

“Walkabout”

**A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for
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Everyone experiences moments of regret, frustration, and bewilderment in his or her life. I know that I do. I sometimes reflect on the different directions my life has taken over the years with mixed feelings. There have been times when I enjoyed a sense of worth, personal growth, confidence, newly discovered abilities, and having served others well. But, there have also been a number of occasions when I realized that I had made terrible choices that damaged how I viewed myself, placed me in difficult positions, and potentially caused harm to others. It was at those times that I felt I had wasted significant parts of my life.

I am sure the discouraging thoughts and feelings I have described are familiar to each of you. They can cause us great sadness and to even see ourselves as being like the people pictured in the following poem by Robert Service, one of my favorite poets. It is called, “The Men That Don’t Fit In.”

**There’s a race of men that don’t fit in,
A race that can’t stay still;
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
And they roam the world at will.
They range the field and they rove the flood,
And they climb the mountain’s crest;
Theirs is the curse of the gypsy blood,
And they don’t know how to rest.**

**If they just went straight they might go far;
They are strong and brave and true;
But they’re always tired of the things that are,
And they want the strange and new.
They say: “Could I find my proper groove,
What a deep mark I would make!”
So they chop and change, and each fresh move
Is only a fresh mistake.**

**And each forgets, as he strips and runs
With a brilliant, fitful pace,
It’s the steady, quiet, plodding ones
Who win in the lifelong race.
And each forgets that his youth has fled,
Forgets that his prime is past,
Till he stands one day, with a hope that’s dead,
In the glare of the truth at last.**

**He has failed; he has missed his chance;
He has just done things by half.
Life’s been a jolly good joke on him,**

**And now is the time to laugh.
Ha, ha! He is one of the Legion Lost;
He's a rolling stone, and it's bred in the bone;
He's a man who won't fit in.¹**

Are you like the man that Robert Service describes; someone restless, impulsive, dissatisfied, repeating mistakes, and failing to be the person you and others feel you should be? Or do you recognize yourself as being more like the other individuals portrayed in the poem that Service apparently equates as successful, those persons who conform to expectations, quietly plod along in life, and give fully of themselves to whatever they are doing? In reality, your true self probably lies somewhere in between. God has shaped us that way in order for us to become the individuals the Holy One wants us to be.

God has purposely formed our human natures so that the shortest distances between our goals in life are not straight lines, but meandering routes. This idea is affirmed in the third verse of the Twenty-third Psalm, which can be rendered in English as, "He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Psalm 23:3, New International Version). Rabbi Harold Kushner points out that the original Hebrew wording of this verse should be literally translated, "He guides me in roundabout ways that end up in the right direction."² "Roundabout ways," what does the psalmist mean? That certainly doesn't sound efficient does it?

We have been given free will with the capacity to recognize our limitations and to grow beyond them. God has given us great talents and abilities so that we can be more than we are, not just for our benefit, but for the benefit of all. It is through risk-taking that we discover the individuals the Holy One desires we should each be. It is only by journeying through life in roundabout ways that lead to successes and dead-ends, that we better our lives.

Rabbi Kushner observes that straight, easy paths fail to challenge us to recognize strengths and talents or don't allow us the time for them to emerge.³ Ideally, failures and stumbling blocks that cause us to meander through life, force us to stop and think. While they may bring about some chaotic moments, they also open the possibility for creativity, insight, and the acquisition of new skills, as long as we are receptive. Moving through life in roundabout ways is a process of maturity and self-discovery that can be thought of as a spiritual practice.

The native peoples of Australia, the Aborigines, have a ritual that is undertaken by young boys and embodies this concept of roundabout paths. It is called a "walkabout." "Walkabouts" involve adolescent males entering the stark Australian wilderness for six months and living on their own. During that time, they imitate the lives of their ancestors and ascertain the paths that their own lives need to take. Fran Parker states that a "walkabout" is "the move from boyhood to manhood, from carefree child to man of responsibility and a deeply spiritual awakening and self-awareness that happens with solitude, aloneness, exercising survival and instincts, personal growth and other aspects..."⁴ She also comments that a "walkabout" is "a time of gaining confidence in one's own person and abilities."⁵

¹ This poem, "The Men That Don't Fit In," by Robert Service, is reproduced on pages 23-24 of the book, *The Best of Robert Service* (New York: Perigee Books, 1953).

² Harold S. Kushner, *The Lord Is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 72.

³ Kushner, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*.

⁴ Fran Parker. "Walkabout and other Rites of Passage," *My Passion Is Books Blog*, Blog at WordPress.com. <http://mypassionisbooks.wordpress.com/2011/01/04/walkabout-and-other-rites-of-passage-by-fran-pa...>

⁵ Ibid.

The Bible speaks about God using a “walkabout” for an entire group of people, the Israelites of the Exodus. As we heard in today’s scripture reading from Deuteronomy, the Holy One caused the Israelites to wander in the Sinai wilderness, between Egypt and the Promised Land, for 40 years (Deuteronomy 2:7). Why did God do that? The reasons given in Deuteronomy include disobedience of God and a lack of faith in the Holy One. These two things led to the divine penalty of not being allowed to enter the Promised Land until the last persons who had originally left Egypt had died.⁶

