

“Avoiding the Valley”

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Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”

⁸Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ ¹¹and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

(Luke 4:1-13)

One of the coolest experiences I had as a Boy Scout was a 10-day backpacking trip through the backcountry of Philmont Scout Ranch. Philmont, which once was and probably still is the most popular high adventure base in Scouting, contains more than 140,000 acres of pristine wilderness in northeastern New Mexico. I remember one morning on the trail we had to get up well before the sun rose. We had a long day ahead of us that included a long stretch through one of the lowest and hottest valleys on the ranch. To avoid the worst of the heat, we needed to get through that valley before the sun got too high in the sky. Now, this was a lot of years ago, but I think the area we were passing through is known as the “Devil’s Wash Basin.”

That day, the heat we felt in that valley lived up to the name. I am pretty sure that, if our leaders had asked our group of 12 to 13 year-old boys if we would have preferred to avoid that part of the trek, we would have all voted yes. Truth be told, the leaders would have, too. But the thing was, we could not avoid it. The highlight of our journey, just a few days up the trail, was the summit of Mount Baldy. Standing over 12,000 feet tall, it is the highest peak in the Cimarron Range, and it is literally the pinnacle of most treks at Philmont. When Scouts talk about Philmont, the first question is always, “Did you climb Old Baldy?” We all wanted to be able to say yes, and, given where we were, if we wanted to get to Old Baldy, we were going to have to pass through Devil’s Wash Basin. We didn’t have time to go around. To get to where we wanted to go, we had to go through that valley.

This story of Jesus, trekking through another wilderness in another age, can be understood in much the same way. Each of the three temptations, if Jesus had accepted the tempter’s offer, would have allowed Jesus to avoid a particular kind of suffering. The offer of bread would have ended the deep hunger Jesus was feeling because of his fasting. The offer of earthly glory and authority would have avoided the feeling of being defenseless



against assault. The offer of invincibility, an assurance that he could never be injured or killed, would have allowed Jesus to avoid the emotional, spiritual, and physical pain that awaited him in the dark valley of his passion and death. Jesus, however, refuses all three temptations. In all of these respects, he refuses to avoid the hot, hard, painful walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And he does it because he knows that the valley was the only way up the mountain that lay on the other side of his pain. Jesus knew that, in the end, the world would be asking, "Did you climb the highest mountain? Did you really defeat death? Did the light actually win out over the darkness? When Jesus was done, the answer to those questions had to be yes. If he wanted to reach the heavenly goal of his incarnation, if he wanted to stand at the pinnacle of salvation's story, then there was only one path. He didn't have time to go around. To get to where he wanted to go, he had to go through that valley.

And, just as Jesus chooses to take this journey, we have a similar choice during Lent. From our vantage point today, we know that the glory of Easter is on the other side of this season. But each year, to get to those heights, we first walk the valley of these forty days plus Sundays. During this time, we do the hard work of repentance. During this time, we get honest with ourselves about our sin and the many ways we fall short of the holiness and righteousness of God. During this time, we practice discipline by fasting and giving things up that are hard for us to give up -- not to punish ourselves, but to remind us that the path of discipleship is work -- that all things worth achieving demand some work and sacrifice, and perhaps even some blood, sweat, and tears. When we walk this valley of Lent with intention and commitment, then the dawn of Easter shines brighter. And, in my case, as someone who has given up sweets for Lent, the donut of Easter tastes twice as sweet.

But there are other valleys that are far more painful than a few weeks of voluntary deprivation and soul-searching. The people of Ukraine are walking a dark and difficult valley. Friends who have lost loved ones, who are painfully aware that one of the chairs around their table is empty, are in the valley. Those who struggle with depression and mental illness are in the valley. Broken relationships... financial ruin... the end of a dream long hoped-for. These are the dark valleys that no one welcomes, that no one would choose to walk if they could help it.

That being said, I think many of you would agree that, every now and then, we get to some fork in the road and realize that, if we want to get to where we want to go, the only way to get to that high, happy place is to pass first through a valley of challenge. Sometimes we have to walk the valley to get to the mountaintop. Sometimes the valley just cannot be avoided.

This reminds me of the haunting beginning of Charles Dickens' holiday classic, "A Christmas Carol." It is a story of salvation, but remember that, before he can wake to the joyful dawn of Christmas Day, Scrooge must first pass through a dark and painful valley on Christmas Eve. One of my favorite passages from that story comes at the very beginning. If you've ever read the original, you might remember these words:

"Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever, about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner... There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate."

