

Day-hiking with Jesus

Ash Wednesday-A

March 9, 2011

Welcome to the 40 days (and 6 Sundays) of Lent. I hope you're ready. It doesn't take any particular equipment, this adventure. It just takes showing up, paying attention, telling the truth, and remembering that you are not alone.

It's like day-hiking—there's no need to prepare for the whole 40 days at once, no need to pack a lot of food, clothing, or shelter. Just show up, pay attention, tell the truth, and remember that you are not alone. Each of those will be easier if we pack light, just take a few snacks, some water, maybe some dry socks or a rain poncho, and head out. Oh, yes: and *follow the leader*.

We're going day-hiking with Jesus. We're setting out from where we have been to where we must go, from past to future, one day at a time, whatever it may bring. We're traveling from morning till night. And then we'll be traveling from morning till night again. We're not bringing along the family heirlooms nor the family trash. We're not bringing a box of power tools, or a box of books. We have not hired professional assistants to take care of the details: a caterer to meet us at lunchtime with caviar and champagne, a truck driver hauling a portable john. There's nothing secret about our hikes. We will go quietly, listening to the territory we're passing through, instead of imposing our noise on others in the landscape. We're just trekking through the countryside with each other and Jesus—showing up, paying attention, telling the truth, and remembering that we are not alone. That's it.

We will be making these 40 day-hikes in the wilderness to learn how to live humbly, generously, and in hope. We are taking these journeys to become hungry, so that we may feast gratefully on God's provision. We are taking these forays to learn how to die, so that we will know how to live.

Every now and again, you see, we need to get out of the house, leave our well-feathered nests behind, so that when we return to them, we will notice what's essential and what's extra, what cares for our lives and what we worry ourselves to take care of. Maybe we'll trade Facebook for dinner around a campfire. Maybe we'll throw away rip off our denial and mark a date with the doctor or counselor on our map. Maybe we'll turn off March madness for a few hours to go sit in the sunshine and sing, or pray.

We mark our foreheads with ashes today—our identity badge for Lent. Right on the same spot where we were marked with the cross in oil at our baptism: “sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever,” we declared. These are the same cross, though the one in oil reminds us of birth and the one in ashes reminds us of death. Both remind us of our intent to let go of ourselves, to die to what is hard, heavy, and destructive so that we can be born more completely into the way of Jesus, traveling lightly and graciously into our peace with God.

We are not meant to carry the weight of the world on *our* shoulders. If we carry our Ash Wednesday and our baptismal crosses seriously, we will claim our paradoxical reality: human beings made of dust and ashes, *and* made in the image of God. We are invited repeatedly to shed our old ways, to leave them along the roadside like clods fallen from our shoes. We must let go of our

raccoon-like addiction to fill up our packs with bright, shiny objects and dazzling performances. We must accept God's offer to feed us a simple, gracious plenty. We are born to die to what is perishable so that we might live to the Lord, who remains.

It requires traveling light, then, stepping toward a kind of diminishment that sheds burden and fear. As we make our way forward, "Jesus must increase, but I must decrease," as John the Baptist realizes in John's gospel. We must let go of the delusion that we are "Special"—that we alone are impervious to life's chances and changes or that we alone are enslaved to them. We must toss out both self-sufficiency *and* despair. They are not good traveling gear. Hell weighs heavy in every hour we spend worrying, trying to guarantee our lives by sheer force of will and lots of luggage.

We do fail in loving ourselves, in saving our lives, or in saving those we love. The Good News of Lent is that we are neither condemned for this nor left to find our own way. Jesus descends with us into the dark wood—walks right into our betrayal, suffering, death, and hell—to lead us out, to bring us home, to carry all the saving love we need to go the distance. This is a journey into forgiveness.

Welcome to Lent. Welcome to traveling humbly, generously, and in hope. We are foot=soldiers of humility on the move, dancing with the world God has made. So we can forget trying to be seriously and somberly religious for anyone's approval. We are already Beloved. We are already forgiven. "Just day-hike you life," Jesus says, "step along with me humbly, generously, and in hope toward the Father."

