

The First Baptist Church, Midland
March 7, 2010 – Communion Sunday
Joshua 1:1-9

“You Shall Meditate On It Day and Night...”
Thoughts for the “Tools For the Journey” Lenten Worship Series
Theme: Meditation
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

Some years ago, a young man who wanted to improve himself went into a church and sat down in the sanctuary for awhile. He took out a piece of paper and a pencil and began writing a long list of things he promised he would do to change his life. When finished, he signed his name at the bottom, went forward to place it on the altar and then returned to his seat.

He sat there quietly meditating for a few more minutes and then something unusual occurred. He began to sense God speaking softly in his soul. And the more he listened the more he sensed God saying to him, "You've done it all wrong. I want you to go back up there, get that piece of paper and tear it up. Then I'll give you another instruction."

So, the young man got out of his pew and proceeded as he felt led. Then he returned to his seat and awaited further instruction. For awhile it was very quiet and nothing seemed to be happening. But finally he felt moved a second time. With a very gentle voice God said: "Now take a piece of paper, sign your name at the bottom and let me fill in the rest!" (From Barry P. Boulware, First United Methodist Church, Kansas City, Missouri)

What a wonderful story... listening quietly to the still small voice of God is, as David suggested last Sunday, sometimes a difficult thing to do. Yet as we seek to enhance our journey toward spiritual fulfillment it's important to strive toward having this experience. Today we're considering *meditation* as a tool toward that end. Thus far we've talked about prayer and solitude. Now we ponder the third important leg on our "listening stool".

Obviously these three tools are closely related. Yet, they are different. One has us in conversation with God (prayer)... the second has us withdrawing from the world's frenzied pace in an effort to rest with an eye toward recharging our spiritual batteries (solitude)... And this brings us to our third step. With meditation not only do we seek to empty ourselves of the world rushing by, but we seek to fill ourselves with the ever present God by looking to some of the resources beyond ourselves that bring us into the holy presence. To accomplish this, we focus upon the tenets of God.

Let me try to clarify. I have a conviction. Deep in my heart of hearts, I believe we are constantly in the presence of God. I believe the final words of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew confirm this presence: **“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”** (Matthew 28:20) There is no where we can go to flee from the company of God and there is nothing we can do to distract the attention of God. Our Creator brought us into the world, our Companion walks with us through this world, and our Savior will abide with us through eternity.

Is there a more beautiful metaphor bringing this promise to life than the one found in the 23rd Psalm? *The Lord IS my shepherd...* This isn't an expression born out of our past and it isn't a promise for the future. It is a declaration of the present reality. God is shepherding us right now... God is watching over us right now... God is protecting us right now... God is caring about us right now. It's all happening in the present moment. Do you believe that?

There is only one problem and this leads to my second conviction. Even as God is always with us, we are not always in touch with the mystery of God's presence. We can go for hours... for days... for weeks... even for years without a sense of our abiding Savior. There is sometimes an empty place within that is so large it feels like the Grand Canyon. There is sometimes a distance so great that it feels like we can journey to the ends of the earth and still not reach his mysterious presence. But there is a way to be drawn closer to this mystery, and that way is at least in part this tool or this discipline we call meditation.

Do you remember the story of Joshua? We saw a brief snapshot of his life a few minutes ago. Joshua was the person chosen by God and ordained by Moses to lead the Hebrew people across the Jordan River and into the promised land. Oh, Moses had done a great job. The Bible says **“Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform...”** (Deuteronomy 34:10-11) Yet, as Moses stood at the top of Mount Nebo looking over the land on the other side of the Jordan River... the land that had been promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendents... he died. He got them to the doorstep but didn't get to walk through. That was left to Joshua. And God came to him and blessed him by saying, **“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.”** (Joshua 1:5b)

But the task was daunting because the enemies were many and the land was rugged. Yet God gave to Joshua a very unique and empowering gift, and that gift was the promise of his constant presence. **“Be strong and courageous (Joshua),”** God said, **“do not be frightened or dismayed, for (I) am with you wherever you go.”** (Joshua 1:9) Does this sound familiar? It should because these are the same words used by Jesus at the point of his departure from this life: *“Remember, I am with you always...”*

I hope the point is clear. As we've been suggesting, God is always near and approachable. God never leaves us to our own devices. And we can always access this holy presence – even when we feel distanced from the Almighty - through the gift of meditation for as God said to Joshua, **“This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it.”** (Joshua 1:8)

You see, meditation takes us out of ourselves in those quiet places (this is the solitude piece) to the point where we focus upon the holy and this is the point of meditation. But of course, it's not always an easy thing to do.

Meditation consultant Eknath Easwaran tells of his experience leading a meditation workshop. The auditorium was full of people eager to learn of this sacred art. And at the end of

their time together, Easwaran gave them a chance to experience what he had been speaking about through the day. He invited those present to meditate with him.

His tells this story... "We all closed our eyes, and I got absorbed. When I opened my eyes 30 minutes later, there were only three people in the room--my wife, myself and the owner of the bookstore, who was waiting to lock up. That is when I realized it was going to be extremely difficult to teach meditation in this country." (Take Your Time: Finding Balance in a Hurried World ((Tomales, Calif.: Nilgiri Press, 1991)), p. 183)

It's true... it's not easy to meditate and many of us are uncomfortable with the thought. But this is one of the tools which, when properly sharpened, can bring us gently into the presence of the Holy. Of course, there are many different forms this tool can take which are designed to draw us into the presence of God. One can read spiritual biographies, listen to great hymns, ponder the actions and behaviors of faithful people we admire... You see the point. Meditation takes us from the quiet place within to a defined focus beyond ourselves. And of course, the greatest tool to be used in meditation is connected to our Biblical foundation.

Now we're not talking about the study of scripture in an exegetical way. Rather, it's about taking time with the stories to internalize and personalize their meanings. We're talking about bringing the imagination to life and allowing our feelings to color our thoughts and impressions.

Richard Foster in his book, The Celebration of Discipline, describes it like this. "Take a single event like the resurrection, or a parable, or a few verses, or even a single word and allow it to take root in you. Seek to live the experience, remembering the encouragement of Ignatius of Loyola to apply all our senses to our task. Smell the sea. Hear the lap of water along the shore. See the crowd. Feel the sun on your head and the hunger in your stomach. Taste the salt in the air. Touch the hem of His garment... As you enter the story, not as a passive observer but as an active participant, remember that since Jesus lives in the Eternal Now and is not bound by time, this event in the past is a living present-tense experience for Him. Hence, you can *actually* encounter the living Christ in the event, be addressed by His voice and be touched by His healing power. It can be more than an exercise of the imagination; it can be a genuine confrontation. Jesus Christ will actually come to you." (Richard Foster. Celebration of Discipline, Harper & row: New York, 1978. Pg. 26) This is the power of meditation.

So now as we close, I'm going to invite you to meditate. I'm going to invite you to contemplate one of the major stories in our tradition. We call it *The Lord's Supper*. As you listen to this story in preparation for the experience in a few minutes, capture the scene as best you are able. Close your eyes. Allow your imagination to take center stage. And feel the presence of Jesus... (John 13:1-15 and Matthew 26:26-30)...

¹ It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

² The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷ Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

⁸ "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

⁹ "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

¹⁰ Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean.

¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

²⁷ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

³⁰ When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Amen and *Amen*.....