

The Journey: "In the Void"

[Genesis 1:1-5](#)

[Matthew 4:1-11](#)

Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Lynnewood United Methodist Church

March 5, 2017

You may have a place of wilderness that you can recollect and picture, a place that is barren and dry. When I was in seminary I took a class on pilgrimage that culminated in a group trip to Lone Pine, California. The name even sounds like a dreary place. Lone Pine wasn't exactly the destination. We were headed for a place 9 miles north of that God-forsaken town, in the middle of nowhere. It was half way between Yosemite and Death Valley, near another dreary place, Fort Independence—there's irony in that name—where there is still a small Indian Reservation. It was dusk when we arrived at the site of our pilgrimage to Manzanar Internment Camp, one of 10 camps where 120,000 Japanese Americans were involuntarily sent to live for more than 3 years during World War II. Your kids might have read the book, *Farewell to Manzanar*, but I grew up in California, and I never remember learning anything about internment camps.

This last month, February 19 marked the 75th anniversary of President Roosevelt's Executive Order #9066 that authorized relocation and internment of anyone who might threaten the United States war effort. On that day in 1942, Americans of Japanese descent were ordered to register at relocation centers. They left their homes and businesses. Many had to sleep in crowded horse stalls at fair grounds and race tracks. Barbed wire fences and armed guard towers made it impossible to consider escape. From these temporary locations, the people were bused to ten permanent internment camps. One of these was Manzanar in the wind-swept California Sierra desert, where 11,000 Japanese-Americans were sent. There families lived in cramped quarters with little privacy, with no furniture but cots, and with loss of all liberty and dignity. It was a place of sagebrush, rocky soil, and dust storms. It was a wilderness.

The people entered a period of void, three years of their freedom taken away. The details of their former lives evaporated. After a while, the people interned at Manzanar created prison lives. They took up jobs around the camp, and the children attended school. The unsanitary conditions and lack of privacy were distressing and hard to overcome. Many families fell apart. People suffered from depression. Jeanne Wakatsuki's father turned inward. The person Jeanne knew her father to be disappeared in the void of the camp experience. There was nothing left of the man she had known. But then, as months turned into years, something changed. Her papa started collecting rocks, and he made a rock garden in the Japanese style. It was his own creation of beauty. It was something of his own spirit. There were other rock gardens at Manzanar. They evolved around the camp hospital, giving patients a quiet beauty to rest their eyes on as they recovered from illness or as they died. And some of the internees planted rose bushes and apple trees, when they could.

Today Manzanar is a National Historic Site. In the gift shop they sell copies of *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, who was seven when she and her family were sent to the camp. And they also sell pocket-sized copies of the U.S. Constitution, to remind visitors of what can happen when we allow fear instead of law to govern our country (<http://www.newsweek.com/2017/02/24/manzanar-japanese-internment-camp-trump-extreme-vetting-556944.html>).

The Japanese internment story is a bleak reality in our history, one that began with an executive order. When the internees returned to their homes after the war, most found their properties destroyed. Many had nothing. Once again, they had to create new lives in the void.

God's most creative act starts in a void. The first lines of the bible describe the transformation: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:1-2). "The earth was a formless void"—nothing—"and darkness covered the face of the deep." Like a painter before a huge, blank canvas—God created out of nothing. Nothing there, but the face of the earth—a blank façade—and then, in the wind from God, came God's creative act. Out of the darkness of nothing came light!

The ancient people who wrote this story must have tried to imagine how the world began. What was it like before life came into being? And they imagined darkness—nothingness—void. And into the void, God called forth light! Where did the light come from? From the voice of God in the wind. The word for wind in Hebrew, *ruach*, also means spirit and breath. Out of God's moving spirit and breath, God spoke. Speech was God's artistic medium.

When Genesis was written, some two and a half thousand years ago, people had no way of understanding as we do today the origins of the earth and our solar system. Even today it's hard to fathom a history of 5 billion years! And we still do not know how the earth began. It wasn't until Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in the 19th century that people were exposed to the idea of evolution. And not until the 20th century that people attributed creation to science and not only to God. Even now in the 21st century, cutting-edge research is trying to decide how cellular materials formed perhaps in geothermal ponds near active volcanoes, or how a meteor could have created a crater where life began. (<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20161026-the-secret-of-how-life-on-earth-began>). The ancient people didn't know about DNA and RNA. Even with great advances in scientific research, we still do not fully understand the origin of life. And even if we learn what happened, we will always wonder why.

I like to believe that a force beyond all scientific knowledge—God—created something out of whatever matter was present. The creative act called forth an order and a chain of events that have brought about life as it has evolved. God started a journey that continues over these billions of years, and it is not finished yet. According to Genesis, that journey started in a void.

Last weekend three of us attended a conference in Santa Cruz. One of the speakers wrote a book I purchased which intrigues me. His name is David Galston. The chapter of the book that grabbed my attention is "Jesus the Teacher of Nothingness." What could that be about? Well, Galston has the idea that Jesus' teachings begin with a void. Take the parables, for instance. Each parable sets up a hypothetical situation, like say you are going down a street and you see a man injured in the gutter. When you hear this, you can't help but ask yourself, "What would I do?" "Would I be like the Good Samaritan and help?" Jesus doesn't give lectures with answers. Instead, he asks a lot of questions, like "Who is your neighbor?" We have to fill in the blanks.

It's that way with the story of Jesus' temptations. Jesus is in the wilderness. It's bleak there, with 40 days of a fast and lack of water. It's a period removed from normal life. It may really be a metaphor for our own periods of isolation. It's in those lonely times when we face the big questions of life: What is my purpose here? What will become of me? The writer puts us into the same dark place as Jesus. Jesus doesn't take the bait from the devil. In this surreal wilderness experience, Jesus doesn't need bread to live by; he has God. Jesus doesn't need to put God to the test to lift him up if he jumped from the pinnacle; God has nothing to prove. Jesus doesn't need all the kingdoms of the world; he has God, and that's all he needs.

In the void of the wilderness, in the black hole of the devil's temptations, Jesus creates meaning for himself and for us the reader. What would I do in the wilderness, without food, or companionship, tempted by hell and destruction? Would I think to invite God into that void?

Jesus is the "teacher of nothingness" because he requires us to use our creative imagination. He requires us to determine what is important and act on it. God calls forth meaning in the void, and we are asked to do the same. Like an artist, before a canvas, how will we create something in the void? This is the task of our Lenten journey—to find meaning in our lives—and it starts with nothing but God.