

By Faith
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – August 7, 2022

Please Read:
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40

Because this is August, summertime, many of us have taken vacation trips. Kim and I traveled to Oregon for a family reunion and enjoyed seeing my parents, two of our sons and a number of cousins, nieces and nephews. Our son Matthew was scheduled to come in from Paris, Charles de Gaulle to Newark, and then a direct flight from Newark to Portland. What actually happened was a little different. On his flight across the Pond, a woman had a medical emergency, and the flight was diverted to Toronto. He then had to catch another plane to Boston, and of course missed his flight out of Newark, so had to overnight in Newark before catching another flight to Portland the next day. 32 hours later, he arrived. But that's not all. Our son Danny came and visited us this week for a few days and on his way home to Nashville, his flight was cancelled, but then they tried flying him to Atlanta, where he got stuck for another day and night. Two days later he got home.

Journeys can be like sometimes. You pack up the kids and suitcases and dog and set off to see relatives or some far-away vacation spot. It's usually great to get away... But honestly, no matter how well you plan a trip, it never goes as planned. In the various journey's we make in life, you can expect to be occasionally surprised by what you encounter, one way or the other!

In some ways much of the Bible is concerned with people on a journey. When the Bible opens, in Genesis, it begins with settled life in a perfect garden. But a couple of chapters later, Adam and Eve are surprised to find they must leave the garden, and the journey begins. Human life, it appears, is destined to be no tame, ordered affair. Noah ventures over the dark waters in the ark.

Marcus J. Borg, a well-known scholar who died about seven years ago, returned to faith after a 20-year journey through adulthood. He writes about his return in his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. As the title implies, Borg met Jesus again. He had met him before, in church, as a set of beliefs to be affirmed, as set of ideas to be grasped. Yet he had trouble with some of the beliefs, struggled with many of the ideas, and like many of us, left the church. Later in life, Borg discovered Jesus comes to us, not with a set of beliefs and doctrines to think about, but as someone to be met and followed.

Borg says that, if you look at the Bible, you will find there are "macro-stories at the center." These stories are about journeys. The history of God's people begins with a journey of an old couple, Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah venture forth, as today's lesson from Hebrew's puts it, "not knowing where they were going" (11:18). Abraham and Sarah journeyed, not only geographically, to a different location on the map, but also spiritually, to a different location in their world of meaning and understanding who God really is. Abraham had been promised by God that he would be the father of a great nation "even though he was too old"; even though he was, in the indelicate phrasing of Hebrews, "as good as dead." Yet by the power of God, Abraham and Sarah were given a child and the family of Israel was born.

Then, through a complicated and sometimes strange chain of events, Abraham and Sarah's descendents dominate and then in one of many surprises in the biblical narrative, are later enslaved in Egypt for centuries. The work was hard, but they enjoyed three square meals a day.

Yet they suffered. God heard their cries and called Moses to lead them out of slavery. Another journey began, the journey called the Exodus, the journey to the promised land.

The third great journey of the Hebrew Scriptures is the journey out of exile. Assyria and Babylonia had made war upon Israel. Those who were once slaves became virtual slaves again as their beloved Jerusalem was destroyed and the whole nation was deported to Babylon in exile. There were those Hebrews who said Babylonia wasn't all that bad. Why not just settle down, assimilate, adjust to the lifestyle of our captors? But God did not abandon Israel. They were liberated and journeyed back home.

The Old Testament leaves us then to respond to a God who calls forth, evokes, pushes God's people on a journey. So not so surprisingly, we find the New Testament has a journey motif of its own - the journey of faith. The meaning of the word disciple is the initial clue. It does not mean to be a student of a teacher so much as to *follow* after a leader. Discipleship in the New Testament is, of course, a following after Jesus, an ongoing pursuit of conforming our thoughts and actions more to the will of this Lord of self-giving love.

The Gospel writers organize their thoughts about Jesus as extended travel narrative. Jesus is always on the road, always on the move to somewhere else. He says something, his words fall upon the ears of the crowd, and then he moves on. *En passant*, in passing, Jesus touches people and they are healed, the demons leave them, the deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk. And Jesus continues his journey to Calvary, where he consummates his earthly mission at the cross. And we hear again his words, "Pick up your cross and follow me..."

