

“Spiritual Walking”  
Calvary Lenten Preaching Series 2009  
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My dear friends, before I preach, let me say a few words. The greatest privilege of my rabbinate, after serving the members of Temple Israel, many of whom are here today, the greatest honor has been serving alongside the faith leaders of this community. I have met religious leaders in cities much larger than Memphis, but as in so many other fields – whether law, medicine, academia, or non-profit vision – Memphis is a national model when it comes to interfaith partnerships in general and Jewish-Christian relations in particular.

This may be my 8<sup>th</sup> year preaching in this Lenten Series, but it’s the first time I have been sandwiched between two Bishops! - Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson, whose invocation at the Lincoln Memorial during inauguration week was the most moving of all in my judgment (Google it!) and on Wednesday, my good friend named Terry Steib who as Bishop of the Catholic Diocese has done great things in so many fields, from the renaissance of our Catholic schools to interfaith relations.

So given the sequence of preachers at Calvary this Lenten season, this would be the perfect moment to tell you a joke about a minister, rabbi and priest. Instead, I’ll tell you the one about the 76-year-old man who could have been Jewish, Catholic, or Episcopalian. The man goes in for a physical and all of his tests come back with normal results.

The doctor says, “Hal, everything looks great. But how are you doing mentally and emotionally? Are you at peace with God?” Hal replies, “God and I are tight. He knows I have poor eyesight, so he’s fixed it. When I get up in the middle of the night to go the bathroom, poof! The light goes on. When I’m done, poof! The light goes off.”

“Wow, that’s incredible,” the doctor answers. A little later in the day, the doctor calls Hal’s wife. “Ethel,” he says, “Hal is doing fine! But I had to call you because I am in awe of his relationship with God. Is it true that Hal gets up during the night and poof! The light goes on in the bathroom, and when he’s done, poof! The light goes off?”

“Oh, my God!” Ethel exclaimed. “He’s peeing in the fridge again.”

No matter what our age, the body is a marvel. In Judaism, we are supposed to say a blessing every time we go to the bathroom – not in the fridge - but in the restroom. The blessing thanks God for creating us with arteries and veins, openings and closings, for if one of them should fail we would literally not be able to stand up before You (as some of us may have personally experienced and as we all learned from the character Violet in Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory). This daily Jewish blessing ends with the words, “Baruch ata Adonai...Blessed are You, God, Wondrous Fashioner of the human body.”

We are, indeed, wondrously made, aren’t we? Having said that, in the words of the late Rabbi Alvin Fine, “God did not create everything with perfect wisdom. Take the human back for instance!” Or the knees and hips too, I would add!

Are we here just for the physical? Hardly. Even Botox delays the inevitable. So what are we here for? To arrive at some truth claim? Or are our Christian and Jewish truth claims meant to lead us to a greater understanding of God’s world and all who inhabit it?

I recently completed my 13<sup>th</sup> marathon in Houston. It was my bar-mitzvah marathon, and I was struck by two phenomena. First is that age really is just a number when you have your health. So many of you have already taught me that lesson. One of my favorite examples is a congregant named Mary Shainberg who traveled with me through Israel two summers ago at age 90. As my travel companion, she wore me out. And to top it off, Mary just celebrated her adult bat-mitzvah two months ago at age 91. When Mary was asked by her daughter why she insisted on pumping her own gas at a local service station that offers full-service gas for seniors at self-service prices, Mary replied, "Because I can!" So even when the knees and body slow down, people living into their 90s are living proof that what grows never grows old. And maybe that is what motivated me to run the fastest marathon of my life in Houston – over forty minutes faster than when I began this Mike Cody-inspired running journey long ago. That is why a religious life is about a *lifelong* journey of growth, and not simply one age or stage.

