

## Lent: Our Annual Vision Quest

Dr. Jon Pahl

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Union Congregational Church, Green Bay

Grace to you and peace, from God, our Creator--who invites us to see with the vision of children of light.

It's an honor and a joy to be here with you this morning; God-willing, the first of many such mornings!

How many of you gave up something for Lent? Let's see a show of hands. How many of you tried to give up something and didn't succeed? And, finally, how many of you thought about *maybe* trying to possibly give up something for Lent?

I'm in that last camp. I've never been very good at Lenten discipline, or--to use the fancy theological word, I've never been very good at ascetic practices, like fasting. It's not that I don't see their value. I'm writing the biography of a Turkish Muslim preacher, Fethullah Gülen. He's been in the news a bit lately, and like most faithful Muslims he fasts for the month of Ramadan from sunrise to sunset. From studying his life, I've come to see how for some people there can be real value in that practice.

But I don't think fasting or giving something up is what Lent is all about. Instead--I think Lent is about clarifying our covenant. As our first reading for today put it, God has written a law--which is what a covenant was in the ancient world, in our heart. Lent is our season to clarify that covenant. Lent is our season to examine and study and clarify the state of our relationship with God, deep in our souls, or in our heart, at the core of who we are as a person.

Among the indigenous peoples of the world--Menominee and Oneida and Lakota and Igbo and Yoruba--there was a formalized way to study the state of one's relationship with the spiritual world, too. They called it a vision quest. Sometimes, this vision quest would be a rite of passage for a young man or woman who needed to clarify their purpose in life. But a vision quest could be undertaken whenever you needed to get greater clarity in life. Lent is our annual vision quest.

There are lots of examples of vision quests in the history of religions. The one I know best, having done it several years ago, is from the Lakota people--most of whom now live in the Dakotas and Wyoming. A Lakota vision quest starts with a sweat lodge ceremony. How many know what a sweat lodge is? A sweat lodge is like a sauna or steam bath--only much, much hotter. A small hut--think rounded ice shanty, is constructed out of bent tree branches over which skins (nowadays sometimes tarps) are lain. A small flap near the ground is the entry point into the lodge. Just beside this entry point a huge fire is blazing, into which big stones are put until they become white hot. People then go into the hut after prayer, kneeling or sitting cross-legged on the

ground. Then one person--the gatekeeper, brings the stones into the lodge one by one. The stones are welcomed as grandfathers and grandmothers--because they are ancient. Then the flap is closed. Sage or sweetgrass is ground onto the stones, and water dripped on them, and they hiss, releasing steam. The heat becomes incredibly intense. Songs are sung, and prayers offered. And you sweat. When I finally crawled out of the sweat lodge after maybe a half-hour of prayers, I couldn't possibly have stood up: I was drained. It was a near-death experience.

And then, among the Lakota, the vision quest proper begins. After having been purified in a sweat lodge, a person on a vision quest would go to a remote place--usually a mountain, where they would sit for days at a time with no food, no drink, no guests other than those that nature sends your way. In a very short time, after having had your body robbed of vital fluids in the sweat lodge, you begin to notice things differently there on the mountain. Sounds seem sharper. Any movement grabs your attention. The breeze, or rain, or sun caresses your skin. You begin to see with the eyes of your heart. And you discover what the ancestors from the spiritual world want for you; you clarify your covenant. Lent is our annual vision quest.

I'll get back to that point--and our gospel, in due course, but to do so I'll tell you what I learned on my vision quest. Today is, after all, your introduction to me, so I hope it's alright if I share with you a story from my life. My vision quest was a little unorthodox--and it's a story I first told in my book *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces*. It happened when I was in South Dakota--the land of the Lakota, to celebrate my godson Rich Krueger's graduation from high school. And on the Saturday of that celebration--it was a glorious sunny June morning, I sat on the Krueger front porch in the foothills of the Black Hills with my Dad, Fred, and soaked up some rays. I was reading a book by the historian of religions Mircea Eliade about "sacred space," and after a couple of hours of sun and reading I decided to go for a little hike. So--I took off across the gravel road, in my sneakers and shorts, no shirt, just to take a walk in the woods. My uncle Guy pulled out of his driveway as I was setting out--he was going to get some chairs from church, and he tooted on the horn and called me over to his pickup truck. "Jon--don't you want some boots on out there? There's rattlesnakes, you know?" I shrugged, said I'd be ok--and then walked very gingerly through the meadow across the street from their house to get to what looked like a trail winding around the side of a hill.

