

The surveys are back and thank you all so much for taking the time! Let's continue the conversation...Sunday's sermon was about mountaintop experiences opening our hearts and going back down the mountain to make ourselves and our church all that we can be.

Continuing in that vein, the Lenten Study will be reflecting on who we are as a church and where we want to go. I will be using David Ray's books on 'small church' to guide us. Please join me at 4:00 Friday afternoons, beginning this Friday, February 12, through Lent to begin this important journey together.

The Pastor Parish Relations Committee will be announcing an open meeting to discuss the results of the surveys soon.

Many of the people interested in the Open and Affirming Committee are out of town this week and next. Open and Affirming meetings will begin at the conclusion of the Lenten Study and will meet Friday afternoons at 4:00 beginning Friday, April 1.

Ash Wednesday Service: 4:30 PM at Union Church New Harbor Methodist Church and Bristol Mills UCC joining us.

Friday, Feb. 12, I will be in New Harbor for snackpacking Friday at 11:30. In my office or making visits until 3:30. Lenten Study at 4:00-5:00.

DON'T FORGET THE BENEFIT CHURCH SUPPER: Saturday, February 13 at 5:30 in the Union Church Parish Hall and Community Center. Bring a sharing dish and a smile! Dessert will be provided.

HEBREW SCRIPTURE Exodus 34:29-35

EPISTLE 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

GOSPEL READING Luke 9:28-43

MESSAGE *The Fruit of the Spirit*

Pastor Beth Hood

Someone once said that throughout our lives, we seek to learn who we are and who we want to be.

That was on my mind as I packed my bag for Israel. I wondered what my 'mountaintop experience' would be. I prayed I would have one.

Walking through Yad Vashem was a powerful and devastating experience. Would it happen at the Church of the Nativity? A wonderful moment, but lost in the almost Disneyland demeanor of many of those there. At the Holy Sepulcher? Lost when the gatekeeper was more concerned about whether the gentleman ahead of me was wearing long pants and snatched my pashmina for a leg covering.

I think I came the closest in Joseph's workshop and Shepherds' Field. Both places of serenity and strength ...and places where I was able to feel alone.

The moment that I was changed...that I began to question who I was and what I believed in... occurred at the end of a long and exhausting day sitting in a classroom. Hardly a mountaintop experience but that was when the sand beneath my feet shifted.

Perhaps sheer exhaustion was enough to open my heart...let down my defenses and to hear my own thoughts and words coming back to me. And, as awful as this sounds, to hear them as intolerant and uncompromising. To find them hateful.

That's what mountain top experiences do. They open our hearts. When I went to Israel, I had never thought sympathetically about the Palestinians. But that is a whole other sermon that I look forward to sharing with you at another time.

Peter, James and John went up the mountain with Jesus to pray. "Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings..."

Peter had his mountaintop experience and wanted to stay there. It is good to go to the mountaintop. And it is good to rest there and have your heart opened. But Jesus knew that the work, the mission, the way to the cross was at the bottom of the mountain.

The surveys have come back. Thank you! And if we take them at face value, we are good. It is tempting to 'stay there'. It is tempting to bask in the upbeat answers. It is tempting to welcome new friends and accept that they are here because we are good. And we are grateful for their fellowship.

But my friends, there are also people leaving and that breaks my heart. We have to ask why. We have to ask what we can do so that all people feel welcome and wanted here. We have to let them know that they are needed here.

Yes, it is tempting to stay on that mountain. But there is work to be done.

If we are honest, we have to admit there is dissension in this family. Dissension that challenges us to seek out, once again, who we are and who we want to be.

For openers, I know that I must continue to grow.

When we have people leaving because we are not all that we can be, because we are comfortable sitting on that mountain top basking in what is comfortable and known, then it is time to come down from the mountain. It is time to shake things up.

There are demons to be fought at the bottom of that mountain. Maybe not demons, but questions to be asked and answered honestly. Steps to take and changes to be made. Energy to be found... within us.

In the midst of teaching and healing, Jesus has called his followers to stop and pray, to be open to and strengthened by God's unexpected and indescribable grace, instructed by the voice of the Stillspeaking God, and empowered to continue on the path of Jesus, no matter where it leads...

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, the time of year when we look at our lives and do the hard work of being honest about things that might be keeping us from growing deeper in our relationship with God and with each other.

I challenge us during this season of Lent to do this critical and honest work as a community.

The experience on the mountaintop with Jesus caused Peter, James and John to really look at where they were going. And how they were going to get there.

Given where we are today, can we ask any less of ourselves? Simply stated, “Where are we going? And how do we get there together?”

As I have asked myself, I ask you: What is your role in getting us there?

If for example, we want more energy in our Sunday service as some have said, what does that mean to you? How can your talents help contribute to a renewed sense of energy and belonging?

As we move closer to Holy Week, to the Resurrection, I hope you will all join me in looking deeply and honestly at ourselves and our community of faith that we might be worthy of all that Jesus suffered for us on that dark Friday and ready to rise again with him on that radiant Sunday.

Uncomfortable? You bet! I know that I am and know others are as well. That tells us that the survey has opened up the right conversation. Let’s take full advantage of this moment.

Yes, we are all seekers. And these are all questions to explore together in love and hope during this Lenten season.