

# God Moves... In the Desert

Part 1 of Sermon Series: *God Moves...*

a sermon based on

Luke 4:1-13

(with reference to Deuteronomy 26:1-11)

and delivered on

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First Sunday in Lent (Year C)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Looking around this room – I’m guessing that most of us (if not all of us) have moved at some time in our lives. For some of us that’s been very recent. Some others are facing and impending move. Some of you may have moved from one home to another, but within the same community. You might not have lived anywhere but Cherry Valley. Or maybe the move or moves have been a little wider but still in the Rockford area. Maybe you moved away for a time – for college or basic training and wherever Uncle Sam decided to station you – but home was always still here. Maybe you moved to Cherry Valley from somewhere else in Illinois, or from another state – another country, maybe. Maybe you’ve moved away, and then moved back. For the next several weeks, the sermon theme will be “God Moves.”

We’re doing theme during Lent as we move towards Easter. I want to re-emphasize that – we are moving **toward** Easter. We’re moving **towards** the fulfillment of God’s promise. That “towards” part is important. Our Christian journey is always toward our home in God’s kingdom, toward that place that Jesus prepared for us. Our journey is not a move **away** from sin. It is not a move **away** from worldliness or preoccupation with corporeal matters. The journey will take us away from those things. However, to move **away** just to get away from anything will leave us wandering a wilderness full of hardship and temptation with nothing to encourage us from (to use a Methodist term) backsliding.

In a sense that’s what happened to Israel. Moses led the people out and away from Egypt – Moses led the people out and away from slavery. Yet without a real sense of moving towards God’s promise (It was actually called “the Promised Land”) – without that sense of moving towards God’s promise rather than away from slavery, the people were always complaining and ready to go back to Egypt where they had it “so good.” Even when Moses took them directly to the Promised Land, they were afraid to claim it because the people who were already there were big and scary. So they wandered the wilderness for a generation – for forty years – until those who came to accept their time as slaves in Egypt with nostalgic admiration had died. Only then when moving into the Promised Land meant moving into a land flowing with milk and honey – only when taking those scary steps across the Jordan River meant moving towards a place to settle and towards God’s promise – rather than merely running away – that they were able to enter the Promised Land. And so, that reading from Deuteronomy that we heard from today, talks about how to set up housekeeping – and that the first step is with a blessing. (Just a side note: The United Methodist Church does have a rite for the blessing of a home in our Book of Worship, and I am always happy to do that.)

Now, back to our regularly scheduled programming.

What are we moving towards? In this season of Lent? In our lives? And our relationship with God?

In the context of this sermon series, what is God moving towards? When we look at Scripture, God never moves back. God always moves so that people will find fulfillment in his promise. Sometimes that means being away for a time, but promised home is always the same.

I took a little bit of a detour here talking about Israel’s exodus from slavery in Egypt until actually claiming the Promised Land. I think that was important, for context. So let’s go back to what it means to move; maybe even where we hope to move, and how that plays out in our lives.

First, let’s face it moving is a pain in the rear end. It is. It’s stressful. Just the practical things involved bring on anxiety – things like: finding/collecting boxes, actually packing (and your home gets more cluttered and chaotic as you prepare), setting up utilities, paying deposits when the deposits at your current home haven’t yet been returned, lining up help to move all your stuff (whether that means friends or hired help), trying to prevent breakage of your stuff and the walls as you move it, and finally the challenge of evaluating what stuff to even keep. It’s stressful. It’s trying. It can be disorienting to the point of wondering whether it’s worth it. That’s where knowing where we are moving to – or what we are moving towards is important.

In one sense, as a Christian don't we hope to be "movin' on up to that deluxe apartment in the sky-y-y..."? Of course, even George Jefferson started out living in what we could call slums, that is until he had the "privilege" (sarcasm) of moving in next door to Archie Bunker, before he found that deluxe apartment.

Even in the practical sense, moving on up often means moving on down. It might mean living in studio apartment eating Ramen noodles and mac and cheese while you complete an education that will move you towards a job that will help you fulfill your purpose in life. Maybe it means moving to a hot tropical climate to share the Gospel. Or maybe it means downsizing into a smaller home towards an environment more conducive to your health needs. It might mean moving in with relatives either out of immediate necessity, or as a means of sacrifice your own independence to care for an aging parent. The truth is most of those things might not feel like a move up.

