

Lent 1 – Willows 22nd Feb '15
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The world has seen some great inventors and thinkers and because the human is a naturally inquisitive animal humans have ventured and explored and made new discoveries. Humans have plumbed the depths, gone east, west, south and north, humans climbed mountain heights and latterly gone into space.

“This is one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind”, said Neil Armstrong as he, the first man stepped onto the moon. That is what that phrase will forever be associated with but humans have made other great steps – the giant leap of the invention of fire enabled mankind to stay warm and survive; the giant leap in the invention of a sharp weapon enabled humans to hunt for food. Explorers as they travelled opened the eyes and minds of everyone as they ventured out fearing they might fall off the flat planet, but still they travelled. Imagine coming to the conclusion that the earth was round and not flat – and imagine trying to convince others!

Some have had difficulty in getting their message accepted like Copernicus and Galileo who told of the earth circling the sun and not vice versa and that the sun and not the earth was the centre of the galaxy. The church refused to allow them to tell their message.

Darwin was mocked for proposing evolution (the Scottish people have developed his ideas further however!!!). Darwin was most mocked and resisted among those of religious faith for as they saw it, challenged their ideas of creation. They refused to accept Darwin's findings and some today are still members of a flat earth society and refuse to accept that the earth is round or that all life has evolved. What must it be like to come up with such new and revolutionary ideas? Darwin said that his discovery was like “*confessing to a murder*” – as a Jew he knew he would be isolated, mocked and rejected by those of faith.

All over the world Christians sing:

One more step along the world I go,
one more step along the world I go;
from the old things to the new
keep me traveling along with you:
And it's from the old I travel to the new;
keep me traveling along with you.

It's kind of strange that the churches sing this because of all groups in the world the Church is the one organization most especially that does not like change and most resists all new ideas about humanity and human nature or the planet and the universe.

In Lent we journey with Jesus in the Judean Wilderness. Jesus is going to take a small step in this wilderness that would be a giant leap for mankind and a step that we (as followers of Jesus) may not haven't fully taken yet!

The Judean Wilderness is dryabone. It's not a sandy desert it's boulders, rocks and stones. It's a dangerous place to walk as the ground is so uneven and rocks move underfoot. It's easy to fall here and if you fall you're going to be cut very badly. This is the lowest place on the planet, the air is dry, and hot, and salty. There is very little water and the water you can see only reminds you of your thirst because that's the Dead Sea.

The Judean Desert is a lonely place. It's a scary place and it's a dangerous place – you may be alone... but you're not alone... there are snakes, and other wild animals (leopards). Are you sure you want to be here. Jericho isn't too far away you could give up now and head for Jericho!

Father God, you led me here... you did lead me here didn't you? Why have you led me to this place? Jesus is in the Judean Wilderness for a reason, he has notions of his calling: “Father God, what is your calling on my life? What kind of messenger shall I be? What will your word be? What is your word for me to proclaim?”

Jesus has grown up in the Jewish tradition and the Law of Moses orders all of life both religious and secular. God's justice is seen in the Law of Moses. “What from the Law of Moses shall I declare Father?”

Father God, an eye for an eye... is your justice. But "an eye for an eye will leave us all blind..." Your will Father, is that we should see *and not be blind*. Time and time again I have known your loving kindness. Again and again I have witnessed your boundless mercy.

Ps103... ¹¹"He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; ¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us."

Your way is the way of love and forgiveness and not condemnation. Your way is not judgment but forgiveness. How will I reveal your forgiveness... to whom shall I go? The Law of Moses is clear on sin and punishment, *and even stoning*. Who am I to speak of your forgiveness, in the light of the Law of father Moses?

Jesus wrestles with the theme of forgiveness like many others have since. Surely God cannot just forgive? That's not just is it? The truth is that *God is not just*: God is merciful. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end..." (Prov.3:22).

Isn't this what it is to be merciful... that you pardon those who do not deserve to be pardoned. How else can God be called merciful? Be assured, "his mercies never come to an end..."

How will Jesus reveal this love of God, how will he reveal the mercy of God even to those who do not deserve it? Where will this love take him, to whom would he reveal this love, how would he reveal this love? "Father God, your love is without limit, your love you have shown to those our people hate and despise. The Samaritans aided those who invaded this land, killed your people and destroyed your temple. Yet I have seen your love and mercy offered to Samaritans." Isn't this precisely what the passage means: "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." And along with Jesus we wonder at this measure of love. What does this mean? Where will this lead us?

In this Judean Wilderness Jesus is praying and fasting; he is calling out to God; he is listening for God. The heat can get to you in this place, look at that large stone, it kind of looks like bread. It's been a while since Jesus ate; he could swear that he could smell bread. It's ridiculous how much that rock looks like bread. It can't be but he investigates anyway. He realizes he could easily be tempted away from proclaiming forgiveness and mercy to those *scum of a people the Samaritans*... they should be judged, they should be condemned, they should not be forgiven... then there were the tax collectors and Romans and... *what was the limit of the mercy of God that he would reveal?*

Jesus feels like one of the prophets of old, as he says to God, "But who will believe me? No one's going to believe that your love is unconditional or that your mercy never comes to an end, or that it is so graciously offered to the undeserving."

Love does not need to be loved back... love is unconditional.

Love does not need a sacrifice in order for love to be induced or secured... love bears all things.

Love does not need to be accepted for love to last, love never comes to an end.

And you do not need to accept my forgiveness in order for me to forgive you.

Jesus entered this wilderness to hear, and sense, and feel, and know his calling and to know his purpose. He sings, "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end..."

Jesus takes one careful step for man but makes a giant leap of faith for mankind. He knows that he will be despised and rejected not to mention hated for this message. Those who venture, those who make new discoveries, those who say the likes of, "you have heard it said but now I say unto you..." they face the anger of many but most especially the wrath of the religious. All the same, Jesus sings his message: "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies they never come to an end..."