

"TRAVELLING MERCIES"

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 30, 2020

Exodus 3:1-15 ~ Romans 12:9-21 ~ Matthew 16:21-28

I love to travel, and I've been to a few exotic locations. Of course, it's not just where you go, but what you see and what you do that makes travel worthwhile. Some people love to get out of doors, commune with nature, climb a mountain, shoot the rapids, sail the seven seas. Me, I like to shop and try to find good Mexican food.

Two people may travel the same road and have two entirely different experiences. There are various styles of travel ... various attitudes among travelers. In any journey, there is all the difference in the world between being a tourist and being a pilgrim. And that is certainly true of this journey we call "life." Some people pass through this world as if there were nothing more to it than seeing some sites and taking a few snapshots to remember them by ... hardly noticing the marvels and the miracles that surround them.

But there is another way to make this trip through time ... to do something good ... to draw closer to God ... to leave the world better for having been here. In traveling this way through life there are certain key moments ... and we hear two such moments today from today's sacred stories.

The first is the call of Moses. He's out roping goats in the wilderness. Everything has turned out so differently than what he had dreamed when he was raised a

Hebrew in the Egyptian Pharaoh's court. He thought he was in a special position to deliver his people by virtue of his privileged place, but when he tried to intervene, he discovered that he was neither an Egyptian nor a Hebrew, as far as both sides were concerned. So, he ran for his life and ended up riding the range for his father-in-law, Jethro. His dreams were dead ... his life wasted ... his destiny blown. And then he came across a burning bush. He was way out in the middle of the desert ... thinking he was forgotten ... wanting to forget. Yet, suddenly he was on holy ground. It was a miracle in the middle of nowhere ... the God of the universe seeking him ... finding him ... calling him to go to Rameses and face down the Pharaoh. Was this a blessing or a curse? Was it an opportunity or a danger? Well, God gave him a choice.

Jesus wandered in the hills of Galilee drawing big crowds ... enjoying his disciples even if they could be dense at times ... and healing people of their wounds and woes. But he discerned the time had come to go to Jerusalem and face the powers. You don't have to be omniscient to know what's likely to happen if Jesus goes to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a hotbed of high stakes intrigue. Jerusalem was the vortex of the national whirlwind ... the collision of the Roman military occupation and the Jewish Sanhedrin and all the political and religious parties striving for power. But his destiny called. God called. And Jesus called the disciples to go with him. Actually, Jesus gave them a choice.

The first challenge in our life journey is to be alert enough to recognize the turning point when it comes. The turning point can happen any time. God met Moses way down on the back forty of Jethro's ranch. Jesus walked with the disciples all over the map and everywhere he went they were in the presence of the God. So, wherever you go, be alert. It might happen at a major transitional moment, like the day you get married or start a new job or start your education or get divorced or

move into a new home. But just as often it happens when you are slogging through an ordinary day in the ordinary way you've been living for as long as you remember. Suddenly - BOOM - there is God speaking to you and giving you a choice. Where are you going with your life? How and why are you going there? Will you go for me? Which turn will you take?

Naturally Moses and Jesus' disciples resisted at first. They were comfortable enough with the status quo. Why should they change their plans? God told Moses to go face down the mighty, mighty Pharaoh. "Do I know you?" Moses asks. God doesn't need an identification card. "I am," God says. "I will be what I will be." "I will do what I will do." God is the only one who can say that because no one can force God to be or do anything other than what God chooses to be or to do. "I was with Abraham," God says. "I was with Isaac. I was with Jacob. And I will be with you."

You all remember the reading this morning when Jesus said, "We're off to Jerusalem, men, where the chief priests and scribes will collude with the Romans to kill me," and Peter told Jesus, "Ain't no way. Ain't no way we're goin' there. Ain't no way that's happenin' to you. Ain't no way I'll have any part of this." "Get behind me Satan!" Jesus barks. Is he talking to Peter or is he talking to the Tempter that Peter awakened within him? Jesus was tested more than just that one time in the wilderness after his baptism, you know. With each step toward Jerusalem ... with each confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees ... with each dull-witted response of his disciples ... in the garden of Gethsemane ... hanging on the cross ... Jesus was tempted to turn away from his call.