In many cultures and religions, journeying is a primary metaphor. The Australian Aboriginals have the "walk about." Christians Pilgrims travel to Jerusalem or to Rome. Muslims have Mecca. Even the communists in China remember the Long March...

So, today, I invite you to consider your own faith journey. To where, with whom, and how far have you journeyed? Some of us yearn to settle down. Others of us are of the wandering Aramean clan, been bitten by the travel bug, besotted with wanderlust. There is a part of us which yearns to put down roots and bolt down the furniture. But Jesus calls us, "Onward!" He is usually on the move - challenging us with calls and commands to follow him to new life...

Today's Gospel lesson is unsettling, for the simple reason that Jesus' teaching seems too hard for anyone to obey, at least for any length of time. The reading today is just a slice from a whole series of challenges in which we are confronted with the impossibilities of absolute discipleship. For many, we feel like Jesus leaves us in the dust pretty fast here. "Sell all you have and give it to the poor!" "O.K.," we think, "umm, Jesus, you go on ahead for a while: let me catch up to you on that one in a few decades..." Or, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit!" Surely through the reading of scripture, prayer, and service, we are in some sense dressed and ready for action, but when are we ever *totally* ready for all that surprises us on the paths of life, let alone, to meet our Maker?

Journeying with Jesus means never getting too self-satisfied or complacent. It means being on the road with him. It means to be a sojourner; to have nowhere to lay one's head, no *permanent* resting place, anyway. It means undertaking the journey from the life of conventional wisdom, from life in our Egypts and our Babylons, to the alternative wisdom of life in the Spirit of Jesus -

the One who calls us to new life, the Spirit of love who frees us like Christ to let go and give of ourselves. As we journey with Christ, we realize that our real home is not to be found anywhere here on earth, but in the eternal presence of God. As we journey with Christ, we realize the unworldly truth that it is more blessed to give than to receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, in giving up our life we receive it...

But here's the thing, following Jesus means something needs to change in us, probably on a daily basis. We can't just sit still. Richard Rohr writes this, "Christianity is a lifestyle — a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, and loving. However, we made it into an established "religion" (and all that goes with that) and avoided the lifestyle change itself. One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is one's "personal Lord and Savior." The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great."

Indeed, the world has no time for such silliness anymore! When we take a journey through the news, it is clear our world needs transformation, and that begins with us. For many of us, entering this journey of transformation by faith means listening to Jesus' teaching, obeying his word and giving of ourselves. We are struggling with issues of integrity, of priorities, of fidelity, of piety. We, like his first disciples, sometimes understand his commands, and obey, but then other times understand his commands, and are not ready to commit ourselves at all. Our following can involve denying him, even betraying him. Does that sound like your journey with Jesus so far? To be honest, it sounds a lot like mine.

Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Sometimes we are afraid to venture forth. We try and hold tight to old securities, comfortable patterns. But our God is forever on the move, creating, sustaining, calling forth, peripatetic, going about.

Please note that the Scriptures do not teach us that we will receive the kingdom because of our good following. Clearly Jesus teaches us that it is God who will give us the kingdom - It is God who is pleased to give us the grace and courage to hear again the call of Christ and respond in faith. And with faith in the Risen Lord, we will move on with him to new life.

So friends, brothers, sisters, siblings in Christ... Jesus calls you to let go of all that keeps you too settled and secure in yourselves. He challenges you to let go and follow him - to receive again the life in Him which you can't keep and hoard, which robbers cannot steal or moths consume, the divine love that you can but simply receive and share with others. Don't get too settled in, even if you've just got done unpacking. Stop at this table he has prepared for you to gain strength for the road ahead. Eat drink and be filled, so that you can venture forth by faith. And even amidst the ambiguities and perplexities, the sudden changes of challenges, perhaps you will discover the reality that Jesus is journeying here with you, walking with you along the way, all the way, for he is the way.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.