

Are We There Yet?

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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I believe that you can divide the world into two kinds of travelers. There are the destination travelers who have their sights set at the place they are going and the sojourners, the ones where the journey is the trip. All that is fine until you try to mix the two. I come from a family of serious destination travelers. My family takes getting to their destination in the most direct and quickest possible route as an extreme sport. The first thing my family of origin asks when you get out of the car after a long trip is not how was the trip or how are you but how long did it take you?

I married into a sojourn traveler. Gregg likes to stop and see things along the way. We were about to be married and I wanted to take my future husband and step sons to our family place in Maine. As we planned the car trip from Illinois to Maine, Gregg started looking at places to stop and see along the way. “Why would you do that?” I asked incredulous, the point is to get to Maine as quickly as possible, not stop to see things like in Lowell Mass. It has been over 30 years and both of us have compromised and we have had many trips to Maine, but we still have never stopped in Lowell to see what is there. Why would you want to go to Lowell!?!?

As I read the Exodus passage, I think that the people of Israel are destination people caught in a sojourning world. As a result, they are encountering forty years of frustration as they wander around in the wilderness. The reason Moses went to Pharaoh to ask to leave Egypt was so his people could go to the holy mountain to worship God. As they make their way to the mountain, the people of Israel are not having a good time. They are not reveling in the trip itself.

The readings of Exodus tell of the most amazing evacuation of an entire people. They move from bondage to freedom; from slavery to a land of their own; from a collection of foreigners to a nation. They travel from Egypt to

Mount Sinai where they receive rules to live by and then on to the promised land of Canaan. However, their final destination takes generations. The ones who start the journey do not see its completion. Laced within this epic story is a refrain of people murmuring, quarreling and being unhappy. They forget the miracles that happened in order to leave Egypt. The first thing they face is an immovable object, the sea. “It would be better to be back in Egypt than to drown here.” Even in this consistent complaining there is a counter refrain, which is, “God provides.” The waters part and they are led to safety while their pursuers drown. Surely, that would have been a moment to bring even the most skeptic souls into line.

As they continue to travel, they get hungry and once again, the chorus strikes up as they turn on Moses and complain, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt....” Once again, “God provides” as quail and manna from heaven is given to the people while they journey.

One would think things would go smoother and that they would learn. Their enemies are no longer following them and they have enough to eat, but the complaints continue. They are thirsty. Now it is really starting to sound like a family vacation gone south.

Here is the reading from Exodus where it looks as if Moses will have a downright rebellion on his hand:

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” ³But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which

you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Here is the defining event for the people of Israel, the one that feeds the Jewish nation. Here in the middle of the journey we find this trip is not a happy pilgrimage to the holy mountain but is filled with reluctant travelers who have doubts and are quarreling. The complaints were so significant that Moses names the place after their doubting and complaints.

Our time and place is not for the faint hearted. It is not for those whose sights are only on the destination. We are on a journey not sure what our destination will be like with many stops along the way. We are as a world, as a country and as a church in the middle of a sojourn so any of us who are antsy for the destination of being post-pandemic post-election post- interim pastorate is not having a good time right now. We do not know the rest of the story. We do not know how any of this will play out.

It is in times like these, platitudes and simplistic answers do not help. We are tired; we are frustrated and we cry out are we there yet? Moreover, when we are not doing that then we look back over our shoulder and long for the carefree days when we could simply shake each other’s hand!

Writer William Willamon wrote about 20th century Theologian Karl Barth. Barth during World War 1 never mentioned the war in his wartime sermons even though he thought it was a disaster and amounted to the just wages of nationalistic sins. His sermons included about the opportunity of living in “a unique time of God.” Instead of bemoaning what is, he urged his congregants to think of what they can do with this time.¹

¹ Ploughs July 22

We are in a place that challenges us to find meaning in the journey itself. It is a challenge to be fed in the midst of what we are doing now. While we set our sights toward a post-time we are currently in the present and what we do now today has an impact on our destination.

For the people of Israel, even with all the complaining, it turns out that the growth comes in the journey itself; it is in the travel time that the people of Israel see the hand of God working over and over again. It is in their journey that they receive God's commandments. The journey defines them as a nation. The people of Israel are so focused on where and how things should be that they fail to appreciate God's actions in their midst, and that God provides.

We are quick to reach our destination that we may miss God's revelation in the process.

There is always somewhere in our lives that the landscape is changing and we find ourselves as sojourners, when we are in that in-between time. It could be in our relationships, our work, or our own bodies as we age. When these transitions are uncomfortable, we simply want to get through them, endure them until we reach our goal, or we complain and argue long to go back or to get there. The challenge is finding the moments to treasure during the journey; to experience the moments when God provides during the transitions.

Dear friends of ours have a daughter-in-law inflicted with stage four cancer of the pancreas and liver. After her diagnosis, nearly two years ago she asked her doctor if she will see her children graduate. The Dr. paused and only said, "I am sorry." She does not know how much longer she will be healthy and whole. This past week she was told that the tumors in her liver are growing. After coming off a six month reprieve she is about to begin another a round of chemo and radioactive pellets. It is disappointing news. but she wrote this on her caring bridge:

But you know what? Early this summer I had a great revelation. I paused and took notice of everything. Even with all the personal and societal hardships surrounding me, I felt good. I consistently had energy. I laughed and played with friends and family. I tried new things. I lived my life the way I want,

almost as if I were cancer-free. And I realized . . . "Oh. Here it is. This is the miracle. I'm right smack in the middle of it, right now".²

This is our wilderness time. It is filled with angst, and uncertainty. It is also filled with opportunity. We celebrate Brooks' baptism, another child welcomed into loving arms of God through this church. We readily promise to teach him along with his brother, Jack what it means to be sojourners in a world demanding the destination. We celebrate that nine people who desire to join our church during a pandemic during an interim transition not because the time is right but because they are part of the journey and we can share with them. This is how God is working in our lives, one relationship; one person at a time.

It is in faith that we can take hold to the lesson that the people of Israel were taught. God provides and we have found that God does so abundantly. We know the extent God goes through God's son Jesus Christ out of love for us. With Christ as our companion in this journey, we are able to live the moment with our eyes focus on the future and not long for the past.

For those of us who are predisposed to be destination travelers we need to be stretched and to pay attention to the journey and for those of us who are sojourners who are comfortable dwelling in the journey, our destination friends will help us to focus on what we are working toward and keep us on task. We need both kinds of travelers.

As we travel together, let us all be mindful and attentive to what God provides us today and that Christ is with us each step of the way. Amen.

² Carolyn Buzza Caring Bridge September 24, 2020