

Into the Mystery - I SURRENDER! 3-14-10

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Luke 4:1-13

4Jesus, 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."⁸ Jesus 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.

Exodus 16:1-5 (paraphrased)

16The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin,... ²There they complained against Moses and Aaron saying, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." ⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.

Lucille, one of the elder members of the congregation I served before coming here, particularly enjoyed telling this joke: "Why did Moses wander around in the wilderness for 40 years?" Do you know the answer? "Because he was a man and he refused to stop and ask for directions." We laugh because we can recognize ourselves or someone we know in that. We humans seem to have a great need to be in control. Of course some of us have more of a need for control than others, but all of us, to some degree, want and even need some sense that we are in charge of our lives. The other side of that, of course, is the topic we took up last week. When we feel we have lost control, we often complain and try to find someone else to blame.

Last week we heard the complaints of the Israelites - "we don't have enough water, we don't have enough food, we need a better God who is more responsive to our needs!" This week we see that, wow, amazing, God provided what the people needed. What they couldn't do for themselves, God was there to provide, time and time again. So you think they'd learn. You think after a while, those Israelites would

start saying, "I don't know how or where we'll get what we need, but God hasn't let us down yet!" But they never seem to "get it."

Today's theme, "I surrender!" is the pivotal point in this Lenten wilderness journey into the Mystery we are on. We began Lent as we encountered God, who will not be pinned down, who is Mystery, in the burning bush, at Jesus' baptism, and as a Still, Small Voice. When God catches our attention, we are often flung into some new or unknown place like the desert, which can make us feel lost and confused; disoriented and fearful. That is when we might begin our complaining. That is when our level of discomfort can get the better of us. But if we can get through the disorientation, if we can somehow ask for directions, if we can surrender ourselves to the power and guidance of God, then we are able to move into the next stage which takes us from disorientation to reorientation, seeing the world and our lives through God's eyes.

There is a word of caution, here. Surrendering is the hardest step in this whole journey. And some just can't do it. Or maybe we

give it a go, but get scared and quickly take back control, trusting our own selves or egos or needs more than we trust in that which is greater than we are - in the Mystery that is God - who is beyond our control and bigger than we can think or imagine, and who is faithful, abounding in steadfast love. For all the wonderful words and heart-warming thoughts, surrender to the Almighty is hard for even the most faithful among us. But this is the turning point step. This step is the one on which everything else depends and which determines whether we will move toward abundant life and the Promised Land, or whether we will keep wandering in the wilderness.

If you've ever had to deal with an addiction or been close to someone who has, or, if you've ever experienced a seemingly insurmountable problem, you may already know that the first step to "recovery" or "sanity" or renewal or reorientation - there are many words that can be used here - the first step is surrendering to a power greater than yourself. And we're not talking about someone else. We're talking about a "power" greater than yourself; admitting that

you are lost and need direction; acknowledging that you do not have the resources in and of yourself to change, to give up the behavior that is causing grief and struggle for yourself and for others.

Are you familiar with the 12 steps programs that are used to provide a path out of the lostness that can occur in our lives for a variety of reasons? This path, I think, does correspond to the kind of spirituality Jesus taught. The first three of the 12 steps are all about surrender. 1.) We admit we were powerless over our addiction - that our lives have become unmanageable. 2.) Come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. 3.) Make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God. But let's face it, these words can be difficult to our modern or post-modern ears. The idea of surrender is a sign of weakness, right? Giving up our will and offering ourselves to be at the mercy of another is antithetical to so many messages we receive, even if it *is* surrendering to God.

Do you know, though, that every major religion has this idea of surrender at the core of its teachings. Losing the "self" and allowing yourself to be a vessel of that which is greater than you is there in the Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish and Christian faiths. In fact, one of the meanings of the word Islam is surrender. Surrender, in religious terms, is when a believer completely gives up his or her own will and subjects their thoughts, ideas, and deeds to the will and teachings of a higher power. In Christianity, we have the idea of Christ living in me. In baptism, we talk about dying to the self and rising into life in Christ. That is the ultimate surrender. It is not me, but Christ in me. You've heard of DUI - driving while under the influence of alcohol. Well, surrender is LUI - living while under the influence of Jesus. That is where we find life. That is the sanity we are looking for, the direction and purpose which brings blessedness and a reorientation to life that is in tune with God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, just as Jesus asks us to pray.

The truth is, we can just keep wandering if we choose. We can keep complaining and wondering why things don't go the way we want or we can keep up the illusion that we are a self-made person and don't really need God. We can say, well, God, you can have an hour on Sunday morning, but the rest of the week is mine. I'll let you know when I need you and make sure you know what I expect from you. But eventually the question will catch up with each of us, "How's that working for you?" Jesus teaches us that faith and true life, real life and fulfillment come on the other side of the confession, "It's not working anymore! I surrender my will to yours, God! Take me and mold me and use me."

Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.²⁴ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." (Luke 9:23,24) And he certainly practiced what he preached. Each week we get closer to Holy Week and the stories of Jesus' last days leading up to his crucifixion. On the night

before he was crucified, Jesus went to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. Things had become very difficult for Jesus and the disciples didn't seem to grasp what was happening. So Jesus prayed, God, "if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." "Not my will, but yours be done." Then, as a final act of surrender to God on the cross, with his dying breath Jesus said, "into your hands I commend my spirit." Jesus showed us the way to resurrection and new life, and you simply cannot get there without surrendering. It's part of the journey, and until we take that leap of faith, we cannot know what we're missing out on.

One minister tells the story of his grandmother who would always sing as she went about her day at home. The song she sang the most was, "I Surrender All". All to Jesus I surrender; all to him I freely give; I will ever love and trust him, in his presence daily live. I surrender all, I surrender all, all to thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all." This minister says, [That] "call to surrender and trust has been like nails on a chalkboard to my "type A" personality. I

modified Mum's song to "I Surrender Some" and was doing fine!, thank you very much..." We can all probably relate to this minister's sentiments, can't we?

When the answer to the question, "How's that working for you?" finally faces an honest, "Well, not very well", we may be ready to say, I surrender, God. When we wake up and realize that there is so much more to life than we are experiencing, we may be ready to say, I surrender, God. When we are ready to seize life as God intends, to see with God's eyes, to take hold of the things that matter and to let God be the director in the drama of our life, then maybe we are ready to say, I surrender, God. And once we finally get to the place of surrender, God is there to meet us and show us the way. But I'll save that for next Sunday. Amen.