

WRITTEN ON ROADS

Pentecost 20 – Cycle C: Lamentations 1:1-6; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

It all started with Abraham and Sarah, the Bible tells us. Abraham hearing a voice within himself, a voice which would later be revealed to him and through him as the voice of the Creator of heaven and earth, the Creator of all life, calling him to gather his large family, his herds and flocks, and pack up his considerable earthly possessions, leave Haran, and make the long trip south on foot to Shechem, approximately 650 kilometres away and on the other side of the River Jordan. “This land will be your new home,” the voice told him; and Abraham obeyed the voice, and upon his safe arrival at Shechem, built an altar from which he would begin a tradition of worship to the One God, the invisible God, but nevertheless the God revealed little by little to Abraham and those who would follow him as the God who was, and is, and always shall be; the God who not only creates and governs the earth, but also the heavens; the God who calls to people and prays for their faith; the God who blesses, leads, provides, and protects people; the God who, working through a people and their leaders inspires laws to live by; the God who remains faithful and sure, even as people disobey those laws and go their own way.

The journey to Shechem, although the longest, was not the last. The voice urged Abraham to move again to Bethel, and then to Egypt, and then back to Bethel, to Hebron, and finally to Hobah, near Damascus – the whole journey from beginning to end adding up to about 1700 kilometres on foot, the distance from here to approximately the Saskatchewan border. What people saw in Abraham and Sarah, both during their lifetime and in retrospect, was faith. Their journeys always led from blessing to blessing. At each destination, they built an altar to the One, invisible God. The voice promised them a child in their old age, and the promise was fulfilled in the birth of Isaac. Their long journey, their devotion, their obedience, their worship, made faith visible for their family and the countless generations who followed. And “the journey” became, it seems, the context for faith’s growth and development among the Hebrew people.

In time of famine, the Hebrew people migrate to Egypt where ample supplies of grain have been stored. They sojourn in Egypt for approximately 200 years, and then when living conditions have become unbearable because the Egyptians pressed them into slavery, the One God, first known to Abraham and Sarah hundreds of years before, raises up a leader in Moses who takes the people out of Egypt and into the wilderness where they journey and are tested and are blessed many times over. At the end of the generation, approximately 40 years, Joshua leads them into Canaan, the land of promise. They are established in Canaan as a nation, eventually as Israel. Notions of their own greatness, however, eventually lead to their downfall, the invasion by Babylon lamented in today’s First Reading. And the people move again, this time at the command of the conquering armies to points unknown – the Dispersion it is called, the Diaspora. At the end of 70 years, we have a vision of their return across the rough terrain to a ruined homeland where they begin again.

Thousands upon thousands of kilometres; a people unsettled, it seems, and their God always present during all of their travelling, their escape, their exile, and their return. To read the Old Testament is to read of a people on the move and God on the move with them. To read the New Testament is to read of Jesus travelling from place to place, calling, teaching, healing, preaching – all of it later seen as the long, but inevitable road to Jerusalem, where the struggle of good versus evil is played out once and for all through the cross of Calvary and the empty tomb. And it is on the road to Emmaus that Jesus encounters Cleopas and his friend, and opens the scriptures for them to the extent that their hearts burned with passion for the gospel.

It is no wonder that “the journey” becomes the primary metaphor for the experience of faith, and life itself with all its changes and challenges. Faith is discovered and revealed, as one of our Prayers at the Table reminds us, “through the water, by night and day, across the wilderness, out of exile, on the way, and into the future.” “*Life is a journey,*” Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “not a destination.”

The metaphor of journey relating to faith is not explicit in our Second Reading today from 2 Timothy, but it is implied as Paul identifies Timothy’s pedigree. He sees Timothy as *inheriting* his faith through his mother and grandmother, both of them, apparently, conspicuous members of the early church at Ephesus. At the time of writing, it seems that Paul is concerned that Timothy’s commitment may be waning. He writes to Timothy, “rekindle the gift of God that is within you...do not be ashamed of the

testimony about our Lord...God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” Paul, also, we see in this passage, has a place on the road Timothy walks. As Timothy received the gift of faith through his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, so he has been tutored and commissioned by Paul through the laying on of hands, the same sign we use to this day for baptizing, confirming, ordaining, and commending the people of God in Christ Jesus. Paul is revealed in this passage as Timothy’s mentor and friend. The road on which Lois and Eunice and Timothy and Paul and you and I walk is the road of succession from generation to generation, from congregation to congregation. We receive the Word of God and then become the Word of God as God’s story and our own stories intermingle.

It is the community, of course, the community of the church in which all of these stories are held. Coming to this place for worship, being part of this faith community, acknowledging our place in the succession of faith from generation to generation is not self-serving. It is affirming, to be sure, but it is also something we do for one another and for others we will never know. So many people came to our barbecue a few weeks ago with the same story: “We pass this church every day, but we have never gotten to know the people who are this church. We know the church is always busy, we know it for its community garden, but we’ve never been inside the building; we never really knew what this church was all about.” Of course they did. They knew we were here and are very much part of the community – perhaps just not their community. And now that has changed. We may be only a speck on their lens of the world, but they and we have made a connection. These folks may never join us for worship on Sunday, but they know that we will be here week in and week out, year in and year out, proclaiming the good news of love and welcome and care. If they get to know us better, they will learn of our efforts toward justice and service, and our passion for peace in the world.

So many congregations in our church and other mainline churches have embraced the culture of defeat that is so much part of our post-modern world, a world that has displaced faith with a love of control and a passion for discovery. Faith in the context of scientific discovery, theoretical mathematics, and quantum physics, seems a little lacklustre when compared with all these things. And yet, they are not mutually exclusive. For all the well-deserved euphoria proceeding from the exciting times we live in, faith is still our homing, our harbour, the stuff of hope, our call into the future. Human nature compromises us at every turn. Sin and evil prick the balloons we release into the sky. Faith is still essential if we are truly to grow in wisdom and understanding.

At that same barbecue I just mentioned, I saw a parable of faith from my Study window. It was the morning of the barbecue and it was pouring rain. Out on the lawn, Keith Myra and Ken Schade were putting up tents and canopies, able to imagine a blue sky, warm temperatures, and hundreds of people gathering from all corners of north Waterloo to enjoy a meal together. “Faith,” the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

And so, we, too, walk the road. We remember in love those who have gone before us in our families and in this congregation, and who inspired us to become part of the worshipping and serving community here. But we also are those people for others: that’s what being “in Mission for Others” means. To be people of faith is to be people for others: we can’t help ourselves! But, St. Paul would say to us, we can always do better. We can gather groceries for the Food Bank’s Thanksgiving Food Drive; we can bring in sweaters for the Syrian refugees in Jordan; we can continue the tradition of a fall barbecue for the wider community; we can live-stream our Sunday worship so that our worshipping congregation increases; we can continue to assess the needs of the world around us and the strengths we have to meet those needs.

And when we struggle – and Jesus pulls no punches in this morning’s Gospel concerning how great the struggle is in ministry and discipleship – all we need to do is look around us. We are not alone: there are others on the road with us; when we look behind us, there is a numberless throng; and as we look ahead, there is only light, the light of Christ’s resurrection glory, promising resurrection, new life, and new beginnings.

Those who have walked the road before us all have stories of stumbling and even falling down on the way. But through all of their stories, there is another story, the story of God’s faithfulness and love; promise and fulfillment; covenant and covenant-keeping. “Bless now, O God, *our* journey on the road where faith is found.”