
Vision Quest
Wesley Mimico United Church
February 17, 2013
by Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 4:1-13

Aboriginal people in Australia have - or at least had - the idea they called a “Walkabout”, where a young person would walk around - alone - for up to 6 months, exploring their natural environment and exploring themselves at the same time. It is a ritualistic separation from the tribe in which the child had grown up. Essentially, a child leaves the tribe or village, alone - on walkabout, and return as an adult.

Many North American indigenous groups have a similar idea – many people participate in a “vision quest”, and venture alone away from their tribe. Those journeys may only last a few days, but they are an intense time of embracing the spiritual world and seeking visions. They are also a time of deprivation - deprivation of sleep, food, and sensory input. Often, youth return to their tribes and then begin to live out the spiritual vision that they discovered - to live it out in everyday life, in the community where they grew up. And of course, a new vision about how to engage with life is critical to one's understanding of one's own identity.

So we need not be surprised that after Jesus was baptized, he went on a spiritual retreat into the wilderness himself. He went alone. He suffered the mixed-blessing of not eating. He experienced sensory deprivation. He reflected. And when Jesus returned, he returned with a clearer vision of who he was and how he should live his life. Clearly, the idea of isolating oneself from society in order to gain spiritual clarity is a very old, and a very common, idea. Perhaps it's a very powerful idea too.

In the summer of 2006 I had a similar experience. Of course it wasn't quite as neat and tidy as the story in the gospel. But at the start of the summer of 2006, I was a scientist who was considering a call to professional ministry. At the end of the summer I was committed to that journey.

A number of things happened over that time to encourage that transition, but one particular event was - in fact - a trip into the wilderness.

I have a small sailboat. And when I say small, I mean that it is currently inside my single-car garage. I pull the boat with my Toyota Corolla – that's how small it is. It's really a glorified rowboat with sails and no oars. By it does have a small cabin, and because of that, overnight trips are possible - even if they are not what you might call comfortable.

In any case, in the summer of 2006 I took the boat - or at least the boat took me – alone - on a 9 day trip into the wilderness North and West of Killarney.

The trip was a lot of what you might expect on a 17 foot boat on the waters of Georgian Bay and the North Channel. With such a small boat, I could easily find places to put ashore. I would usually set an anchor out the bow and tie stern-to-shore, allowing easy access to both the boat and to the delights on land.

And when I was onshore, I did what I came to do. I explored. I swam. I cooked and ate. I played harmonica. And I painted landscapes in acrylic.

But in 9 days, you can imagine that I had a fair bit of "alone" time. I didn't have a cell phone, and my only outside contact was through my marine radio. And so, in spite of the daily activities of studying the weather, studying navigational charts, sailing, exploring, it was a time for much reflection. It was time in the wilderness. And it was a time for me to reflect on my own identity.

When I started my trip, I arrived in Killarney, had my last "shore" meal of fish and chips at the local dock, rigged my boat, and launched it at the boat ramp. Then I stepped off the town dock into my boat and sailed away. When I stepped down, I was searching, and uncertain. 9 days later, when I returned to Killarney, I tied up at the same dock. But when I stepped up onto the dock, I stepped up as a person committed to the journey of professional ministry in the United Church of Canada. The time in the wilderness was a critical time for my own understanding of my own identity.

Some people would brush that off as a mid-life crisis, but I believe that reflecting on one's own identity can be critical. At least it was for me. And it was for Jesus.

[invite stories of journey and identity and transformation]

But in this gospel story, Jesus does not just struggle with his identity – he also faces temptations. And I have to admit – I find it a bit hard to relate to that part of the story. The

temptations of Jesus – to turn rocks into bread for example – are hard for me to relate to, because I am not Jesus.

I find it easier to relate to the story of the temptation of the disciples. We all know the story of the temptation of Jesus, that we just read. But do you remember the story of the temptation of the disciples? If you think you don't know that story, perhaps you know it by a different name. I'm sure you know the story. In fact, I'm know that you know the story - because we read it just last week. But perhaps you know it better as “the transfiguration of Jesus”.

In the story of the transfiguration of Jesus was are told that Jesus and some of his friends went away for the crowds, up a mountain, and suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared. And Jesus's appearance changed, and the disciples see Jesus as radiant. We covered that part last week – but there's more. Peter wants to build shelters in the mountains to immortalize the moment. What was Peter thinking? Perhaps Peter wanted to live on the mountain-top. Perhaps Peter imagined that Jesus wanted to live in a shrine, away from the crowds, pure and uncontaminated by normal life.

Predictably, Jesus does not support Peter's idea. Jesus did not live in a shrine, and he wasn't about to start living in a shrine just because Peter suggested it. In fact, immediately following the transfiguration story Jesus is back to his most frequent location - he is back with the common people, and Jesus back to his main occupation - one-on-one healing.

But I feel for Peter. I really do. Because there are many times in my own life that I've wanted to “freeze” an experience. I've wanted to preserve and immortalize a slice of my own life. I've wanted to make a “backup copy” of something so that I can relive the experience of it again and again. I can still vividly remember the day - about two years ago now - when my youngest son, Ian, became a teenager. It was a great occasion. It is still great to engage with him as he continues to grow and develop. But at the same time I grieve - just a bit - that my son is no longer a child. Part of me wants to “freeze” him in his childhood - to preserve that relationship with him which I have delighted in. It's very natural to want to preserve what we love.

It's a very tempting idea in our churches too. Many United Church of Canada congregations seem to want to freeze and preserve an image of who they are today - or sometimes an image of who they were in their past. We want to hang on to a piece of our own congregational life when we understood our place in our community, when we were respected,

when we were understood, when we were part of the mainstream, when we even defined the mainstream.

But perhaps we - like Peter - are called not to immortalize our past but to leave the mountain and embrace our unknown and perhaps scary future. Perhaps we are called to follow Jesus back down the mountain into a future that we can not predict and certainly cannot control.

But – like the disciples – we are tempted. We are tempted to preserve what we love. We are tempted to try to preserve an idea, or a building, or a plan for a new building. We are tempted to keep our ways. We are tempted to keep control. We are tempted to keep power. We are tempted to keep what we want instead of looking for new signs of new life. Signs from God.

And so, as we begin our journey through Lent, I hope that we can all reflect on what temptations are keeping us from going down into the valley, to be with the lowest of the low. To providing healing and God's love for all.

What's your temptation?

Amen.