There was a trail, and I took it. I walked along the base of the hill for maybe fifteen minutes--my body breathing deeply, smelling the sap from the pine trees that filled the air. And then I saw a dry gully, an old wash-out, running down the side of the hill--and I decided to climb it. So I did. Another fifteen minutes, and I was near the top of hill. I saw over to my right, through some blown over trees, a rock outcropping in the sun. I crawled toward it. And discovered there a rock ledge--with maybe three-hundred feet of empty air below me. I learned later it was called "Stagebarn Canyon," because there used to be a way-station for stage coaches at the bottom.

So, I sat there--in my tennis shoes, no shirt--skin red from the sun and exercise--with my feet dangling out over 300 feet of empty air below me. And I sat there. It was beautiful.

And then I saw the bird coming towards me across the canyon. I had just been reading about sacred space, and I knew that a visitation from the “winged ones” was a particularly auspicious thing--they represented vividly the spiritual world in their freedom; they were like angels, with their wings. And so I paid close attention to this bird, as it came closer to me. It was big--with a wingspan larger than my own. And it soared beautifully--dipping and diving and turning with such grace that I couldn't help but be awed. And then there was another bird coming, too. And another. And two more. All told, soon there were five huge birds in the blue sky over stage-barn canyon, circling and soaring right above me. I was transfixed with awe; I'd never seen anything like it.

And then, I noticed, the lead bird was coming closer--much closer. I could see the individual feathers on his wings. I could see her eyes--beady, hungry. I could see the beak--hooked, for tearing flesh--with a bright pink tongue. And I could see those talons--pointed and sharp, extended, reaching for me... I was lunch!

But I could not speak. I felt paralyzed. All I could manage was to clap my hands....and the lead bird vaulted up, and then just as quickly flew back down. It was maybe fifteen feet away from me. I could not move. I clapped once more--and before I could wait to see what the bird did, I marshaled the strength to do a backwards somersault away from the bird, off the edge of the rock ledge, rolling twice--now completely unafraid of any mere rattlesnakes, and wound up propped up against a small birch tree, leaning sideways--looking up to see if my tormentor was still there. It wasn't. The bird had begun flying away, and one by one the other birds followed, leaving me panting and breathless and terrified like I had never felt before in my life. I felt hunted.

Almost immediately, I left that place. I hurried back down the mountain--as quickly as I could, almost running to get back to my aunt Joanie and uncle Guy's home. “There were some big birds up there on the mountain,” I told Guy, no doubt fear still oozing through my voice. “Probably Turkey vultures,” he said, “although maybe Eagles--did they have a white head?” “They didn't,” I recalled. “Vultures, then,” Guy said. Gradually my heart started to slow down, and I returned to something approaching normal. But what I've learned from this unorthodox vision quest has stayed with me for the rest of my life. I'll come back to that, too.

In our gospel for today--Jesus offers us one of the somewhat rambling discourses that the Gospel of John is famous for. There's a lot going on in this passage. But at its heart is this idea: when we face fragility honestly, we live. When we cling to life, we die. Albert Schweitzer, the great Lutheran musician, theologian, doctor--and Nobel Prize Winner, put it like this: “The real tragedy of life is what dies inside a person while still living.” God wants us to live, and so God's covenant in our heart is really pretty simple, when we get down to it: love God, love our neighbors. When we do this, we do what Jesus did. Like Jesus, when we love, we get lifted up. In love, we find the flow that is true living. “Hell,” Feodor Dostoyevsky said, “is the suffering of being unable to love.” So love--being in love, is what heaven must be like. Heaven is like that flow that warms us whenever we're loving.

