

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 2/10/08
Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

“God In Our Bodies”

From the text: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.”
--Matthew 4

This morning as I prepared for worship I did pretty much the same things that I have done for the past 19 years on Sunday mornings. I awoke at 4 am with two alarm clocks. I brewed the coffee and put in one cream, one sugar. I lit a single candle. And I rewrote and wrote once again these very words. I carried out a ritual, my sermon-writing ritual. You probably did something similar. You walked the dog before dawn for the 3,000th time. You took a run. You got the newspaper and turned right to the sports section. You ate the same cereal you have for the past 20 years. Ritual: sets of individually determined actions which give order, dependability, predictability, stability to life. Humans are very ritualistic. Religion and faith is especially filled with rituals, some ancient, some modern, all creating a common familiar framework for meeting our God.

A story: there once was a man who had ham every Easter Sunday dinner. But before he'd cook that ham, he always took it out of the wrapping, cut it exactly in half, then placed it in two pans in the oven. One year his wife asked, “Why two pieces? Why not just cook it whole.” The husband said, “I'm not sure—that's just how my Mom did it.” So he called his mother and asked, “Why do you always cut the Easter ham in two before you cook it?” and she replied, “Actually I have no idea. That's just how Grandma did it so that's how I do it too. Ask her.” And so he phoned his grandmother: “Why do you always cook the ham in two pieces on Easter. Is it a secret recipe ? Does it make it taste better?” She laughed. “One Easter years ago I bought a ham much too big for one pan so I just cut it in two and placed it in two pans. You aren't still cooking it that way, are you?”

Yale Church historian Jaraslov Pelikan once noted, “Tradition is the living faith of those now dead. [But] Traditionalism is the dead faith of those still living.” He might have said the same thing of what we risk in our Christian ritual: unexamined and unexplained ritual, carried out merely for ritual's sake, because that is the way we have always done it. The danger is such that rituals lose their life, spark, meaning, devolve into lifeless worship, ritualism. So: in these next six weeks of Lenten worship and preaching together we'll pull back the curtain on some of our rituals, the trappings, rites, ceremonies and familiar acts of the Christian life and ask, “Why this ritual ? Why do we do what we do?”

The first and only time I traveled to the Holy Land it was on El Al, Israel's state owned airline. We flew out of New York City on a twelve hour flight to Tel Aviv. The plane was packed, and half of the passengers were highly observant Orthodox Jews. The women were dressed modestly in head scarves and long skirts. The men wore black fedoras and sported long, curly hair locks and full facial hair. They ate kosher, including

highly fragrant gefilte fish! Every four hours right on time, the men rose from their seats, turned towards Jerusalem, placed prayer shawls upon their shoulders, and rhythmically bowed and prayed in Hebrew, the exact same prayers that had been said by faithful Jews for more than 2,000 years. I remember being so impressed by their rituals, especially the physicality, the embodiment of their rituals. The ancient ways they met their God were so physical, in their bones, their very bodies. In the pungent fish they ate. The bobbing of bowed heads up and down. Turning towards the Holy City with their whole torsos. The sing-song voicing of sacred words.

I looked at them as they ritualistically prayed. Then I looked at me, a modern day, “enlightened” American Protestant. With my Red Sox cap and blue jeans, reading a Stephen King novel and drinking a coke. Not very holy! What strikes me is how physical, physical some faith rituals are: the tang of wine on the tongue at communion in the Episcopal tradition; the enthusiastic “Amen!” and joyful singing in African American worship; genuflecting and kneeling in Roman Catholic circles; full immersion soaking wet baptisms in Baptist churches.

Us reformed, “liberal”, mainline, New England Protestants? Truth is we are often not very physical or embodied in our faith rituals. We’re not nicknamed “the chosen frozen” for nothing! Or when we are physical it’s outside of worship: hugs for old friends after the benediction; delicious food at potluck suppers; sweaty days on a Habitat site; youth groups running around fellowship hall as they play games.

We UCC’ers are very good at the head part of faith, thinking faith. That’s why the robe I wear is designed to look like an academic garb for the sermon/lecture by the pastor/professor. Why the pulpit looks like a lectern. Why we are known for Biblical interpretation and go to Bible study.

But what about our bodies and our God? Why are physical rituals central to a vibrant faith? Why when we pray and bow our heads does it somehow feel more pious? Why when we walk forward for communion does it feel like a commitment, a conscious act of “yes!” to Jesus? So—are we willing to be more embodied, more physical in our rituals, our faith? Beyond brain to body? That’s what I ask us to ponder today. An embodied faith: faith in our bones.

That’s the faith we see in Jesus’ journey into the desert. He walks there, doesn’t catch a camel cab! Then: he fasts for forty days; in rituals then such fasting involved no food from sun-up to sundown. Even his temptations and the work of the devil are so physical: Christ is tempted to turn stones into bread and to take a swan dive from the highest point on the Temple. When the devil finally flees angels minister to Jesus. They touch him. They wipe his brow. They feed him food, give him drink. They care for his body.

The body and God and ritual. I think we are sometimes reluctant to connect to God in our bodies for many reasons. Traditional Western thought argues that the body and mind are split, separate, that the mind is more important than the physical shell we call home. Christianity does not have the best track record on sex and sexuality and so much of our traditional religious talk about the body is filled with shame or fear or denial. In Protestant surety we can see a ritual like Ash Wednesday and be tempted to just write it off: “That’s what the Catholics do, not us!” And many of us are downright reluctant to embody our faith so physically, me included. For it is intimate. It is revealing, risky even. Like when the Pilgrim Band or the choir rocks out on a gospel tune or hymn. How many

of us are reluctant to move, to sway, to clap?! I know I feel like my body is frozen. My arms are stuck at my side! I feel so self-conscious about my body.

Yet: God does not merely give us a mind with which to attempt to understand the Divine. God also gave us a body with which to worship the Holy One too. A God of thought, of just ideas, is one that's just too small for me. How about you? So here's a ritual challenge for all of us. In the words of that great theologian Olivia Newton John, maybe it is time for us to get physical, get physical in our faith too, to embody our love for God and not just say it, speak it, but also feel it in our bodies! To embody in physical ritual our intimate connection to our intimate God.

Like the AA person who every night and every morning starts with prayer on his knees. In that act of kneeling he says he is reminded of his place before this big and incredible God. We can try out a forty-day Lenten discipline: give up some food or a physical pleasure or commit to a physical act of worship: a morning prayer walk. We can be more physical in our Christian love for others: embrace our kids more, our spouse or partner more frequently. God's knows we all need human touch. We can bow our heads when we pray or fold our hands or lift them up to heaven. We can join hands around the dinner table and say grace every night. When a hymn excites us we can move! Really! We already know how to think our way to God. Maybe it is time for us to also feel our way to God too: in our very bones.

Physical ritual: may God move us beyond the brain to the body, to worship the Lord our God with all our hearts and all our minds and all our souls and...with all of our bodies. Let all God's people say, "Amen!"