

Walking Through Lent (Lent 1)

Luke 3:1-6

March 6, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

Our dear sweet Daisy the schnauzer has a maddening habit of what we call “securing the perimeter” in our back yard. First thing in the morning, she bursts out the doggy door, races to the far side of the lawnmower shed, and from there, makes her way as quickly as possibly up and down the back fence line. In the far corner, she has to stop and bark at the neighbor dog. In the middle, she does the same to the other neighbor dog. Back and forth, as close to the fence as she can get. Same thing in our previous house. I have no idea why this is important in her little doggy brain, but she clearly thinks she is keeping us safe from all possible predators, at least those that might gain access under, over, or through the back fence.

It will not surprise you to learn that there is now a path all along Daisy’s patrol route. Straight from the back steps to the far side of the lawnmower shed, and all up and down the back fence line. She made the path herself, just like cows do, or deer, or other creatures of habit.

Humans do it too. My dad attended the University of Texas at Arlington soon after a bunch of new buildings were built. He joked for years that they should have waited to build the sidewalks, because they ended up with sidewalks that no one used, and paths that the students created where they were needed instead.

If you visit McKinney Falls State Park in Southeast Austin, as you approach the crossing of Onion Creek, and if the light is just right and you know where to look, you can see the ruts that the loaded-down wagons made in the soft limestone, as they traveled on the Camino Real. Humans make paths, too, because we too are creatures of habit. We look for the ways that others have gone before us.

It’s not too creative or unique to think of Lent as a journey. Lent traces Jesus’s journey to the cross, after all. We, too, are on a journey, but it’s not just for 40 days. It’s the journey of a lifetime, the journey of faith along a path—or more accurately, pathS—paths that we find already cleared and paths that we make ourselves.

We begin Lent with John the Baptist this year, which is not the usual place to begin. The devotional that we’re following begins with John, and upon

reflection, I decided that makes a lot of sense. Because John the Baptist begins with calling us to repentance, which is very much a theme of Lent. If we begin our path with repentance and confession and turning in a new way, then the path where we find ourselves is a faithful one, an ancient one, one that is worn and wide and clearly marked.

John the Baptist also quotes from the prophet Isaiah, which is full of path imagery. Listen again: "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth." The path of the Lord is straight and flat and makes for smooth walking. We more commonly think of John the Baptist as being the one who is preparing the way of the Lord, as he prepares the way for Jesus to begin his ministry. But when we put this reading here, at the beginning of Lent, it shifts a little bit, in that we ourselves are called to be part of that path making.

Our devotional today references a poem by a Spanish poet, and a line that he writes has become famous: "we make the road by walking." The devotional writer proposes that we're all making a path as we go along, because we've not been on this path before, the path of being faithful disciples in the midst of a pandemic and all the conflicts that surround us, all over the world.

I want to emphasize one word in that poem, which is "we." We make the road by walking. We're not alone. We're not the only ones on the path of discipleship. We're not the only ones making a path through Lent or the pandemic or anything else. There are those who have gone before us, whose footprints may have faded, but the evidence of their passage remains, like wagon ruts in the limestone. And in the present, we aren't alone either. We have people just ahead of us on the path, holding branches out of our way, flattening down the tall grass, like Daisy in the backyard. And there are people behind us, too, trusting us to keep the path cleared out, hoping that we are making the way straight and flat and smooth.

This Lenten path, like any path, is not one we walk one time and then abandon. This path is made over a lifetime. Sometimes it may have to shift a little, to accommodate a detour around a new obstacle. Sometimes we may take a short cut or a long cut, or realize we've been on a loop. Sometimes we may have to retrace our steps. Sometimes the way is clear and sometimes it's obscured. Sometimes we thought we knew where the path would lead, and we are surprised instead.

We make the road by walking. We, together, make the path. John the

Baptist gets us going, with repentance. We have companions as we journey, people ahead and people behind, and people beside.

We make the road by walking. We keep putting one foot in front of the other. We keep following Jesus as best we can, making the most faithful choices that we can. Let's keep walking and making paths, throughout this Lenten season.