



QUEST: Travel as a Spiritual Act **LEAVING THE FAMILIAR**

LIGHTING THE ALTAR CANDLES

MUSIC TO PREPARE US FOR WORSHIP Sue Koeppel, Musician

ANNOUNCEMENTS

*Due to the rise in Covid cases, please be diligent about wearing your mask properly and at all times in the church. Please practice social distancing. Thank you for your ongoing cooperation. Our Health Team is monitoring LaSalle County's numbers and they are increasing. Please check Facebook or your email for any announcement about the decision to go online only for a couple week.

VIDEO

WELCOME

Today we'll hear how the Hebrew people journeyed from slavery in Egypt to a promised land, a better place. Only issue: leaving Egypt wasn't a pleasant excursion. It's the Exodus story, a desert pilgrimage story reminding us that traveling, and leaving the familiar, is part of our faith tradition. At some point, we've all found ourselves needing to leave the familiar in order to grow and thrive. Beginning any journey involves leaving "home"—whether that's physically leaving to explore another part of the world or leaving a mindset that's keeping us from growing spiritually. Today's question: "What must we do to leave the familiar to journey into the unknown?" We're not tourists traveling to a foreign land. We're travelers on soul-widening adventures. Worship today has us leaving the familiar, traveling with God on a quest for deeper meaning. Would you stand as you are able and Joan will lead us in sharing our gathering words...

†SHARING OUR GATHERING WORDS

Joan Brooke, Liturgist

Sojourning God, your Spirit exists everywhere, on every path, inviting us to move with curiosity and compassion toward each other.

Give us courage to leave the familiar, to venture out beyond our walls, taking leave so that we will see with wider vision, know with deeper appreciation, exist with expanded perception. Nudge and guide us, O God, we pray. Amen

OPENING SONG “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” # 127

Let’s enter into an attitude of prayer with this prayer song...

PRAYING IN SONG “Stepping In” by Christophe Grundy, Worship Design Studio

PASTORAL PRAYER & LORD’S PRAYER

Gracious and Loving God, all along this journey called life, we only want to be in step with you, for you are our guide and our companion. From our first breath to our last, you are there. You run this race alongside us, at times encouraging us, at times comforting us, at times tending to our wounds, at time carrying us when we don’t think we can take another step and at other times challenging us to step into the unknown even as you are right here with us— with us in our discipline and devotion, with us in our weakness and failure, with us in our fear; with us in our hope. Today, we pray for all who are walking a hard journey: for those who have lost their health; for those whose daily paths encounter barbed wire and guns; for those who did not want to leave home but were forced to; for those who set out today in search of food and water; for those whose journey is shattered by economic hardship; for those whose journey is marred by pain or despair, for those who are making a move and beginning again; for those who are clinging on to something that’s ended; for those who are being bullied, and for those who are bullying; for those who have just taken their first breath, and for those who today will take their last. God, the journey is not just about the destination; it’s about each step along the way. God, help us see the journey itself as the blessing, with all its joys and sorrows. You use it all to shape us into your people. Traveling with you, and aware of your presence makes us who you desire us to be. So, help us be attentive to each step, in the darkness and in the light. Help us fully experience all we encounter, the good and the bad, for you are in it all. Bind us ever closer to you, O God and to each other and every neighbor. Give us strength and courage to follow your way, the way of love, a risk taking, vulnerable, inclusive love that shares the journey with every traveler. Hear us even now as we join our voices to pray the

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prayer Jesus taught us praying...Our Father who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. AMEN

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE READINGS

Joan Brooke, Liturgist

Psalm 121 (NRSV)

I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Exodus 13: 17-21 (NRSV)

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.” They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.

MESSAGE “Leaving the Familiar”

Pastor Cheri

Have you noticed? Been some pretty spectacular sunsets lately? Sunrises, too. My Facebook newsfeed's been flooded with sunrise and sunset beauty. Morning and night, the skies ablaze of color, sometimes crimson, burnt orange, and fiery yellow; other times fuchsia, cotton candy pink and a golden amber! Have the skies always been so spectacular? Or, are we just noticing them more often? But, why now? Could the pandemic be tuning our senses to see God's beauty as we travel through this hard time? Aren't we all on a journey searching for the good, the beautiful, the stuff that speaks to our souls to know love, peace, wonder and contentment? Could that be the reason we're seeing beautiful sunrises and sunsets?