But how often, like Jesus in our passage for today, do we, instead of acting from love, get caught up in fears or anxieties of one kind or another? Our hearts get troubled. Maybe we're worried about school. Maybe we're worried about a health matter. Maybe we're worried about finances. Maybe we're worried about a relationship that's gone wrong. Maybe we're worried about whether we'll get a job, or not.... It doesn't matter the source of that worry, but when darkness clouds our vision it's good to be reminded that Jesus--God incarnate, worried, too. His soul could be troubled. And yet he knew, he taught, that "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

This is the heart of every vision quest, in Lent, or among the Lakota: to face death, our fragility, honestly and without fear. When we do, we live in the light--because it is the fear of death that is at the root of all other fears. And if *death* has lost its sting, then of what can we possibly be afraid!? "Listen, I tell you a mystery," Paul puts it in I Corinthians 15: "when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

This is to walk in the light--to be a child of light, along with Jesus. Whatever our worries, Jesus knows them. Whatever troubles our souls, we can face them together. Whatever our sins and weaknesses, God knows them. Whatever our potential, God can help us realize it. Lent is our annual vision quest. So how is yours going? What are you going to change--because clarifying a vision always means change? What is your new vision? What is our collective vision of living and working together in love--here in Green Bay, in America, around the world?

As for my first big vision quest--my encounter with five vultures at Stagebarn Canyon, here's what I learned: I wasn't in control. I was so out of place, so naïve, that my immediate reaction to this strange encounter was terror--fear of death. Each time I retell the story, though, I learn from it--not least about the existence and habits of turkey vultures, which, according to one interpreter is a more accurate interpretation of the Hebrew word *nesher*—used for God in Deuteronomy 32, than the more frequent translation "eagle." You know the song: "And God will raise you up, on vulture's wings, bear you on the breath of dawn..." It doesn't lose anything with that translation, as I see it.

For the more I've gotten to know about vultures--and I've kind of taken to studying them since my encounter, I can see them clearly enough as signs of God's presence and a source of spiritual truth.

These huge birds, with wingspans of up to six feet, are sociable, friendly birds, according to the Turkey Vulture Society—and I did not make that up. The Turkey Vulture Society's members study the birds and seek to preserve their habitats. Turkey vultures are omnivores who primarily eat plants, for they cannot always find a good carcass to clean up. They live in families or roosts, often in the same place for over a century, usually

rock ledges or cliffs. In short, I was in their place—probably the first person to visit in decades, and quite possibly ever, given that no trail ascended to the spot. They were curious. Other observers have noted that the birds like people. In captivity, a turkey vulture will play with its caretaker, bouncing a ball back and forth with its head, following the caretaker around and watching his or her motions, and even playing tug of war with an object, like a pet dog. They are called the “peace Eagle” by the Cherokee, because they so rarely hunt.

Still, my experience surely brought me into touch with my fragility. I learned that I lived in the same world with turkey vultures, and I wasn’t sure I trusted them. I knew they were huge, and that I was in an unfamiliar and dangerous place—quite possibly their roost, or even a nest where a mating pair might have left a couple of eggs. I learned what it felt like to feel hunted. I learned fear. Now, I suppose that if my experience had been part of a formal vision quest, my name might be Jon “Afraid of Vultures” Pahl. I kind of like it. That’s who I was.

But I’m not afraid of them any more. I saw first hand not only the awesome nature of those birds, but also their freedom, their beauty, and their stunning ability to soar. The Turkey Vulture Society calls them “the most graceful soaring bird in the world,” and I would have to agree. They hold their wings all but silent, in a “v” shape, without flapping, just “feeling” the air current and making adjustments with their wing tips to soar for hours on end. They communicate with other birds when they find some food, and enjoy playing games in the air like follow the leader, tag, and speed soaring. I do think of them as angels.

Maybe that’s too strong, but I know I learned from them--and that someday like them I will be lifted up, when I die. For vultures live in proximity to death, like Jesus did--he knew what was coming for him. Vultures, like Jesus, face death honestly, and even manage to thrive from it. The Mayans called vultures “death eaters.” I think that’s profound. For Christians, we might put it this way: Jesus is our “death eater.”

So, here’s the point--and then I’m done: We can welcome the vultures in our life--greet them, don’t be afraid of them. For “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” This is true--as any of you who are farmers or gardeners surely know. This is true--as we learn from those young people who face the death of school shootings honestly and walk-out to lead us toward greater justice and peace.

And so--may the remainder of our Lenten vision quest be fruitful. May the covenant written on our hearts be renewed, clarified, and strengthened. May each of us walk in the light, as children of light. And may Easter--our feast of the Resurrection; our feast of love, after the long fast of this season, be filled with new joy and hope. Amen.