

THE SACRED JOURNEY – CONDITIONS OF FAITH  
II Corinthians 4:7-18  
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Welcome back to the sacred journey. Over the past several years I have become convinced people come to church not only with differing motives but for motives that are totally opposite. Christian psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, author of **The Road Less Traveled**, **Children of the Lie**, **The Different Drum** and other books, insists that to grasp religious pluralism you must understand the degree to which people find themselves in different stages of spiritual development. He differentiates four such stages.

In stage 1 everything is chaotic. People are antisocial; they don't give a darn about anyone else. A lot of criminals are found in stage 1.

Then, dramatically, they may get religion. And the religion to which they are converted may be rigid, for that is exactly what they are looking for -- order, a God who is a kind of benevolent cop-in-the-sky. In stage 2, people are apt to behave as model prisoners in very authoritarian churches; because it is not so much the essence as the form of the religion that has saved them from chaos, they don't take lightly people who seem to be fooling around with the rules. A lot of fundamentalists are found in stage 2.

In stage 3, doubt is recognized as important. Skepticism is affirmed. The bumper sticker "Question authority" refers not only to the government but also to the churches, which are often perceived by folk in stage 3 as having all the answers because they deny all the questions. People in stage 3 are frequently nonbelievers -- but spiritually, Peck insists, they are more developed than those content to remain in stage 2. Although more individualistic, they are not antisocial. A lot of academics are in stage 3.

But then some of these stage 3 people begin to get restless. They don't want to sacrifice intellect, but they do want to oppose its presumptions. They want to feel as well as think, intuit as well as reason, cry more, and especially dare to dream. They continue to mock the King of La Mancha, dear Don Quixote, but at the same time they realize that "there is no disaster so great as when the spirit is denied its journey -- when the Knight loses his horse, spear and cause -- for when that happens a terrible meaninglessness invades life."

Such people are ready for stage 4, for a God who mysteriously infuses life with purpose and beauty. They are ready for a mystical experience of God which is generally accompanied by a deeply communal view of the world. Believing that God provides maximum support but minimum protection, they have an awesome sense of human freedom and of the personal responsibility it entails. They pray, "O God, grant not that I be sheltered from dangers but fearless in facing them; I pray not for the stilling of my pain but for a heart to bear it. Grant me the blessings of success, but even more let me find the grasp of your hand in my failures."

In stage 4 are a lot of Knox members -- or so I'd like to think. They take seriously these words from Paul, "Though our outer nature is wasting away our inner nature is being renewed every day." They know that life is a journey that starts in the physical world and continues in the

spiritual world, where the journey is one of becoming more and more the selves God intends us to be. It is a journey for which God daily gives us what Ezekiel calls "a new spirit and a heart of flesh," a journey that only death finally grants permission to end. And who knows it may continue thereafter? For death is only a horizon and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight.

Everything in life seems to be journeying on, starting with the earth itself. I occasionally enjoy reading books by paleontologists, the folk who fuss with fossils -- fossils which tell us that long before vegetable and animal life appeared, before the eaters started to dream of fish and fish of human beings, the earth had been evolving for millions of years. I can still remember the day in the fifth grade when Mr. Hale told us wide-eyed kids that the length of human history compared to the life of the earth was as a nickel on the top of the Empire State Building. I think that was the first time that my life was put, as they say, "in perspective."

But human history itself is also a journey. Cro-Magnon man, whose jaw muscles relaxed just in time to allow their eyes to widen and so to zero in on the objects their hands brought before them, produced all those nomads following the seasons to the ends of the earth, unimaginable hardship notwithstanding. Those were times when a capacity to journey was as vital to people as the air they breathed and the food they ate. And I remember learning in high school how whole races of indigenous people perished because foreign civilizations deprived them of their freedom of movement: Native Americans, for example, and Australian aborigines, whose "walkabouts" were abruptly restricted by the impositions of civilization.

Human history can come to a very abrupt end. Our physical survival, as never before, depends on our spirits' capacity to continue the journey, to discover a whole new world greater than that discovered by Columbus or any other sailor of the seven seas. "No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping, and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days." The prophets always saw that new world.