So much of life has a leaving the familiar. Especially these days we're not traveling like we used to but we certainly are traveling in unfamiliar territory. Leaving the familiar can be a choice, like choosing to leave to go to college. We can also be invited to leave the familiar...with a new job, or marriage. We can also be forced to leave the familiar, too. Like a pastoral transition forces us to leave the familiar. Or, a cancer diagnosis, Covid, a stroke, a serious accident, or the death of someone we love. After any of that, life's never the same. We're left traveling in unfamiliar territory! Hard, because it's not our choice. Happened to my stepmom, Minerva. 3 years before she died, she suffered a stroke. The stroke affected her brain's occipital lobe, the part of the brain responsible for vision. After her stroke, Minerva couldn't read. Reading had been so much a part of her life; the newspaper, novels, the Bible, her investment portfolio. She read a lot but the stroke forced her to leave the familiar. Living after a stroke forced her to travel like a foreigner exploring a new land. Only, she didn't like that journey. To remind her she was never traveling alone, I copied today's Psalm. I posted Psalm 121 all over their house, the bathroom mirror, her bedroom closet door, on the frig, by her living room chair! No, she couldn't read it but she knew the words. Served to remind her to lift up her eyes. To look to the Lord for help, the Lord who neither slumber nor sleeps. She really needed that constant reminder.

How about you? The Lord is our keeper. He will keep our life, our going out and coming in from this time on and forevermore. Forever! No matter where life takes us! No matter how unfamiliar life becomes. Suggests there's never a time we AREN'T helped and kept by God. Psalm 121 helped my stepmom put her whole trust in God's care as she journeyed through life in the foreign, post-stroke lands. Psalm 121's so appropriate because it's a traveling psalm, a psalm of ascent. Ascent because the road to Jerusalem's an uphill climb. Jerusalem's located on Mount Zion. Hebrew families read Psalms out loud before they left or they sang Psalms on their journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals of their faith like the Passover, the Feast of Weeks (we know as Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles. Suggests worship and singing Psalms helps us leave the familiar. Worship and singing Psalms helps us know God's protective security all throughout our lives. Helpful then and helpful now as we journey through unfamiliar territories: like, life post 2020, life in a never-ending pandemic, life during a pastoral change, LIFE. Maybe we need to copy and post Psalm 121 all over our houses to help us travel through all that's unfamiliar? Or, better yet, let's just be regular travelers to worship in person or online! I also think today's ancient Exodus story can help us on our journey.

King Pharaoh enslaved the Hebrew people in Egypt. Wasn't until God sent the 10th plague that Pharaoh decided to let the people go. The Hebrew people left oppressive Egyptian slavery to travel to God's promise land. Today's scripture told us something very significant about when they left the familiar. God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that road was shorter. That road was a major trade route. That road was heavily guarded by Egyptian troops. God knows it's hard for us to leave the familiar. God knew any military opposition would cause them to give up and surrender. They'd return to the familiar, back to slavery, back to the oppression. What is it about us that keeps us stuck in the familiar, even when the familiar's hard, oppressive, or unhealthy? Today's scripture tells us: God chose the longer, most indirect route through the hot, dry desert. Sure, traveling God's route was more difficult in every way; but, it was safer. God's route wasn't heavily guarded. They'd be less likely to face armed military confrontation. The unfamiliar, well, it's just so unfamiliar. Sure it's harder. Sure it's longer, oftentimes way more difficult but God is with us. Scripture tells us by day YHWH, God went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way. God went ahead of them by night in a pillar of fire. God gave them light, day or night so they could travel safely. God gave them two clearly visible signs of God's presence with them. The pillars functioned to guide and protect the Hebrew people. They knew God never left them. And, still today, we remember the pillars of clouds and fire, as God's gracious act of love, moving them, moving us at the pace of God's grace, continuous reminders that God is with us. They couldn't see God, but they could see God was with them, leading, instructing, guiding, and directing.

So, how do we know God is with us, leading, instructing, guiding and directing us? The route through the pandemic's certainly been longer, not AT ALL direct and harder in every way...but I wonder...what could change for us if we saw this time as spiritual journey, a Quest, to be an awakened traveler, awakened to God's constant presence leading, instructing, guiding and directing us as we travel to new places or a new state of mind. The pandemic's forced us on this journey...just like my retirement's forced the church on a spiritual journey. But, can we look at this time as journey of exploring, encountering new people, new perspectives, new ways of living together? Isn't that what God's grace does? Grace awakens us to the joy of journeying with our loving God all our lives?

