

“Taking the Long Way Around”
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In Sue Monk Kidd’s book *When the Heart Waits*, she tells the story of the time when Sweet, who looked after Sue (and her brothers and the house in which Sue was raised), pointed out a wheelbarrow that was somewhere on her grandmother’s property; in the wheelbarrow were hundreds of tadpoles swimming in rain water. Sue and her brothers race inside and ask for three jars. And then, the grandmother appears in the door. “Girls don’t catch tadpoles,” she says with a laugh. “Sue, you come along with me, and I’ll teach you to play “Chopsticks” on the piano.” And her brothers dash off to the wheelbarrow, and Sue ends up at the piano bench. A few days later, Sue and Sweet were out for their frequent walk to the city park about four blocks from her house. But that day, Sweet takes her hand and starts in the wrong direction. “We’re taking the long way round,” she said. About six blocks into the long way around, Sweet stops beside a ditch swollen with water and tadpoles. She pulls a Mason jar from her pocket, one with nail holes in the lid. “Now aren’t you glad we took the long way around?” she says. “Ain’t no tadpoles the short way.” Kidd writes: “Inside my head I still could hear my grandmother’s words – “Only boys catch tadpoles.” Only boys. I hesitated, but Sweet nudged me with the jar. Soon I was elbow deep in the brown water, chasing after the rich, darting life before me. I was reveling in a new universe; it was one of the grander times of my girlhood. It was the day I learned to challenge the tight, tidy categories of what was expected and possible in my world. Like the tadpoles, I was molting into a new being.” (Page 18, 19)

As I did last week, I’ll state up front the take-home assignment for the second week in Lent: Listen to the voices in your head; I’ll listen to the voices in my head. If the voices are too limiting, chances are you and I are not “molting into a new being.” We must listen for the Voice that says “take the long way around.”

The lectionary readings assigned to this Sunday remind us of the importance of the long way around. The First Testament reading from Genesis, chapter 15, which we did not read, concerns Abraham and Sarah’s long way from Iraq to Palestine. We are told that the Lord’s word came to Abram, even before his name is changed to Abraham, “Don’t be afraid; I am your protector. Your reward will be very great.” But I suspect he was afraid most every day. Who wouldn’t have been? And his reward was a long time coming. The epistle lesson (Philippians 3:17-4:1) we read together reminds us that our citizenship is in heaven, which I doubt means that our future mailing address is a dozen light years away from Clallam County. But it does mean, St. Paul states, that we are part of a long and mysterious process of transformation, “from humiliation to glory.” I’m not exactly sure what that means, but it reminds me of something we might find in a ditch swollen with rain water and tadpoles. “Stand firm,” says Paul, stand firm in this long process, because there ain’t no life the short way.

The long way, it turns out, is the way of the Christ. “I must be on my way,” he says, “because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather you together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” (Luke 13:34) The Brooding God? Well, to the degree God broods, it is a decision to take “the long way around.” This should not surprise us. Noah, you’ll remember, waits for the flood to recede. Daniel waits through the night in a den of lions. Sarah broods in her barrenness in the hope she might become a mother hen. Israel waits, walks and wanders in

Egypt and then in the desert, and then in Babylonia, and, as far as I can tell, she is still waiting. Are not the Psalms filled with waiting and hen-like brooding? And the teachings of Jesus? What about the ten maidens who wait and watch? And my favorite parable, remember the waiting father, who waits and waits and waits as one of his two wayward sons takes the long way home? This is what we know of Jesus, which is why we call him the Christ, I think. The one who takes the long way around to Jerusalem. The one who longs to enter our own waiting, ready and willing to pull us in under his wings. Christ: our brother, the brooding Hen.

Thoreau once wrote: "Nothing can be more useful to us than a determination not to be hurried." What Thoreau had in mind, I think, was that the long way is not determined by distance but intention. In his journal dated February 8, 1857, Thoreau wrote: "You think I am impoverishing myself by withdrawing from people. But in my solitude, I have woven for myself a silken web, a chrysalis, and once nymph-like, I shall burst forth a more perfect creature." And this is what we need to hear on this second Sunday in Lent. During these days of great intention, we walk more slowly whenever we can, just in case we see a bunch of tadpoles in a ditch, or maybe a cocoon, or better yet we discover that we are tadpoles.

I want to end with a story I recently found in an old journal. About five years ago, I was midweek into a five-day retreat, sponsored by the Academy for Spiritual Formation. It was Wednesday afternoon, the lecturer had just ended, and had sounded the bell that signaled two hours of silence would begin. On my way out of the room, I stopped by the tables covered with books for sale, and spent the next several minutes dipping in and out of the ones I thought I might purchase. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a woman moving back and forth, in front and behind a room divider; back and forth, back and forth. I had watched her before, but just casually; she was from California and one of the 20 or so individuals on the same retreat. On that Wednesday, I watched for about a minute until I couldn't any longer. I moved to her, tapped her on the shoulder, and said: "Can I help?" And she replied: "Please, I'm kind of lost." So I walked her about 100 feet or so and she said, "OK, I can take it from here." She had a couple of things in her hands, so I said, "I'll call the elevator down; it's right here." And she replied: "That's OK, I'll take the steps." And so, before I returned to the book table, I watched her move to the door that would lead her to a staircase that ascended three full stories. It was the long way around to get out of the lecture room and back to wherever she wanted to go. And it was the scary way around, because being blind she would be in danger if she didn't walk slowly and with real intention. And so that's how she walked those steps, I suspect, several times a day, for the entire week.

Now, if a 70-something year old blind woman can take the long way around, I suspect we can also. Don't you think?