This weekend in the life of our nation we celebrate the contributions made by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Martin King was raised as the son of a respected Black minister in Atlanta. While he experienced a couple of minor incidents of racism, and while he was certainly caught in the segregation system, he was insulated from the worst violence and injustice by which Whites kept Blacks down. His privileged position shows in his education, at Morehouse College, then Crozier Seminary in Pennsylvania, and finally a Ph.D. at Boston College. Those studies brought him into complete accord with the ethical and social theology taught by Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Rauschenbusch. But he didn't know just how to apply those principles.

Then Rosa Parks showed him how, his first year in Montgomery.

The one-day boycott stretched into weeks and months. The bus company deeply cut its services and still was losing thousands of dollars and downtown merchants were suffering. The White Citizens Council and other Ku Klux Klan types got into the act with threats and terrorism of the worst sort. But the Black community remained united.

Two months after it all began, on a Friday night, Martin was sitting quietly in the kitchen. Coretta and the baby had gone to sleep. He had just been released from jail after his first arrest. Lately, there had been almost continuous obscene and threatening phone calls. The phone rang and yet another caller told him to leave town immediately if he wanted to live. King thought about giving up. His coffee cup sat untouched as he tried to figure some way to move out of the picture, to pass the leadership on to someone else. He thought of his little daughter and beautiful wife and shuddered at the bomb threats. What happened next he told in these words: "And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.'" That experience gave him a new strength and courage. He reported, "Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared." It was the turning point for him, the revelation he returned to repeatedly in the darkest days. When his house was bombed three days later, King hardly broke stride.

In 1963, the year before Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, he delivered the speech he is best known for. A quarter of a million black and white peaceful people were gathered in front of Lincoln's Memorial as Dr. King spoke: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.... This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning,

'My country, tis of thee Sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing...  
From every Mountainside  
Let freedom ring.'"

To that God-inspired dream, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his life. Like the prophets of old, he found unimagined strength by doing God's will, seeking justice, showing love. So it is for all who would live with strength.

Forty-one years after his death, Dr. King's work is far from completed. That is why programs like Hunger Offerings, Tutoring at Third Church, building a Habitat House, hosting homeless families supporting emergency and assistance centers and clothes closets are so important --- all are working toward Dr. King's dream, the dream of all true prophets of God.

We talk of a world free of war, but we're talking here of one free of violence and hatred, fear and suspicion. "And it shall come to pass in the latter days..." The prophets were always taking a dim view of the present only because they held such a bright view of the future.

I hope that's why Knox folk come to church. Of course we come for comfort in sorrow, for reassurance in all our anxieties. But most of all I hope we come to realize all the unrealized being in ourselves, to ask God and each other's help to divest our minds and spirits of the vested interests that hem us in, that prevent our moving together on behalf of a more fully just and decent and lovely world.

I hope we have come to church because, as we earlier confessed, we have allowed the present age to mold us and left untapped the power of the age to come.

In stage 4, Christians are a pilgrim people who have decided never to arrive. It's an exhaustive thought, yet one true to life where change is as insistent as sin and taxes. And it is true to our faith, for ours is a God who declares, "Behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth." Ours is a God of history -- a history characterized by an Exodus; one that proclaims a New Testament, that describes a New Jerusalem, anticipates a new song and new wine, and promises that we shall become new beings. "If anyone is in Christ, she is a new creature; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

Know that "God is ahead of us as much as above and within us." God gives us the "growth choice" as opposed to the "fear choice," to use Maslow's terms; God gives us a present with a future, and a future right up to the end of our days, "for though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed each day."

There is a predictable world. Toward the end of Shaw's **Caesar and Cleopatra** Caesar says, "And so to the end of history murder shall breed murder, always in the name of right and honor and peace, until the gods are tired of blood and create a race that can understand."

And in contrast to the predictable world, there is a preferable world. It can be created by people in stage 4 of their spiritual development, who understand, as did Karl Barth, "To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

I hope we come to church to clasp hands in prayer to God, and to clasp hands with one another that we may continue our spirits' journey, this pilgrim life of ours, moving together on behalf of a more fully just and decent and lovely world.

It's tough. Imagination comes harder than memory, and faithfulness is more demanding than success. But it is possible. "For though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day ... We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." Thanks be to God. Amen.