

Sermon for Homecoming 2020

Exodus 14:19-31

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Have you ever been lost? It's a disorienting feeling, isn't it? I remember two instances... the first, I was with my family when my daughter was young. We were walking on a path in a state park in CT where had been were camping for the weekend. I was in front, and I realized at some point we must have turned the wrong way somewhere along the trailway. As I noticed the sun beginning to go down a bit, I was frantic that we wouldn't find the right trail to get us back to our camp site before it was dark.

The other time I remember pricked much more at my sense of pride. I was, once again hiking, although this was a 10-day trek in the High Sierras in California. It was part of a course pre-seminary with 15 other seminarians and 2 guides designed for inner personal and spiritual growth and community building. Each of the students was given a day to lead the group – only utilizing the help of a topographical map. I had only **some** experience using this type of map and was very unsure of my abilities to get us from point A to point B in the allotted time. In addition, each of us were carrying 50-pound packs on our backs... so the weight of making a wrong decision and taking us up a steep ridge, only to find that we had gone the wrong way, literally had major implications for the group. I panicked several times as we headed up steep hills, constantly asking myself... was this the right way or the wrong way? Would people be angry with me? I was anything but a confident leader that day... I blurted out desperate internal prayers... begging for divine guidance. After some hours, I swallowed my pride and finally asked the guides for

help. They helped me interpret the map several times and we all eventually made it to our camp for the night, **or at least the guides made it look like wherever we ended up was the right place for the night. Only the guides will ever know the truth.**

I learned several things from those experiences. Two which come to minds are these: First, being out of control is a disorienting feeling, especially when others are counting on you, but it is a place where learning cannot be matched. Second, you will eventually get to where you need to go, especially if you're willing to ask for help.

There is much to be learned in what is called a liminal space, or the threshold between what is known and what is unknown. That place when you've left a way of being (even if it was a healthy or even an unhealthy place) to a new way of being. It's a place described in the image of the trapeze artist who has let go of one swing before she grabs the next.

The Children of Israel felt all of that. Our text this morning, is the well-known story just after the Exodus out of Egypt and along the beginning stages of their wandering in the wilderness...You know the story. The background is that the people had been treated brutally, forced into slave labor in Pharaoh's Egypt. Their lives were threatened daily.

Seeing their pain, God raised up a leader, Moses, to come and lead them out of the repressive rule of Pharaoh. To give them freedom. In a moment of weakness, Pharaoh agreed to let them go, and so they gathered up all their belongings and set out to a place unknown to them, on a journey which would take them decades to complete.

I wonder how they must have felt? Did they feel lost and abandoned? It's probably a good thing they didn't know how long it would take.

Not long after they had begun to wander, what must have seemed an aimless and endless journey, the people began to complain... they whined and moaned to each other about Moses and about God. That picked up steam when they saw Pharaoh's armies in the distance. Their whining was then fueled by sheer terror. They even begged Moses to take them back to Pharaoh, to what they knew was familiar... bondage in Egypt (and that wouldn't be the only time they would do that).

But how does today's passage start? The angel of the Lord was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so, the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night as a pillar of fire; one did not come near the other all night. And that protection continued day in and day out.

The angel of the Lord went before and behind them. With that kind of beginning, you may think that with all of the protection, nothing bad or scary would happen. And that the people would trust God and all would be well.

And then the part of the story most well-known... the parting of the Red Sea... also known as the Sea of Reeds. It's the dramatic story of how, when faced with impossible circumstances... death-dealing circumstances, God makes a way.

The scriptures tell us stories such as these to tell us, and have told us for thousands of years that even when we are faced with the most impossible, the scariest, the most incredible circumstances we could ever imagine, even when everything has been stripped away... the pillar of cloud goes before and behind us. The God we trust will literally part bodies of water to make a way through for us.

The result? The people were brought to a deeper belief in God and the leader God had sent to guide them through the next phase of their lives. And boy would they need that... out wandering in the wilderness... day in and day out for 40 years.

Suzanne Guthrie, a contemporary theologian who lives in New York, notes that we Christians usually don't just sit down one day and decide to believe. That would require a HUGE leap of faith for most of us. Guthrie says the truth and the necessity of faith often come clear to us only when most everything else has been stripped away.

That's true for me. How about for you?

I mentioned a few weeks ago that I had been reading a book and taking an online course with its author in August called, "*How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going.*" Rev. Susan Beaumont is a church consultant, coach, spiritual director and author of several books on leadership. Her bio says, "She is known for engaging cutting-edge organizational practices filtered through the lens of careful spiritual and theological reflection." (susanbeaumont.com)

We're living in a stripped-away time... a time of liminality, a time of desert wandering... taken to an exponential degree. School started in person or online for many students and teachers this week. People don't know what to do or how to be...a ll they know is they are scared... or angry or frustrated.

On this day when we would normally be in our sanctuary for Homecoming Sunday... pews filled with people singing out their favorite hymns, here we are and will be for the time being... sometimes in small gatherings in person with masks on, like last Sunday, or in virtual worship like this. It has made People sad and lonely and frustrated.

Our country is facing the liminality of the movement to hear and recognize the experience of black and brown people as we head toward our election in less than 8 weeks.

The anxiety is high... so high it's brought people to a level of emergency...

Where is the hope? What shall we do in this wilderness? The same God who led the children of Israel out of trouble and through the wilderness for 40 long years, who parted the Red Sea and made a way for them in the middle of danger... the same God who provided a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night...

That same God had led us, is leading us and will continue to lead us into tomorrow... one step at a time, one day at a time... God is with us.

Alleluia Amen!