

Congregational Church of the Messiah

Third Sunday after Easter

April 13, 2008

“Living as a Pilgrim—Not a Tourist”

Luke 24:44-55

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What we give to life is more important than what we get out of life. Tourists go, see, and return satisfied if they have seen something of interest and have not become sick or tired of traveling.

The pilgrim also travels but then often settles, choosing to improve a place rather than just leave it as it is.

Easter is the beginning of the exciting pilgrimage of men and women whose minds and hearts caught on fire when the Spirit of God filled them. After Easter, Jesus walked with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus and opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

Understanding the meaning of scripture is far more than hearing a word or defining it. Knowing what the scriptures mean is not always easy. To understand fully, we must research thoroughly and catch the spirit of the person writing or saying the scripture.

Even getting to know Moses, one of the famous personalities in the Bible, can take years of study and effort to learn how Moses thought as well as knowing the things he did.

As many of you know Charlton Heston passed away April 5 at age 84. He was an outstanding actor, first in Cecile B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments*, which came out in 1956. The papers of that day reported Heston being interviewed by then *LA Times* religion editor Dan Thrapp.

According to the interview, Charlton Heston prepared to play the part of Moses by filling his mind with information about Moses, going to Mt. Sinai and places Moses had lived, and learning who Moses was. Charlton told the reporter that he truly wanted to “understand Moses well enough to believe in his portraying of him.”¹

Heston was willing to make a sincere effort to open his own mind to try to understand the mind and heart of that giant of a man, Moses. To a great extent, Charlton was able to do so. We all, through him, got an amazing glimpse of what Moses himself was like.

Charlton Heston joined First Congregational Church of Los Angeles that same year, 1956, and also had his son baptized there.

¹ Padilla, Steve. Heston Wholly into Moses. *LA Times*, April 12, 2008: p. B2.

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Three years later, the Annual Meeting of National Association of Congregational Christian Churches was held at the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles. Chairman of the executive committee was Harry R. Butman. Moderator was Henry David Gray. One of the speakers was Charlton Heston and what a deep, penetrating voice he had. His eyes looked straight at you. His powerful hands matched his friendly manner. You were in the presence of an exceptional person.

Now, years later, I read in Steve Padilla's article, with excerpts from Dan Thrapp's interview, what made the difference for Charlton Heston. In his words to Dan Thrapp Heston said, "There is something of Moses in everyone of us – the more there is the better we are.

"It is interesting to note that once Moses climbs Mt. Sinai and talks to God, there is never contentment for him again. That is the way it is with us. Once we talk to God, once we get His commission to us for our lives, we cannot be again content.

"We are happier. We are busier. But we are not content, because then we have a mission – a commission rather."²

Moses was an agent for the divine but was human himself.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus had their minds opened to the meaning of the scriptures.

The experience changed them from being tourists seeking the least discomfort into pilgrims—persons with Good News—to share with others.

The focus was on using the information and understanding that God had given them, showing, and talking about the forgiveness that comes through repentance. God is a God of love and understanding, who seeks to have us live an abundant life.

We can identify with the life and teachings, the suffering and death of Jesus through intellectual learning, which then becomes heart-changing conviction.

Charlton Heston was a witness—not in the traditional religious way of thinking that you had to be a preacher or religious fanatic but in the more Biblical way—of living one's faith and not being afraid to talk about it.

We are God's witnesses as we go about whatever we are called to do. God is with us encouraging us to change whatever needs to be changed, to leave alone or enhance whatever is already doing the Lord's work, and the insight to recognize the difference between the two.

² ibid

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Pilgrims are willing to leave the familiar and seek the adventure of living for God in new and creative ways. Using all of their minds, all of their hearts and all of their strength, pilgrims seek ways to help the self-giving love of God become real in the hearts and minds of people today.

Our attitude toward life greatly influences how we live. In some ways, it is like the difference between persons who do not know how to play the piano and the well-trained pianist who creates beautiful music using a piano. No one claims that the piano makes music by itself but rather as the result of a person who knows how to play it.

