

Uplifting

It was the summer of 1980. I was obviously a much younger man and also much thinner and trimmer. Those of you who can also remember 1980 may recall that there was a North American Mennonite church conference in Estes Park Colorado that summer. I was still living in Ontario at the time, and the youth leader from one of the Leamington Mennonite churches had planned an excursion for a dozen youth and young adults to Estes Park with a stop at the Grand Canyon.

I'm not sure I was all that excited about the conference, but the Grand Canyon caught my attention.

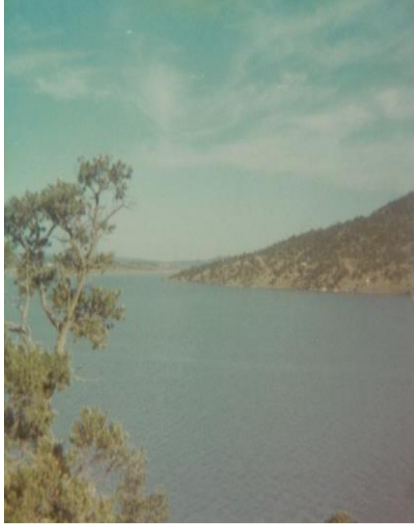
So it was that early on the morning of July 5th we headed out from UMEI in Leamington, stopping in Windsor to pick up a couple more travellers, across the bridge into the USA. I only recall an afternoon stop in Chicago and a night at the Mennonite High School in Iowa. I do remember that we camped a couple of nights, but I have no idea where or how long it actually took us to get to the Grand Canyon. Those details have slipped my memory. You know how those trips are, 12 people in a 15 passenger van, driving and driving. There was visiting, there were Beatles tunes on the tape deck, there was sleeping, there was sight-seeing, pit stops, etc. Jake was the organizer and he and Brad were the only designated drivers, even though a number of us were old enough to drive.

Jake had planned some activities for us. One was to decorate this trailer that we had our backpacks and luggage in.



But as we got into Arizona and closer to the Grand Canyon, it felt like we were definitely heading into the wilderness.

In time, the scenery changed from this:



to this



To this:



I'm pretty sure that the place where we camped for the night when we arrived at the Grand Canyon was in the Canyon parkgrounds. But early the next morning we were up and packed but still had to drive a few kilometres to the rim where our hike to the Canyon floor would begin.



Jake had been there the previous winter and had planned out our route. A shorter, steeper trek of about 7 miles for the way down, and a longer, thought to be less strenuous trek out of about 10 miles. The trip down was fine, lots of talking and joking, picture taking and snacking on GORP – Good old raisins and peanuts, though I'm pretty sure mine contained m & m's or smarties as well.

There were some wonderful views as we made our trek down into the canyon. However, when I showed a friend of mine the pictures I had taken with my pocket, instamatic camera, he commented that you could get the same effect running a water hose through a sand box.



been in a photo album for 40 years.

Hopefully you can see these well enough. They have



We had also packed a lunch and took a break to eat at some point. In the early afternoon we were at the bottom and we unpacked our tents and such from our backpacks, set up our tents, and then went to enjoy the cool of a stream flowing into the Colorado River. I'm pretty sure it was flowing into the Colorado river because we swam or waded to the point where the stream joined the river and I still recall the distinct change in temperature when the cold water of the river met the lukewarm water of the stream. You could literally stand with one leg in cold water and the other in warm water.

We'd also packed along food to cook, pots and pans in which to cook it, and I'm thinking now, that someone may have even had a Coleman stove along on which to cook our supper. We probably had a campfire for the night before turning in.

The next morning began bright and early once again full of promise. But as the day began to warm up, our trek slowly began to feel like a trip out of hell. The temperature rather quickly rose to about 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Jake had suggested to us that we wear pants and long sleeved shirts as opposed to shorts and t-shirts to ward off sunburn and sunstroke. However, with our heavy packs that seemed to get heavier each step of the way, we were more in danger of developing heat stroke and becoming dehydrated. The water canteens we had brought along were far too small. They were empty long before we reached the water stations along the way. And then people would jog past us in shorts and tank tops and I wondered what we were doing.

