

# **John Muir Trail Sermon**

**Friday, August 30, 2013**

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**Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara CA**

Exactly one month ago, on July 30<sup>th</sup>, our son Ari dropped my wife Marian and me at Glacier Point in Yosemite National Park with heavy backpacks. Marian turned to me and asked “how did we come up with this outlandish idea?” and we began to walk. The outlandish idea was to hike two-hundred twenty miles, the entire length of the John Muir Trail, carrying our lives on our backs, sleeping in our tent, eating reconstituted dehydrated food, and drinking water we would draw from rivers, lakes, and streams. We would not have imagined ourselves doing this just a few years ago.

Three weeks later, on August 21, we got up at 4:00 in the morning, and walked the final 13 miles, first climbing 2,000 feet to the Trail Crest, and then descending 6,000 feet to Whitney Portal, where we came out and returned to the world of cars, telephones, credit cards, email, fresh fruit and vegetables, ice cream, pizza, our jobs, our families, and the rest of our lives. This evening we would like to share with you a little bit of our adventure.

How did we get this idea?

Five years ago, Marian and I were on a day hike in Kings Canyon, and met a couple of hikers coming out of wilderness, looking weather-beaten and trail-hardened, carrying large backpacks. We asked them how long they had been out they replied “five days.” Walking on I said to Marian “I wish we could do that, but I can’t see carrying that much on my back anymore. Next lifetime!” Three years ago Marian and I walked for three days across the Lake District, carrying daypacks and staying in farmhouse guestrooms and youth hostels. We loved it, being out in the mountains, the wind and the rain all day, but also the pub meals and soft beds in the evenings. Then last summer, in planning for my two-month sabbatical, I went on-line, to explore a forty-year old fantasy of hiking the Pacific Crest Trail.

Marian was pretty clear that she had no interest in going anywhere near where there might be grizzly bears, but I thought there was no harm in poking around on the web. My research quickly convinced me that the PCT was just too long but I discovered what is considered by many to be one of the most beautiful hikes in the world...the John Muir Trail, 220-miles through the High Sierras, which most people hike in about 3 or 4 weeks. And I discovered Ray Rippel’s book, “Planning Your Thru-Hike of the John Muir Trail.” After glancing at Ray’s book, I showed it to Marian, who read right through it in one sitting. We were interested. We borrowed backpacks, loaded them up with weight and hiked up to the top of San Ysidro Trail...3,000 ft. Arriving back at the car, exhausted but intact, we looked at each other and said “yes! We can!”

So many religious revelations take place in the wilderness: Abraham’s relationship with God reaches its most extreme point on the desolation of Mount Moriah, Jacob alone on the road at night dreams of the ladder stretching between heaven and earth, Moses encounters God at the Burning Bush beyond the

wilderness, and again at Sinai. God demands that Moses declare to the Egyptian Pharaoh "Let my people go that they may celebrate me in the wilderness!" Even our joyful festival of Sukkot, coming up immediately after Yom Kippur, is essentially an annual stepping out from our homes and comfort zones and out into the natural world.

Marian and I went on our own exodus journey. We were far away from all human civilization: no cars, virtually no human structures, no roads....deep, deep into the wilderness....if we had needed to get out, it would have taken us two long days to walk out. We did have a satellite personal locator beacon which allowed us to send daily tracking points and would have allowed us to send an SOS if necessary. But it really was a pretty slender thread of connection back to home and to help if we needed it. During our planning, it felt scary, but out on the trail, we just felt free.

For me, the highlights were not standing on the mountaintops....although they were spectacular. For me, the best moments were coming around a corner after a long dry stretch and suddenly seeing a rushing, laughing river, water tumbling down the mountain, a lake with a perfect reflection of the surrounding mountain peaks, and overcoming our nervousness about the cold and just splashing and gasping in the water. Or in the middle of an exhausting day, finding a perfect bit of shade to sit and eat tortilla with humus. Or getting into our sleeping bags at 7:30 having just washed out our dinner bowls, saying goodnight to each other and falling asleep exhausted. Or waking up at 4:30 in the dark, wordlessly packing up and beginning to hike by the light of our headlamps....and seeing the dawn come up slowly....the sky growing light....the first rays of sun illuminating the tips of the mountains.

As you would expect, there were challenges. First, carrying the heavy packs...especially when they were full with food and water. Getting clean enough. Our hands, our legs, our clothes were all fairly filthy after a week of wearing one shirt, one pants, two pairs of socks, two pairs of underwear...day after day after day....rinsing them in lakes and streams and drying them on rocks. Knowing what exactly to eat, and how much. How much water to carry. Dehydration was a much more real danger than wild animals, but one litre of water weighs 2.2 lbs. And the more we drank, the more we needed to pee, which as we all know is easier for guys than for women. And while we're on the subject....Pooping! Here's what you do: Dig a cat hole, 6 inches deep. Go. Cover with earth, rocks and sticks. Carefully place your used toilet paper in a plastic ziplock bag. Pack out your used toilet paper. That is not just being an environmentalist; it's the law.

Henry David Thoreau went to live for a year in the woods and explained afterwards, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." For three weeks in the High Sierras, Marian and I confronted together the essential facts of life: food, water, shelter, toilet....to see what life might have to teach.

We had had some fears about lightning. We knew that in some years, it doesn't rain at all in the summer, but that other years, a weather pattern forms in which each day the sky is clear in the morning, and then dark clouds gather in the early afternoon, producing dramatic displays of thunder and lightning. In that case,

you do not want to be anywhere above tree-line when the lightning starts. We enjoyed two weeks of completely clear skies, and then in the third week, we saw the dark clouds gathering, and every afternoon for four days, we did experience the power and the fury of the storm. But we learned to put our tent up surrounded by trees, and to get it up before the rain started, and we were snug inside while our tent was hammered by the rain and hail, with the awesome, terrifying, crashing claps of thunder ringing and echoing about the mountains surrounding us.

Other fears? We had been reassured many times that the black bears of the Sierra are not aggressive and are only after our food. True we did meet a young ranger on our first day who told us that there was an aggressive bear around, and a mountain lion active in the area. But we only saw deer, chipmunks and marmots. We were worried about altitude sickness....which can be fatal. About injury from tripping and falling. About getting an infection. Or hypothermia. And about how would we get along? Our daughter Rachel told us afterwards that she was pretty sure that we would either end up getting divorced or falling completely in love all over again. To which we replied in one voice: in love!!

Before we left, one of our congregants asked me: "Steve, are you going to hike on Shabbat?" To which I can only reply: "We didn't drive on Shabbat, and we didn't spend any money on Shabbat!" The truth is this. We were on the trail for three Shabbatot. We could not carry the extra weight of candles, wine, and challah was out of the question. On the first and third Shabbatot, camped next to unspeakably beautiful lakes, Marian offered the candle-blessings over two Bic cigarette lighters, and we made the motzi over a tortilla, and I chanted the Kiddush over water flavored with an electrolyte tablet. On the second Shabbat, we were at a rest stop...Muir Trail Ranch. And for the first time in over thirty years, I completely forgot that it was Shabbat.

Two days later, far out in the wilderness, just below Muir Pass, completely by chance, we ran into our good friends and members of this congregation Ron and Becca Garber. I told Ron that I had completely forgotten that it was Shabbat and Ron declared, "I think that for you, that is the ultimate Shabbat!!!"

Ron was right. Those three weeks, out in the mountains, deep in the wilderness, were for us the ultimate Shabbat. Shabbat Shalom.