The origin of the word "quest" is to ask or seek, as in the word "question." Ever traveled and gotten lost? Some of us are better at asking for directions. Asking and seeking are humble positions. How's that asking for other's assistance work for

you? When you're lost... that's lost physically, but also lost spiritually. Just an aside, Christianity has a deep and troubling history of "con-quest." But, the origins of the word "conquest" come more from "conquer" than "quest." Sadly, our world is deeply rooted in white supremacy. We hold supremacist attitudes of our Western "civilization," Christianity, and capitalism. So, it's ever more important we approach the "quest" before us with humility—asking and seeking to understand before making assumptions and drawing conclusions! What if we continually question the lens through which we see the world and its people. Because if God's leading, instructing, guiding and directing us then we will most certainly leave the familiar. And, we can look forward to the loving things God's going to do here at Ottawa First and in our lives.

But here's the issue. Some of you've already talked to me about the next pastor. What you've said, tells me you're afraid to leave the familiar, afraid to venture out with God into this unknown territory. I've heard things like, "I hope he's like Just John or I hope we get a young man (safe to assume that means a young, white man). Or, I wonder if we could get Pastor Mark? But, in this quest to know God can we travel into the unknown territory of inclusive thinking? Can we see all people as possible Pastors: gay or straight, white or otherwise nationed and raced; male, female or non-binary? Oh, what a journey it is to really love every neighbor...to enter into and be in relationship with those who are not in our daily "line of sight." Will God expand our attention beyond those who frequent this "sanctuary?" Is God asking us to examine our prejudices? Do we have the grace to welcome and not exclude someone who might not be like us? Could we open ourselves to travel into unknown territory with a loving respect for everyone, including our new pastor?

Maybe all those sunrises and sunsets are expanding our horizons, challenging our preconceived notions. If that's the case then we know we're on a spiritual journey, with God. God always leads and guides us in eye-opening eureka moments if we just lift up our eyes to see we travel with God. If we see ourselves on a quest, a spiritual journey. Even if we never venture beyond Ottawa, let's be open to "travel" with God. Let's learn about other cultures, religions and lifestyles. Let's adopt a "travelers' mindset." Traveling's a spiritual act because God is always on the move....always going before us, day and night...We'll find our way through this time of unknowing by seeing every sun rise and set on each new day as a sign of God's presence with us, always with us....Just like God led the Hebrew people by the safest but not the shortest, easiest route, God leads us too. Just know,

sometimes the journeys more important or as important as the destination. If the pandemic's taught us anything, it's not "are we there yet?" Meaning, is the pandemic over. Maybe it's more about how open we are to traveling with God, about seeing God leading, and directing us to some new thing! Have faith. Keep looking up! Be assured of this: the LORD will keep you from all evil; the Lord will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. AMEN

INVITATION TO GIVE

Grateful and thankful for all that God was, is and will always be, we bring our gifts, tithes and offerings to help other's know God was, is and will always be. In this unfamiliar time, the church's future and the opportunities for new ministries rest in our hands. What gift can you give to bring about something new? The offering receptacles are at both exists to receive your gift. If you're online, you're invited to send a gift to the church or use our secure online paypal giving option. Now, let's pray to dedicate our gifts and thank God for this gift giving opportunity. Let's pray...

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

God of new beginnings, as we move into this new year, stir in us the feelings of expectation! Kindle our hearts and minds to see possibilities for your kingdom in our world. Help us believe that the world we have can be better: more loving, more just, more compassionate, and looking much more like the world you imagine for us. Lord, help us give generously this day to empower that to happen. In the name of Christ, our Savior and Redeemer, we pray. Amen

†**CLOSING SONG** "Forward Through the Ages" #555

†**BENEDICTION & SENDING FORTH**

You really can leave the familiar.

You are never alone!

God loves you too much to leave you wandering aimlessly. God is with you. God is our guide in this time of transition.

Go with God and know love, peace, awe and contentment in the sunrise and sunset of each new day.

MUSIC AFTER WORSHIP

Sue Koeppe, Musician