

***Lessons From Shenandoah: “Step Inside”***  
**Message For North East United Methodist Church**  
**September 10, 2017**  
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Two summers ago, my friend Carlton and I took all the kids on an adventure that was somewhat different from what we were used to. Often our adventures included climbing, whether it was hiking the trail up to the platform on top of Hawksbill Mountain or rock climbing the face of Little Stony Man with harnesses, anchors, and climbing ropes.

But this time we took our kids underneath the earth that we had hiked atop so often over the years.

Now I am sure many of you have experienced Luray Caverns...



...and the splendor of its stalagmites and stalactites. We had already taken our families through the caverns of Luray years ago so we wanted to do something a little more adventurous.

So we went caving...



...the kind without a constructed path...where one could take the wrong tunnel and become lost...



...a cave without electric lighting or a gift shop at the end...



At times we would have to use ropes to climb down steep inclines, going deeper into the earth...



There were times we had to crawl on our bellies, our helmets hitting the rock above us, the space being so narrow, as we shimmied through to the next open area of the cave...some of us barely fit...



And, unlike our experience walking through Luray Caverns years before...we got a bit dirty...

Here we are before going into the cave...



If you notice...the women are not with us...they stayed back at the campsite for this trip...after seeing our picture having exited from the cave, they were glad they did...



God invites us to “STEP UP” the mountain...



...into His presence, and spend time with Him.

God calls us to “STEP DOWN”...



...the mountain so that we might be able to complete our mission to make disciples for Jesus Christ, but also so that we might be molded into the likeness of His Son through the many experiences and trials we will face in the valley.

And God commands us to “STEP ACROSS”...



...the chasms in the mountains we traverse...the chasms of broken relationships and unforgiveness...the chasms between us and those who are different...

God also pushes us to “STEP INSIDE”.



John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness, **Matthew 3:3 (NKJV)**, “*Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.*”

How do we “prepare the way of the Lord”? We “STEP INSIDE”...

We have to **Break Up The Unplowed Ground.**

**Hosea 10:12 (NKJV)** – *“Sow for yourselves righteousness; Reap in mercy; Break up your fallow ground, For it is time to seek the LORD, Till He comes and rains righteousness on you.”*

*“Break up your fallow ground...”*

God reiterates His message through the prophet Jeremiah...Jeremiah 4:3 (NKJV) – *“Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns.”*

The "unplowed ground" (NIV) or "fallow ground" (KJV, NRSV) is the land that could be productive, but for whatever reason has not been broken up, tilled, plowed, and prepared for planting. The prophets speaking the Word of the Lord are commanding the people to break up that land -- spiritually!

Unplowed ground won't let a crop grow. It's hard, preventing seeds from penetrating, germinating, and growing to maturity. When it's time to put in the garden we get out the rotor tiller and turn the soil so that seeds are able to get into it and let their roots go down deep where moisture can be found.

Isn't this what Jesus told us in the Parable of the Sower? **Matthew 13:3-6 (NIV)** - *“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.”*

**Stumps & Rocks must be removed.** As our forefathers moved West, they began by logging the trees on their land and rooting out the stumps. Removing stumps was hard work. They had to dig down and cut each of the main roots with an axe and then attach a rope or chain to the stump and pull it out with a team of horses or oxen. Finally, they had to pile all the stumps together and burn them as they continued to clear the land, collecting all the rocks they found, both large and small, getting rid of them so they could plow the soil.

We must remove the stumps and rocks that continue to get in the way of God enriching the soil of our hearts. Hatred, bitterness, lust, greed, pride, worry... These are stumps that must be rooted out and rocks that must be gathered and



transported away so a new crop can be planted. They must be removed so the new crop can grow...so we can receive all God has in store for us.

*“Break up your fallow ground...” “Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.”*

**Hardness must be broken up.** A plow or rotor tiller does the hard work of opening up the ground. It takes energy to pull the plow, to guide the plow, to keep the furrows straight so the field can be plowed efficiently.