If the first thing I learned was that age is just a number if you can keep your health intact, the second lesson learned is that people are capable of misunderstanding the Bible in the strangest of places – even at marathon start lines. Whenever you run one of these long distance races, you invariably see Isaiah 40:31 emblazoned on the back of a runner. "*Those who trust in the Lord,*" Isaiah 40 reads, "*shall renew their strength. They shall soar with wings as eagles, they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not grow faint.*"

One of my favorite rabbis of blessed memory, Sydney Greenberg, posed a great question. "Doesn't Isaiah have the progression all wrong? After all, the progression seems to get weaker as it unfolds. Isn't it a greater achievement to soar with wings as eagles? If we can fly, what kind of achievement is it to run? And if we can run, how much of an achievement is it to walk?" Isaiah, suggests Greenberg, seems to be diminishing the impact of his message by going from the heights of flying to just plain walking!

But Isaiah, *does*, in fact, have it right. There are times when everyone can soar like an eagle – a new President, a new year, a basketball championship run and everybody is soaring, right? As the months go by, though, we all know that those soaring heights are reduced to a jog, because no one can keep soaring forever. "Not even eagles," the rabbi notes.

What happens when we stop flying, and, after a few more years, when we stop running? What then? What is needed at that time, Isaiah teaches, and I would contend what is needed at this time in the life of our nation, are the people who find a way to keep walking no matter what befalls them or anyone around them.

No matter what happens at the NCAAs this Thursday and Saturday in Glendale, think of this biblical verse in relation to the Memphis Tigers and Coach Cal. Twelve months ago we were soaring to the verge of a national championship, literally running toward it for all but two minutes of the season. Then it was snatched away, so what do you do? How can you possibly run after that, how can you walk back to another season in the face of such deep disappointment? If you recall, we weren't flying or running high last April. As Brother Eli Morris of Hope Church articulated so well in The Commercial Appeal, the entire city was in mourning. Memphians could barely conceive of a tournament run last May, yet step-by-step – literally – over the summer and into the fall, Coach Cal and his resilient players moved forward one pace at a time. They walked and walked and walked to where they are now - another Sweet Sixteen.

My dear friends, what is needed at this vexing time in the life of our nation are not the high flyers. We don't need fast runners either. What we need to become are persistent walkers who are able to find a way to renew our faith and strength day after day, week after week, and year after year. Because in tough times, what we need most, as Chris Peck wrote yesterday in The Commercial Appeal, what we

need most is a heavy dose of persistence, just the ability to hang in there, to hold on and keep on walking.

The persistent among us are not the ones who seemingly fly like eagles. Do you know why the bald eagle was chosen on the dollar bill as a symbol of victory? First, because a bald eagle wears no crown like the King of England. The second reason is that a bald eagle is not afraid of a storm; he is strong and, unlike other birds, he is smart enough to soar above it. But we are humans, not eagles! And the persistent among us don't fly! Neither are the persistent among us crazy marathoners like me. The persistent among us are the simple walkers, the ones who never give up hope, and who somehow find the inner strength to keep faith and hope and march on, no matter what.

The fact is, we can all become walkers of this kind. Members of mine in wheelchairs have even taught me that spiritual walking is possible for anyone. The key to becoming a spiritual walker is embedded in a Hebrew word everyone here knows, whether you say it in English "Amen," or its derivative from Hebrew "AH-men." Amen comes from the same Hebrew root word for faith – Emunah – and that A.M.N. root is a foundational term. While we usually translate "Amen" as "so be it," and its cognate, "Emunah" as "faith," in the original Hebrew of the Bible, it also means stability, trust, steadiness through the storm. And that's what faith is all about, isn't it? A walker is steady and a spiritual walker is someone who will not ever let despair overcome hope. We need more spiritual walkers because we must not let despair overcome hope.

Perhaps the steadiest person in America, the one whose composure is virtually unflappable, calm, composed, cool as a cucumber, whether you voted for him or not, whether you like his policies or not, is Barack Obama. "He was born long before he could experience or understand the civil rights movement," said National Civil Rights Museum Freedom Award winner and Congressman John Lewis. Lewis was only twenty-five years old when he led a march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, straight into a line of Alabama state troopers waiting for him. They beat Lewis on the head and bloodied his skull along with ninety other demonstrators who were injured.