But I understand Peter's resistance ... our first response is always "no." Several years ago, some dear friends asked us to join them in bringing the love of God to

Texas prisons. Wanting to prove what true Christians we were, we reached for our checkbook, and then they dropped the bomb. “No, no, we’re not just asking for money, we want you to come and spend four days with us at the maximum-security unit in Huntsville over the 4th of July weekend.” Gulp! We stammered and stuttered and tried to hold on to the hundreds of excuses that reeled through our minds like those spinning cherries on a slot machine. Finally, we said we would check our calendars and get back to them. "And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."

We spent the next few days avoiding them, and we were smart to do so. I mean, they weren’t dangerous, and they weren’t pushy ... but God is. God will not leave you alone. Christ will not let you follow only when it's convenient to your plans. The Spirit keeps tailing you until you realize that every moment is a time of choice ... every place is holy ground ... and every person is important to God. God is dangerous that way. God is not convenient. God will interrupt you and leave you no longer the same. To make a long story short, we went, and we went back month after month and year after year. And yes, lives were changed, but I suspect none more than ours.

Most of us throw up our defenses at first when we are given a choice, and God's choices are not easy. God asks the tough questions like ... “Do you want to take care of you and yours and live the easy life that means nothing to anybody ... or will you lay down your life to serve me and make this world different because you've been here?” God says, “I am inviting you to the sacred journey of self-discovery through self-sacrifice ... to find yourself by forgetting yourself and following me ... serving others ... confronting the powers ... giving your all to gain all. One way is easy, but the end is death ... the other way is hard, but the end is life.” What do we say?

We say "no." We always say "no" at first. Our initial impulse, our occasional lapse, our denial and betrayal of Christ all begins with "no." We are Moses. We are Peter. We are Judas. But then God makes us an offer we can't refuse. "I will be with you," God tells Moses (Ex 3:12). "What I am offering you is life," Jesus says (Matt 16:25-26). "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done" (Matt 16:27). God promises it will be worth it if we say "yes" to the call, that is, if we are alert enough to hear the call when it comes.

What is God's call for you? Where does Jesus want you to follow him? In the title essay of her book, Traveling Mercies, Anne Lamott explains:

Our preacher Veronica said recently that this is life's nature ... that lives and hearts get broken ... those of people we love, those of people we'll never meet. She said that the world sometimes feels like the waiting room of the emergency ward and that we who are more or less okay for now need to take the tenderest possible care of the more wounded people in the waiting room, until the healer comes. You sit with people ... you bring them juice and graham crackers. And then she went on vacation. "Traveling mercies," the old people at our church said to her when she left. This is what they always say when one of us goes off for a while. Traveling mercies: love the journey, God is with you, come home safe and sound.

I love that! Traveling mercies are God's promise for the journey to which we are called. And, of course, the journey is not just about where we go ... the places God sends us ... the people God sends us to see ... but also how we go ... who we become as we go. Hence, Paul's instructions ... and others like them all over the place in the scripture ... about what it looks like to behave as Christians in relationship to one another and to the world beyond.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Rom 12:14-18).

Do we really hear those words as we stand again today, on holy ground? Do we hear again God's call to each of us to join the spiritual journey ... to be pilgrims and not tourists through this life ... to be disciples of Jesus whether we are traveling around or staying in place? It's all in the art of travel ... to be awake and alert and to seek God in each place we go, and in each person we meet ... to ask ourselves where God is in this situation ... what does the Lord have for me to learn from this ... and what is Christ calling me to do and to be? Please don't just say an automatic "no" because it might mean changing your plans. This is the opportunity of a lifetime. God will go with you. Christ will give you life and eternal reward.

May we pray?

Call us, God, and we will answer. Lead us, and we will follow. Make us your people and show us the way that leads to life. Help us remember that we do not travel alone, because you are with us ... and you give us one another as traveling partners. We thank you for this and all your traveling mercies, in Jesus' name.
Amen.