Jesus' first move after being baptized was into the desert. He went out into the desert where we are told he fasted forty days with nothing to eat. God's first move when Jesus was baptized was to lead him there by the power of the Holy Spirit. God's first move was to allow him to face temptation. And he was tempted. Scripture says so. It says, "he was tempted by the devil." (Lk 4:2b). It doesn't say that the devil made some easily rejected offers, but that Jesus was tempted. Think about that.

The longest that I ever fasted was two weeks (fourteen days). After a week and a half (ten days), I lost all spiritual perspective on the fast and could only think about how long before my vow would conclude and I could eat. Jesus fasted for forty days – not fourteen.

He was hungry. So the devil says, "Hey, your fast is over. You know what would be good? How about some nice warm bread? But where are we going to find that out here? Oh yeah, you're the Son of God. You can just give the word and these rocks could become bread." I bet that sounded good. His fast was over. That's what the passage says. It doesn't suggest that the devil was trying to get him to break his fast. There would be no sin in eating. But, you and I couldn't do that. You and I, in the same situation, would have to eat whatever succulents or insects that we could find to sustain us until we left the desert. So Jesus says (quoting Deuteronomy 8:3), "No. One does not live by bread alone." And the devil knows the Bible and that the next words in that verse are "but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." In effect, Jesus is saying "I will trust my Father's provision for my needs in the same way that he provides for the people he sent me to save. I will not abandon my love for them for the sake of a quick meal. Besides, it would just make me sick anyway and you know that." We've seen that in history when starving prisoners in concentration camps were given too much food right away. It's deadly. That's the way of the devil's suggestions. Remember that.

Then we hear, the devil takes him up onto a mountain, shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and says, "Worship me (bend down before) me, and I'll just let you have it. I won't even get in your way. Set your own laws and government. Make them behave." Jesus says, it doesn't work like that, serving God and worshipping him is a privilege. That easy way that you offer would strip that blessing from every soul on earth. "

Finally, the devil takes him to the top of the temple and says, "So you want them to follow you voluntarily. Here's the way to do it. Jump off. You know he wants you to save them. He won't let you die. He'll send his angels to rescue you. Then when the people see that, they'll be convinced. Easy peasy. You won't have to face scorn from the Sadducees and Pharisees. You won't have to be beaten and crucified. In fact, you'll get to live to see it." But Jesus says, "No, I will not dare God to prove himself. Besides, you know as well as I do, that as soon as the generation who saw what you suggest dies, they'll forget and people will be lost."

Jesus didn't take the easy way. He knew that eventually he would have to move to the cross, and that needed to have purpose. We are that purpose. He knew that to go there and prepare a place for us – as it says in John 14 – that his Resurrection included a move through death.

Jesus knew that life for us isn't always easy. He knew that because God blessed us with the capacity for free will that we would face challenges when others misused that gift, and from our own temptation to do so. He knew that for us, sometimes it feels like it's easier just to settle – like it seemed easier for Israel to “settle” in Egypt even after they had become slaves – that sometimes it's just easier to settle, because the promise – the hope – seems so far away – and so difficult to get there. He knew that. But as the Word made flesh, the Word who was with God in the beginning and was God, he knew that God the Father and Holy Spirit would sustain him and will sustain us, and that all we have to do (not that it's easy) but all that we have to do is to trust him and to act on that trust. That's what faith is. It's not belief. It's acting on trust. It's acting on trust for a God who has shown himself faithful.

So that same God who could sustain Jesus for forty days of fasting – that same God who did provide for him in that desert wilderness, can and will most certainly sustain us in our challenges and struggles – even when we're tempted.

As we close, let's go back to moving for a moment. It can be overwhelming. So it helps to be intentional about that transition. It helps to plan and to evaluate. That's what this season of Lent is all about. It's about planning and evaluating our lives so that we can keep our focus on always moving to Easter. When moving, one of the things we need to do is to take stock of what we have, and what we will need when we move to our new home. Lists are helpful for that.

I want to offer you a “list.” When the offering plate comes by, you will see some nails in the plate. Take one. Everybody take one. Keep it with you during Lent. And as you consider moving towards Easter, towards God's promise and the anxiety of what may need to be left behind, put those things on this nail, rub them in. Do that through out Lent and then bring it with you on Good Friday, as God Moves us towards life in Easter. AMEN.