Where is the hardness in your heart? Where is the unbelief that is lurking in your soul? What guilt are you carrying? Unforgiveness? Selfishness? Bitterness?

The hardness in your heart must be faced squarely and broken up if God is to plant something new and fruitful in your heart. It is through heartfelt repentance and confession that we plow deep.

*“Break up your fallow ground...” “Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.”*

And **Thorns must be gathered and burned.** *“And do not sow among thorns.”*

Jesus said, in the Parable of the Sower, **Matthew 13: 7 (NIV)** - ***“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.”***

Dr. Ralph F. Wilson writes, *“When a field goes unplanted for several years it often becomes covered with thorns or other weeds. Depending on your particular plot of land, those thorns may represent sexual temptations and lust, self-indulgence, pride, anger, selfishness, a love of entertainment and recreation, addictions, greed, and other thorns. Each of these chokes the Word. Each has a devastating effect on the crop that God wants to grow in you and me. We must root them out.”*

There is a great scene in the film, *Facing the Giants*, in which Coach Taylor is approached by Mr. Bridges, a devout Christian who walks the halls of the school everyday praying over each locker, praying for each student. He tells Coach Taylor that God has opened a door for him to walk through...and tells him a story about two farmers. Each farmer prays for rain...but only one went out and prepared his field to receive the rain.

We must prepare the fields of our hearts to receive all God is ready to shower down upon us. We do this by “STEPPING INSIDE”...We do this through **The Spiritual**

**Discipline of Self-Examination...**going deep underground...deep within ourselves...

We are quick to examine one another, but often afraid to spend too much time looking in the mirror...

...Yet scripture tells us, *“Examine yourselves to see if your faith is really genuine...”* James tells us to *“keep looking steadily into God’s perfect law...”* He says to not be like one who looks *“at your face in a mirror but [does] nothing to improve your appearance.”*

Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 13: 5-6 (MSG)** – ***“Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don’t drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular checkups. You need firsthand evidence, not mere hearsay that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it.”***

James Bryan Smith writes, *“Every day we must begin anew...Though the past is written in stone and cannot be changed, the future is like wet cement, pliable, smooth and ready to be affected by what we do...”*

I have included in the devotions this week, an insert which includes questions which Christian leaders John Wesley and Chuck Swindoll, authors James Bryan Smith and Richard Foster, and NFL Football player Shawn Alexander use as a means of self-examination. Some use these questions daily, some weekly, to “STEP INSIDE” the caverns of their heart, their lives...to discover if there is anything growing that would inhibit God’s fruit to be produced in their lives...that would keep God’s grace from welling up in their hearts...that would keep them from becoming more like Jesus...

William Barclay writes, *“One of the great neglected duties of the Christian life is self-examination, and maybe self-examination is neglected because it is so humiliating an exercise.”* Why? Because it forces us to face the real within ourselves.

This is not a forty-day wilderness experience as in the life of Jesus, one who was without sin, but for us it is a life-long process, involving our surrendering to God and wrestling for God’s meaning afresh every day.

When we came out of the cave into the light...



...we were exhausted...having crawled and clawed our way through the mud and tunnels of the cave...and we were dirty...covered with dirt...

The same will happen to us if we “STEP INSIDE” ourselves and “*prepare the way of the Lord*”...it will be exhausting work...we will have to get dirty...at times we might not like what we find...

**Ephesians 4: 23-24 (MSG)** – “...*everything—connected with that old way of life has to go. It’s rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.*”

...by “STEPPING INSIDE” ourselves we will, after the hard work, having prepared the soil of our hearts...we will be able to “STEP” more deeply into the light...allowing it to immerse us, cover us, embrace us...

And the results...

**Matthew 13: 8 (NIV)** – “*Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.*”

Don’t be afraid...God can be trusted to lead you through the caverns of your heart into a more intimate relationship with Him...go ahead, “STEP INSIDE”