But as we made our way up, we kept our eyes on the rim, and wished it would get closer quicker.



Here is our lunch break.

We were pretty beat then, and we still had a long way to go. Brad is the one sleeping in the picture. Before we left the picnic area, Brad asked if he could exchange his heavy pack for a lighter one. He took mine but at some point, as he got separate from the group and struggled along, someone who was passing him asked to help him and he gave her my sleeping bag to leave at the rim. That sleeping bag was not like the ones we have today. It was big, bulky and heavier than most today. I never did see that sleeping bag again.

But as we traveled we kept our eyes on the rim, wishing it would get closer quicker.



In the heat of the day and in our desire to get back to the top, when we should have stuck together and helped one another out, we ended up breaking apart as those who could walked at a faster pace. Two of the young women got well ahead of the rest of us. I and another fellow were between them and the rest of the group. We kept our eyes on the rim on our way up. By supper time all but Jake and Brad had made it out. As we gathered together to eat, we wondered if we should go back and check on them. Those who had seen them last reported on their conditions and that they were resting until the day cooled down. We were really starting to get worried when it was dark before the two of them, almost literally, crawled out of the canyon.

I think someone who had passed Jake and Brad on the trail had reported to the medical station and so they may have had help getting out. They had a doctor or medic take a look at them who diagnosed them as severely dehydrated and prescribed rest and lots of cranberry juice.

But the ordeal wasn't over yet. We still had to find a place to stay for the night. I'm sure the original plan was to finish our hike in plenty of time to go back to our campsite and set up camp. But no one was in any shape or any mood to do that, particularly Jake. But still, Jake was the one in charge and he was the driver. How far we had to drive and how he managed to stay awake is beyond my recollection. Eventually we got to a city where there were hotels, Jake and some of the group went to check it out. One of the fellows really had to use the washroom and was a bit disgusted when, after he used the washroom in one of the rooms, Jake decided to check out the hotel across the street instead. I remember the fellow being so concerned that he had removed the "sanitized for your protection" wrapper from the toilet seat in order to use the toilet, and that it was now no longer sanitized for the next guest.

Somehow, we managed to make it to Estes Park a day or so later and spent the next week at the conference before heading back home again. Other than the one visit in a police car, the rest of the trip was uneventful.

The writers of the Lenten materials for this morning write, "Wilderness pushes us to our limits." As you may have been able to tell from the pictures, we were definitely in the wilderness and it certainly pushed us to our limits. Some more than others.

The Old Testament reading for today, which we didn't read is one of the many stories of the Israelites in their wilderness experience, complaining and God punishing. Not quite this one, but something like this.



I'm sure we sounded pretty much like them on our trek out of the canyon.

But in the Exodus and Numbers stories, we hear them grumbling over and over again and God grows tired and angry with the people and over and over again threatens to wipe them all out. In this case, the authors of the story say that God sent poisonous snakes to punish them, and only after they cry out to Moses for help, to apologize for their complaining, does God instruct Moses to create a bronze serpent, to hang it on a pole and anyone who was bitten by a snake only needed to look upon the bronze serpent and they would be saved.

Now an interesting aspect of this story is that that hundreds of years later, just prior to the exile of Israel into Assyria, that King Hezekiah, king of Judah, in an effort of religious reform, set about destroying the idols and altars to other gods. And at that time, it is said in 2 Kings 18, that he found and broke into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made because the people were making offerings to it as well, calling it Nehushtan. Nowhere else in the Bible, other than in John 3 is the bronze serpent mentioned. So how was it that it survived those centuries and had become an object of worship? And why?

Well, obviously, because it had a significant place in Israel's history. As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, people only had to look on it and live.

So when Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3, that just as Moses lifted up that serpent in the wilderness, so the son of man would be lifted up, "that whoever believes in him will have eternal life," was he even thinking of this part of the story?

As I've pondered these stories over the past several months, I spent some time mulling over this bronze serpent and how it seemed to find a place among the Israelite people and Jesus' reference to it had me going for a while.