Was God actually punishing the Israelites as the author of Deuteronomy contends? Consider the following passages from our Deuteronomy text. In Deuteronomy 1:31 (New International Version), the Holy One is portrayed as saying to the nomadic Israelites before they came to the borders of the Promised Land, “you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place.” Moses also reminds the Israelites in Deuteronomy 1:33 (New International Version) that the Holy One had always gone before the people, “to search out places” for them to camp and to guide them on their desert sojourn as “fire by night and in a cloud by day.” Every step of their journey, God was there, providing a loving, comforting presence and taking care of their needs. Perhaps, as Rabbi Kushner suggests, the 40 years of travel through the wilderness was not used by God for chastisement, but to lovingly and patiently transform the Israelites from a group of dependent slaves into to a self-reliant community of free individuals.⁷

Think about it. The Israelites lived as slaves for generations in Egypt (Exodus 1:8-13). They adapted to the Egyptian culture and the lifestyles of slaves. After their liberation by God and Moses, the first Israelites of the Exodus rebelled against both because they longed for the life they had grown accustomed to under Pharaoh. The passage of Exodus 16:3 (New International Version) tells us how the hungry Israelites lamented in the wilderness, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted.” The people had not yet matured into a group who could take care of themselves or truly trust in God. They were used to living under a pharaoh of oppression and rigid demands. However with time, pride in successes, and reflection upon the lessons of failure, the Israelites were transformed into a people who could determine their own future and stand on their own feet with God’s guidance. This led to God’s determination that the Israelites were finally ready to enter the Promised Land and claim it for their own (Deuteronomy 2:3).

The Exodus is not the only story in the Bible in which God has sent someone on a “walkabout.” The prophets Elijah (1 Kings 19:4-18) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:1-3:27), John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-6), and even Jesus (Mark 1:12-13) were driven by God into the wastelands to undergo their own “walkabouts” of discernment and maturity. It is also true that the Holy One invites all of us to live our lives in a continuous “walkabout.” This is a message conveyed to us in our other scripture reading from Luke 5.

In the story, Jesus is pictured as coming to the Sea of Galilee where he encounters fishermen, including Simon Peter, James, John, and several others (Luke 5:1-11). Biblical scholar John Pilch tells us that the men were probably hired hands for one of the many fishing corporations funded by tax collectors and regulated by the government that existed along the Sea of Galilee.⁸ No doubt, they were poor and had little control over their activities due to

⁶ Christoph Bultmann. “Deuteronomy,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 135-158; and Deuteronomy

⁷ Kushner, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*.

⁸ John J. Pilch. “Work,” in *The Cultural Dictionary of the Bible* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

storms, unfavorable fishing conditions, and debt.⁹ Their lives were ones of frequent failure, regret, and defeated acceptance of their lot in life. Such was the case for Simon Peter and the others in our gospel text.

According to Luke 5:4 (New International Version), Jesus said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” Simon and his partners did as Jesus requested and were rewarded with a huge harvest of fish (Luke 5:6-7). Jesus’ command to “[p]ut out into deep water, and let down the nets” (Luke 5:4) is a metaphor for going deeper into ourselves to discover insights, inner passions, and new abilities, even in the face of failure.¹⁰ In essence, we are called as Jesus’ disciples to live our lives in a state of “walkabout” so we may go beyond the comfortable or restricting boundaries of our lives to become something more. This is one meaning of Jesus’ statement to the fishermen, “from now on you will fish for people.” (Luke 5:11, New International Version).

Fran Parker writes, “Walkabout” is essential for us to learn “personal confidence, sense of identity, or natural world/spiritual world growth. It is something that must be not only learned but experienced.”¹¹ Imagine, what your life could be like, if you celebrated your successes, looked at your mistakes and life’s dead-ends as opportunities for discovery and growth, and took risks to go beyond your own expectations and that of others. Perhaps you would feel happier in life. Maybe you would stop repeating mistakes.

This is a lesson I had to learn. I was once very sad and filled with a sense of hopelessness over my life choices. At age 18 I had intended to go to seminary to answer what I felt was a call from God to ministry. But instead, I found myself being urged by an inner sense to pursue a degree and career in geology. Consequently, my life took a roundabout path of failures and triumphs that I would eventually come to understand as preparation for ministry. You see, when I was younger, I was too immature, insecure, codependent on others, and narrow-minded to be an effective servant of God or Jesus. God guided me into a life-long “walkabout,” as the Holy One did with the Israelites of the Exodus. That time in geology wasn’t wasted. I gained self-confidence and self-reliance, acquired an expanded vision of life, and found I possessed many talents I never knew I had. I only discovered them because I didn’t dwell in the past, and learned to take the time to reflect on my life and to discover something new with each fresh mistake, something I continue to do each day.

Author Greg Anderson writes of our roundabout paths in life, “Focus on the journey, not the destination. Joy is found not in finishing an activity but in doing it.”¹² Sadly, neither of the kinds of individuals described in Robert Service’s poem embraced this truth. For them, it is always about the end of the journey. However, the Israelites of the Exodus, as well as Jesus’ disciples, did give their hearts and souls to their life’s paths and tasks. As a result, they were transformed into people of joy who lived life fully and brought salvation to many

It is my deep wish that you will heed God’s message in our sacred texts today. Live your life in “walkabout” with God as your journey partner. Relish the great moments of your life, but do not linger in them. Honestly examine the times of failure for the lessons they can teach. Recognize the richer purpose and many abilities you possess. Dare to become more than you are and be the person God has gifted you to be. Amen.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bruce G. Epperly, *Holy Adventure: 41 Days of Audacious Living* (Nashville, Tennessee: Upper Room Books, 2008).

¹¹ Parker, “Walkabout and other Rites of Passage.”

¹² Joy of Quotes Blog, “Journey of Life Quotes,” *JoyofQuotes.com*, http://www.joyofquotes.com/journey_of_life_quotes.html.