Charlton Heston knew how to play Moses because he had come to know Moses. We need to do the same with Jesus Christ. We can learn and receive that same positive spirit toward all of God's creation that Jesus had. It can change our outlook on life in fundamental ways that are good, healthy, and long lasting.

Life can be rough and filled with harsh, realities and difficult decisions. Life can be approached with thoughts of gratefulness to God and thankfulness for little miracles of beauty that lie all around us and often above us when we lift up our eyes to the hills or out to sea.

Choosing how to live the gift of life can make all the difference to us and to others we care about. I will never forget the story of the teacher who went to homes to help children keep up with classroom assignments when they were ill.

One afternoon a routine call came in requesting a visit for a fourth grade boy at a local hospital. The visiting teacher took down the boy's name and room number and was told by the boy's teacher on the other end of the line, "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now, and I have sent over his assignments. I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework so he doesn't fall behind the others."

It wasn't until the visiting teacher got outside the boy's room the next day that she realized it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a young boy so horribly burned and in great pain. She felt that she couldn't just turn and walk out, so she awkwardly stammered, "I'm a visiting teacher. Your classroom teacher from school sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs." They went through the lesson.

When she returned the next morning a nurse on the burn unit asked her before she went into the room, "What did you do to that boy?"

Before she could finish a profusion of apologies, the nurse interrupted her, "You don't understand. We've been worried about him, but ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live again."

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When asked about it later the boy explained he had completely given up hope until he saw that teacher. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. With joyful tears, he expressed it this way: “I figured that they wouldn’t send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?”³

“Hope without an object cannot live.”⁴

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were discouraged, confused, disillusioned. They had hoped that the Messiah would be the Savior who had come from God to save them. He was dead, and they did not have any hope left. Where was God when they needed Him? Then the Stranger on the road began to explain how God was revealing Himself through the prophets in the Old Testament who predicted that the Messiah would come as a Suffering Servant, not as a military king. The Stranger explained to them how Jesus had told them He would need to suffer and would be crucified but on the third day would rise.

The Stranger opened the minds and hearts of the disciples by explaining how different parts of the Old Testament foretold the new teachings that Jesus had given them. The two disciples comprehended connections they had not known before.

That awakening gave them a whole new intellectual understanding of what God was saying in the scriptures. And at the same time, they realized “their hearts burned within them” in the presence of this unexpected Stranger and the great awareness of the Spirit of God working within them.

“The mind is a fire to be kindled, not a vessel to be filled.”⁵

As Charlton Heston immersed himself in writings about Moses, as he sought to get inside the mind and heart of that great man of God, he was able to take on some of those tremendous characteristics that made his performance in the *Ten Commandments* so successful, effective, meaningful, and entertaining.

We do not have to go to Mt. Sinai, Jerusalem, or anywhere else to begin now to become witnesses to the coming of the Resurrection joy in our lives. In fact, Jesus told his own disciples to “stay in the city until you receive power from on high.” (Luke 24:49b)

Applying the triumphant power of God’s love does not require a far country. For us here, I suggest it starts with three things:

Realize God calls us to be pilgrims in mind and heart by expressing God’s forgiveness and love in every way we can and wherever we are. We are called to be pilgrims to plant faith through actions of consideration and love for one another. Each of us has our own

³ Hewitt, James S. *Illustrations Unlimited*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1988, page 292-293

⁴ Ibid Samuel Taylor Coleridge, p. 291

⁵ Ibid Plutarch

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ways of sharing the joy of the Resurrection with others.

Second, God calls us to be gracious respecters of others whose faith and hope is in the Resurrection but who may choose to express their faith in a way different from our own.

And finally, God calls us to be faithful in all ways. When difficulties arise, tough decisions may have to be made.

God calls us to do our best, not to be perfect. His love for us is perfect and everlasting. God's faithfulness brings us through every dark time into the everlasting light of His Presence.

We can live as pilgrims seeking and expressing His love here and now, for we can get to know and believe in Jesus just as much as Charlton Heston came to know and believe in Moses who lived thousands of years ago.

Scripture tells us, "Ask, and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. For everyone who asks receives. And he who seeks, shall find, thus saith our God." (Matthew 7:7-8)

Amen.