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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

Hands of Lent—Seeking Hands

*A Sermon by*

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Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

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Two friends went camping in the desert. After their tent was set up, they crawled inside and fell sound asleep. A little while later, one woke up and woke their camping companion. “Look towards the sky, what do you see?” Waking up from a sound sleep and rubbing their eyes, the friend says, “I see millions of stars.” “Yes, and what does that tell you?” “Well, astronomically speaking, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially millions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Timewise, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three in the morning. Theologically, it is evident the Lord is all powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?” Quiet for just a moment, the friend says, “All that you said is true. But to me, it says someone stole our tent!”

We have begun our 40 day season of Lent which, in part, is modeled on Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness, which, in part, is modeled on Moses’ 40 years in the exodus searching for the Promised Land. I do not take this story literally that Jesus, like we would do, sat down and made a list, “Okay, I’m going into the wilderness, the desert for 40 days, what do I need to take with me: a tent, check; food, check; water, check; a good book to read, check; Devil-repellant, check”. I regard the Bible too highly to take it literally. For me, this story, told by Mark, then Luke and Matthew, is too important to be taken literally, yet, so important that we must take it seriously.

In Mark, chapter 1, right out the gate, Jesus comes to John to be baptized and comes up out of the water to hear the voice from Heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved”, and the Spirit immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke back up their stories a little further and have Jesus being born first, set into a context, ‘in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea.’ You remember those days, don’t you? How could we forget? Times were hard. Taxes were high. The amount owed to foreign governments was out of this world. What kind of a future are we leaving for our children and our grandchildren?

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. “Who will I be? What will I do? How will I live? Whom will I trust?” One does not need a tent, food and water, a good book to read to ask those questions. Two to three generations after Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection, followers of his Way are asking the same questions Jesus asked. “Who will I be? What will I do? How will I live? Whom will I trust?” Those are questions of the human journey, the journey of the heart, and they are the questions of the divine journey, the spark of the divine not only in Jesus, but also in each one of us, the journey of Soul.

Picture in your mind’s eye for a moment who Jesus was or could have been. He was born into a family; he had a mother and a father and brothers and sisters. He grew up in a family that lived in some kind of a house, in some community; a family that earned money and ate meals together. A family that had religious practices. Remember that time they all went to Jerusalem for Passover and Jesus wandered off? Jesus would make his parents, especially his mother Mary, sick with worry. That time in Jerusalem, he was missing for days and they finally found him in the temple, Jesus acted as if they were all supposed to know where he was; he acted as if his family were all supposed to be mind-readers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah M. Foulger, Jesus’ Sister

Jesus was trained as a carpenter, and imagine that long after his father died, he continued in that trade. Imagine that he, along with his brothers and sisters, helped to support the family. Imagine even, that he was quite good at what he did and over time that he saved up a tidy little sum of money. Imagine even that there came a time in Jesus' life when he knew, partly because people kept saying it to him, "Jesus, you are the chosen one. You have a gift. Your life is different. You are a teacher and a healer. Go. Go out and be what you were created to be."

And finally Jesus laid down his carpentry tools, took nothing with him, no tent, no food, no water, no good book to read, no Devil-repellant, out into the wilderness, where he tried to hear, "Which voices are Satan's and which are the voices of angels? You are my Beloved: Angel? God? Devil? One does not live by bread alone: again, Angel? God? Devil? All this could be yours, more money that you have already earned, more power than you already have over people, your name: written in the stars and someday in lights: Angel? God? Devil?"

Maybe, just maybe, Jesus was in the wilderness looking at the stars and asking, "How small am I, God, and how can I ever accomplish anything big?"

Maybe, just maybe, as he stumbled up huge boulders to get to the top and looking down, he thought, "So I have been a carpenter all these years and I have some money tucked away. Who knew I would ever make so much money in my life, but now what? How can I use that money for good?"

Maybe, just maybe, parched beyond human levels, Jesus spit out the words, "I see that my days on this earth will be numbered. So how will I use my days to bring wholeness out of brokenness, unity out of dividedness, and justice out of injustices?"

No one was there to witness Jesus in the wilderness. Still, three of the four Gospel writers felt this story, this metaphor of temptations by a Devil, were so important to record, to put words into Jesus' mouth, words that spoke volumes to their hearers. Luke was writing to a people who were in pain. People were looking for Good News, Gospel, God speaking hope. They wanted to throw the Romans out of their lives so they could get on with their fullness of life. Didn't God want more for them than slavery? Didn't God want more for them than injustice? Weren't they the people who were deserving of healing? They remembered the promises: 40 years, Moses, 'let my people go'. 40 days, Jesus, blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness sake. Blessed are you who weep. Luke's listeners were ready for this new franchise Jesus had started.<sup>2</sup> 'Where do we sign up for this way of love and justice? Our lives can make a difference. Life is about more than the one who dies with the most toys wins.'

So, where do *you* and *I* sign up? It is our 40 days of Lent, our time in the wilderness, our time to ask our questions of our faith and of our living. Remember Jesus' questions? Remember Luke's listeners' questions? "Who will I be? What will I do? How will I live? Whom will I trust?" Those are our questions? Our hearts, our minds, our hands of Lent are 'seeking hands'. Some of us have been sitting in these pews for a long time now. Some of us have just tiptoed in recently through those big squeaky doors, secretly hoping nobody would see us, nobody would notice, nobody would really ask us, "What are you doing here?" Some of us are more in-betweeners. We've been here for awhile,

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<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan

maybe even left for awhile, but somehow we are drawn back in. Not really sure why. Maybe while we were gone we looked for something better and just couldn't find it. Nothing else really fit.

Lent is a great time to spend some time seeking. Come to a dinner you've never come to before and sit next to a person you have never met before and see if you are blessed in a new way. Come to a class or a small group, just once, and listen to a new voice of faith, someone other than all your familiar voices. Maybe, there is another perspective you need to hear. Come to do something for someone else, sew a bag, feed someone who is hungry, pound some nails, visit someone who has nobody. Seek and be open to just whatever you may find.

“The good news about this story of Jesus asking questions in the desert is that he came home from it filled with God’s Spirit and energized for his work in the world. When given the choice between turning a stone into a loaf of bread for his own consumption, he later trumped that by feeding 5,000 with five loaves. Jesus was given a chance to have it all, as far as the eye could see. Only he did that when he rode into Jerusalem and that holy city gave itself to him voluntarily, a far more compelling and powerful victory. Throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple? Why stop at that when the resurrection was to be a far greater gift to the world?”<sup>3</sup>

My prayer during these 40 days is that we will ask and live our questions of faith. We will seek with our hearts and with our hands. Sometimes we will do that in private. Sometimes we will do it together. Religion, often thought of as ‘righteousness’, is better understood as ‘relationship’. I-Thou, and Us-Thou. I am not a big believer in privatized religion, what can God do me for? Rather, if love changes everything, if God’s love changes everything, how do I need to change also? Storing up treasures is foolishness. Treating others as I wish to be treated is priority one. “In the kingdom or the realm of right relationships, we all get what we need, not necessarily what we want.”<sup>4</sup> Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Foulger, <http://teamnoah.info/Stirred/sister.html>

<sup>4</sup> Robin Meyers, *Saving Jesus*, p. 216.