It's evident that throughout Church history, the cross may have been used in ways that it was never intended to be used perhaps not unlike the bronze serpent in Israelite history. Beginning with Constantine and perhaps even before that, continuing on through the crusades, into the Reformation and the persecutions endured by the Anabaptists, and on into the colonization on at least several continents. And even into the politics of today where the separation of church and state is a misnomer.

But maybe that's a discussion for another time. I'll just let you have a look at these comics and leave it at that.





Maybe all Jesus really intended to do was to draw the comparison. Just as the lifted up serpent in the wilderness saved people from death when they looked upon it, so also those who look on and believe in the one who was raised up on the cross would have eternal life and be saved in their wilderness experiences. That is the simple truth. It is what our faith is based upon. It is the basic tenet of our faith.

It was necessary for scripture to be fulfilled, for salvation to be made available to all. Now we won't even get into all the atonement theories that actually tried to explain why Jesus had to die on the cross, whether to appease an angry God who needed a sacrifice to atone for the sins of humanity, or whether in his actions Jesus is the conquering hero, defeating sin, death and hell in one fell swoop, etc.

Jesus, in his life and ministry showed us that he was not at all about being a conquering hero, but a humble servant. It's not about symbols that cannot save us. He wanted us to know that God wants us all to know how much God truly loves us and wants us to love one another. That's supposed to be everyone's favourite Bible verse, "For God so loved the world ..."

Jesus did not come to condemn, but to save. And so we are saved by his actions, we are saved by believing in him, we are saved by obeying his teachings. We are saved when our hearts turn from all the evils of our world, many of which have been perpetrated by the church.

Paul, in Ephesians 2 says that humanity was dead because of the ways in which it followed the rulers and powers and spirits among us; the passions and desires that have dictated our lives.

The people I work with have learned all this. They've had their share of wilderness wanderings and many of them spend a good chunk of their lives trying to get out of the wilderness. They have the desire to live according to what Jesus taught us, but they also know how difficult that is because the passions and desires and other things keep dragging them back. And the system keeps dragging the back down and keeping them down.

But thanks be to God, many also recognize that they don't have to fight those battles on their own. There is a God who walks with them, who helps them when they call upon God. And they know that by God's grace, they, too have been raised up. Uplifted to the heavenly places. Uplifted to know the immeasurable riches of grace through faith. No matter the outcome, they know God is with them. They know that they have been saved by grace through faith, not by any one thing that they can do.

In Christ, God has done it all for us, we are simply asked to accept and believe that fact and follow in the footsteps of Christ.

But this pandemic is something like we've never seen. It's tested us in so many ways. It's felt so often that we're trapped in a deep pit, and every time we get a glimpse of hope, that we think we might be climbing out, we get dragged back down again emotionally, spiritually, mentally and even physically.

Yet, we have an uplifting faith. As Christ was lifted up, so we are lifted up into heavenly places, but we are also called to lift up those around us. To feed the hungry, visit the sick and the dying, care for the poor, visit those in prison and help those who have been in prison.

This past week, I submitted a grant application that could potentially bring our community and our province the means to make a difference in the homelessness, the over-incarceration, ultimately remove the racism in our province, in our country and our world and to work toward a more just society. It could help us to make slightly larger, perhaps even vastly larger steps than the small steps we've been taking in the past. We now wait upon those who make decisions about these things, as they weigh the varied applications that they will have received. But whatever the outcome, we may have started a movement all the same as people and agencies have come together to explore the issues and to talk together about making a difference in the world around us.

There are people wandering around in their wildernesses that are not of their own making. Some are in literal wilderness while others, like us may experience spiritual wildernesses. We can help each other find our way out. We can be like Moses with the Israelites, or Jake with our small group in the Grand Canyon. But we need to recognize that it is better to uplift one another, to journey together and to make it through to the other side.

We've heard that a lot in the past year, we're in this together, there will be better days. We're beginning to hear it again as more and more people are being vaccinated. But let's not put our faith and trust in the creations of human hands, even hands guided by God. But let us, together, continue to ensure that we are in this together. That we need to continue to show compassion to one another, respond to one another in kindness, be concerned about others not just ourselves.

We have the means though to change the world. As we have been lifted up, may we also lift up those around us. May we be instruments of change, even as Christ brought change into our world. Amen.