: we as human beings are always wanting to make things, *especially good things*, into a god other than God who is spirit. While every place and everything can be good, it can also become something that binds us. Egypt, Canaan, the temple, the nation, the Bible, all good things . . . or not: it depends on how we hold

them: like this or like this. [HAND ACTION]

You could say that this [HAND ACTION repeated several times] is the rhythm of the life of faith. In every aspect of our lives, the life of the Spirit means practicing this. (let go, receive, let go, receive, let go, receive)

The story of Jesus' temptation in the desert shows us this

Jesus is driven, by the Spirit of God, out into the desert

The first temptation is to change stones to bread: now what would be wrong with that? Bread is a good thing; there is no moral issue here. And we know that God cares about hunger; but though Jesus is hungry, he is not starving to death; there is more to human life, and life with God than our physical hungers. To change stone to bread would be to make his own needs the "god." It would be to live like this: [HAND ACTION OF GRASPING]

You could say the same about the 2<sup>nd</sup> temptation: Jesus is offered political and economic power over nations. Power to rule is not bad. Someone has to do it. But Jesus, will not rule in this way. He will rule "from below", from the ground. His authority arises not from a position or role or title, or location; his rule comes from love, which is never coercive. So he empties his hand [HAND ACTION of releasing] of "power over"

3<sup>rd</sup> temptation: Here the voice of temptation uses Scripture, quoting Psalm 91's promise: angels will bear you up." See how the words of Scripture can be "used"? These words, in the Psalm are intended to encourage the people of God to trust in God's care. But if we grasp at them, we can use them against people, and against God. We can use them to judge others who seem to "fall over a cliff": maybe they just didn't trust enough! And we can use them to try to control God, telling God what we expect. Even the beautiful words of life in Scripture can be used to try to make a "permanent home" rather than live in dependent trust. We want to take the unpredictability out of life, which really is a way of trying to be a god.

All the temptations really have to do with making our own bread; making ourselves, making our own gods  
WE MAKE GODS OUT OF EVERYTHING AND ANYTHING, ALL THE TIME, EVERY DAY.

There are endless variations, but at root, that is what temptation is: [HANDS GRASPING into the air, repeatedly, pulling into myself]

But you know, as a people, in your very bodies, what it is like to migrate, what it is like to do this : HAND ACTION of release

And maybe if we've done it once, and it was hard, we don't want to do it again.

But what if life is simply a series of "migrations", a series of receiving and letting go, receiving and letting go. We get to Canada, we get comfortable, but then our children, they become different from us, and we can either try to control them (hand grasping) or listen to them (palm up & open); and our bodies, they don't stay the same either..... and we can either rage against them (hand grasping), or receive them (palm open); and the people in our neighbourhood--- they don't stay the same, and we can either rage against them (hand in "claw" position) or welcome them (palm open); and this place called MacNab, we want it to stay the same; we want it to be the bread it has always been; and we can either try to convince ourselves that surely it will always remain the same, or we can look around and try to face the reality of a new world.

What if our life as people who follow Christ, means resisting the temptation to simply settle in to what makes us feel secure, and following a God who is Spirit, who is always doing a new thing.

What if our life as people who follow Christ means a continuous *migration of the heart*,

That sounds, perhaps, scary, or tiring, UNTIL YOU START TO TASTE THE MANNA, and you realize that even though things change, SOMETHING ALWAYS SEEMS TO LAND IN YOUR OPEN PALM, AND THERE IS A SURPRISING CONSISTENCY TO IT. . AND YOU START TO TRUST THAT YOU WILL BE FED .

When we stop our grasping, and empty our hand, and open it, there is always manna.

Let us trust that it is so. Amen.

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church by Catherine Stewart