It was Rabbi Heschel alongside Lewis who said, "When we walked over that bridge, I felt as if my feet were praying," and it was Lewis, the spiritual walker, who recently said, "Obama has absorbed the lessons and spirit of the civil rights movement, but at the same time, he doesn't have the scars of the movement because of how he grew up. He has not been knocked around as much by the past."

Obama's steadiness that keeps him walking with a deep appreciation for the past, was reflected most movingly away from the camera at the luncheon following the swearing-in ceremony. That same John Lewis the short Congressman from Georgia, who is in my view a hero, approached Obama with a commemorative photograph and asked him to sign it. The President took the photo and wrote on it, "Because of you, John. Because of you. Barack Obama."

Whether your name is McCain or Obama, Smith or Jones, a key to becoming a spiritual walker is clearly perseverance. But toward what should we be walking toward and persevering as people of faith? Toward an appreciation of our heritage and past? Absolutely. But Lent is a time to consider walking toward an even deeper understanding, appreciation and love for one another. And I don't think this should be optional. It's a matter of religious obligation, no matter what your path to God. We are obligated to love one another if for no other reason than we are all created in God's image. If you claim to love God because you love people who are like you but you are derogatory toward others who are not like you, then you have not fulfilled the obligation of what it means to love one another. Being created in God's image also means that we are obligated, as Genesis teaches, to make order out of chaos and to make sense out of a seemingly senseless world at times.

America has given us a Bill of Rights, a system of rights, but our Judeo-Christian heritage has given us something more – a system of obligations – obligations to God, to our selves, and to others. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible we share, for instance, do not speak of rights; they speak of obligations. We are obligated, for instance, to pursue justice. Years ago, when I was teaching bible study at Temple, an adult member of the class and torah teacher himself, Joe Levy, reacted to a question I posed. This was back when the economy was booming and more people than ever before were riding the tide. So I asked the class, “If many are doing well, then why do they and we still feel so helpless and hopeless? Dr. Levy replied, “Because too often we hope for our rights rather than pray to know and remember our obligations.”

Which brings us finally to prayer. Prayer works best if you pray for the strength to meet your obligations. And religion works best if you are grateful simply for being alive to have obligations. Life can be full of hope, even and especially now when times ARE tough, if you hope for guidance from above and within to know what your obligations are.

Perhaps that is why church crowds tend to be older, not because people have more time as they age, but because the older you are, the less you think about your wants and the more you think about your obligations – how you can *make* a difference rather than *doing* something different. I have heard 20s, 30s, 40s, even 50somethings of all faiths ask, “Why go to services if it means missing something else I’d rather do?” or “What do you really get from prayer anyway?”

Prayer isn’t about getting, so if a person is focused on his or her rights, wants, or desires, prayer won’t work because that’s not prayer’s focus. Prayer can bring inner calm and tranquility, yes, but religion in general and prayer in particular are fundamentally about our obligations to self, others, and God. That is why the biblical Hebrew root for prayer, “L’hitpaleil,” is very different from the English or Latin root “to pray,” which is related to the verb “to plead or beg.” The biblical Hebrew root, “L’hitpaleil,” isn’t about begging or pleading, it means “to judge one’s self,” as in “to remember one’s obligations.”

*“Those who trust in the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall soar with wings as eagles, they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not grow faint.”*

So the next time you hear this famous prophetic verse about eagle’s wings, don’t worry if you can’t fly or run. And when you hear the final “Amen” at services each week, don’t worry about running home for your Sabbath lunch whether it’s ham or kosher food. Isaiah is really imploring us just to walk – to walk steady and with faith - emunah, with trust and with hope, with a prayerful sense of obligation to those who came before us and those who will follow when we leave this world.

May Lent summon you to self-reflect on your obligations to God, self, and others. For that sacred task, you don’t have to worry about soaring above or racing past anyone - just walk toward them. Persevering alone and holding hands together we’ll get through this. We really will. Become a spiritual walker and *you* will. And let us say: Amen.