That Christmas story actually sits pretty comfortably in Lent, as well, because if we want to understand what the happy dawn of Easter is all about, we also have to recognize the dark valley that is walked before that dawn. In other words, Jesus had to be dead, to begin with. If Jesus was going to beat death, then there could be no doubt that Jesus did not just suffer. He was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful could come from the story of his life.

It is a great mystery, the role that suffering plays in the life of faith. Some people claim that God uses trials and tribulations to guide us and train us and lead us to greater holiness. Others refuse to believe that a God of love and compassion would ever intentionally choose to inflict pain upon us. They prefer to believe that God walks with us through every valley, making rough places smooth, turning pain into joy, and resurrecting life out of death. Some say it is a little bit of both. I do not claim to know the answer. All I can really do is try to wrestle with what scripture says, and two things stand out to me. First, it is clear that the Jesus of scripture believed that his own lonesome valley was inevitable and unavoidable. He repeatedly told the disciples that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering.” And secondly, from the very beginnings of the church, there seems to have been an assumption that true faith will inevitably bear a cross of suffering in some way, but if we are willing to suffer a little for our faith as Christ suffered mightily for his, then we will also be part of the victory that was his. As the 1st Epistle of Peter promises, *“There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold.”*¹

As a preacher, I can say that one of my earliest experiences of great preaching, and some of the best guidance I have ever received about what makes good preaching good, came from my childhood pastor, Dr. Joe Mullin. One of his most memorable preaching moves actually took years to sprout and bloom. He planted the seed in one of his very first sermons at First Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, NC. He said offhand that something had happened to him a while back that had changed the trajectory of his life and ministry. He did not think the time was right to disclose that event to the congregation at that point, but he made them a promise that he would share the details with them at a later time when he “knew them better.” Well, when his retirement neared, one of his friends in the congregation remembered that old promise Dr. Mullin had made twelve years before. And good to his word, one of Joe Mullin’s final sermons was entitled, “Now That I Know You Better.” “Owen,” he said, “Today is the day.” And I still remember that sermon. It was amazing.

I share that memory, because, in closing, I want to share with you an experience of a valley my family walked together a while back. Like Joe Mullin, now is not the time to share that story in its fullness. But, also like Joe Mullin, I will pledge to come back to this story at another time when I know you better. For the time being, let’s just say that we, as a family, went through a period of trial. The details are not all that important for us today, because all of you have endured trials of one kind or another. All of you know what it is like to have the world grab hold of you in painful ways you didn’t see coming. And all of you know what it is like to realize that you really had no choice but to walk down and through a difficult valley, because there was just no way around it. In this particular chapter of our lives, we

¹ 1 Peter 1:6-7.

felt that pain, and we came to that realization, and we walked that valley as best we could. After a little while, the pressure began to ease. A little while longer, the pain easier to endure. And a little while after that, we reached a point where we could look back along the path we had taken, and we could see that God had carried us through the valley in ways that we could never have engineered for ourselves. With God's help, we had climbed the mountain, and the view from the top was amazing.

Even so, even today, something will bring a memory of that chapter back into my consciousness, and I feel a bit of that pain all over again. I believe Ernest Hemingway was right when he observed that "The world breaks every one, [but] afterward, many are strong at the broken places." We are definitely stronger for our experience, and I pray that, whatever valleys you have traveled, you can say that, too. But even injuries that have healed can ache from time to time. And I can remember one time when my old wound was aching a bit. As we often do, Stephanie and I went on a walk to clear our heads. And on that particular walk, she said something that I will never forget. "That was a really hard time," she said, "but if it hadn't happened, then we wouldn't be here."

That really is the nature of life, not to mention the life of faith. Every twist and turn of the path, even the tough ones, help to make us who we are, and help to get us home. Without a doubt, we prefer to avoid painful valleys when we can. Avoiding pain is a basic human instinct, a God-given reflex that helps to ensure our very survival. That being said, as we travel the paths that lead us to the great vistas of life, some valleys just cannot be avoided. Thanks be to God that Christ did not avoid the valley of his own suffering, since there was no other way up the mountain that he was destined to climb for us.

In the same way, may God give us the courage to walk the valleys that we must travel in order to meet him on that mountaintop. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**