

Easter Vigil 2019 Sermon

If you think about it, the Bible is basically a book of advice for travelers.¹ Everyone in the Bible is on a journey. In the Old Testament they are journeying to the Promised Land. In the New Testament it is to the Kingdom of God. There are some books in the Bible, such as Exodus, that read like a travel journal. There are other books that give advice on how to get along on your journey, like the Book of Proverbs.

In the New Testament it is pretty much the same. Jesus said, “The Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” That meant that he was always on the move. He recruited people by saying, “Follow me.”

A central story in the Old Testament is the story of the Exodus, the story of the people of Israel journeying through the parted waters of the Red Sea, and then traveling across the desert wilderness for forty years. The people did not walk alone. God accompanied them all the way. When they were running from the Egyptian army, God was with them as a “pillar of fire by night, and a cloud by day.”

The early Christians, many of whom (like Jesus) were Jews, saw the Paschal Candle used in the Great Vigil of Easter as echoing that pillar of fire leading the ancient Israelites safely away from the Egyptian army and toward freedom through the dark night of that first Passover (as we heard earlier in the reading from Exodus). This morning, in the dim light, we followed behind this Paschal Candle in a symbolic journey through the darkness of our world and our lives, led not by a pillar of fire, but by the Light of Christ, from which we took our own small light. The Great Vigil of Easter is our *Christian* Passover service, and just as those ancient Israelites, in the *first* Passover, were on a journey through the Red Sea and across the Sinai Desert to freedom in the Promised Land, so our lives in Christ are a *journey*, following – and bearing – the Light of Christ. The Great Vigil of Easter symbolizes and re-enacts that journey.

We have just read four stories from the Old Testament which mark points along the journey of the people of God – stories which are part of our own journey, since we, too, are children of Abraham (Gal. 3:7). To be sure, there are **lots** of stories in the Old Testament – some of which reflect a view of God that seems very different from the God revealed in Jesus. But we shouldn’t be too surprised by this, for those who have honestly sought God down through the centuries have, at *certain* times, had **clearer** pictures of who God *really* is than at *other* times. As Richard Rohr says, the Bible is no different from life: it is three steps forward, two steps back. “It gets the point and then loses it or doubts it. Our job is to see where the three steps forward are heading (invariably toward mercy, forgiveness, inclusion, nonviolence, and trust) which then gives us the ability to both recognize and forgive the two steps backward (which are usually about vengeance,

pettiness, law over grace, forms over substance, and requirements over relationship).

“Fortunately,” Fr. Rohr states, “God works with **all** of it, both the forward *and* the backward, and that’s what bases the whole journey precisely in divine mercy or what the Bible calls ‘steadfast love’ (*hesed*).”²

Now, I don’t know about you, but **I** find that a huge relief – that God works in **all** of my life’s journey, both when I am going forward AND when I’m going backward!

Fr. Rohr suggests that in reading Scripture, we should “connect the dots” marking the three steps forward, and then we can see the trajectory of the evolving understanding of God throughout the age-old journey of God’s people recorded in Scripture. Tonight’s readings, I believe, mark dots on that trajectory of our continually growing and deepening understanding of the God who is revealed most clearly in Jesus the Christ. It should not surprise us that the *later* writings of the Old Testament (like the two readings we just heard from Ezekiel) often reflect a more evolved and clearer picture of the God revealed in Jesus than many of the *earlier* writings do. It only makes sense that over 1000 years, the Jewish people would *grow* and *evolve* in their understanding of, and relationship with, God! **New** Testament scholars, after all, point out the evolution of **St. Paul’s** faith from his earlier letters to his later ones.

If we are faithful followers of God, we will be ever on a journey, growing in our understanding of, and relationship with, God.

Episcopal monk Geoffrey Tristram notes that “Christianity has never been simply a static body of doctrine, but rather a dynamic way of life. The first term used in the New Testament to describe Christians was ‘followers of the Way.’”³ (Acts 9:2, 22:4) Jesus says, “Come. Follow me,” and “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”

Concerning those to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection, author George Weigel writes: “as their understanding of what had happened to Jesus and to themselves grew, they grasped that there had been an ‘evolutionary leap’ in the human condition. A new way of being had been encountered in the manifestly human but utterly *different* life of the one they met as the Risen Lord. That insight radically changed all those who embraced it.”⁴ Easter brought an “evolutionary leap” – a quantum leap forward – in the human journey!

Even Martin Luther, who taught many doctrines as inviolable truth, said, “This life [in Christ...] is not righteousness, but *growth* in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road.”⁵

Our life in Christ, as The Great Vigil of Easter so dramatically depicts, is not the end; it is the road, the journey. When you were baptized, it was not the *end* of your growth in Christ; it simply marked a new beginning. Holy Baptism has always been called “initiation,” and the fact that the Church encourages us to renew our baptismal vows today and several other times during the year tells us that we need to be reminded, over and again, of what the Christian life is about and the direction in which we are headed (which is always to become more loving, more united with Christ). And we take these vows *together*, since we are not on this journey alone. All the parts of the Body of Christ nourish and serve each other, causing the whole Body to grow.

Not that the journey is always easy, or straight. We move three steps forward, then two steps back; we veer off in this direction, and then in that direction. Easter does not solve all our problems, any more than baptism does. As Pope Benedict put it in his Easter message in 2010: “Easter does not work magic. Just as the Israelites found the desert awaiting them on the far side of the Red Sea, so the Church, after the Resurrection, always finds history filled with joy and hope, grief and anguish. And yet this history is changed... it is truly open to the future.”³ Anglican priest Samuel Wells puts it this way: “... in our confusing grief, in our sorrows, loss, anxieties, depressions, addiction, recoveries, worries, and concerns, in each place that we find ourselves, we know that if we keep walking, if we keep gathering at the table, if we keep listening for God, if we keep putting one foot in front of the other, if we keep treating the strangers among us as messengers from God, if we stay open to those moments when we feel strangely warmed, then God just might reveal godself to us.”⁶

If we but stay on the road, supporting one another along the journey.

AMEN

- 1 This idea comes from Mark Trotter, Christian Globe Networks, Inc., 2007
- 2 from Daily Meditation, “Circuitous Path,” Monday, August 25, 2014
- 3 <https://www.ssje.org/2005/04/10/emmaus-2/>
- 4 “The Easter Effect and How it Changed the World,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 30, 2018
- 5 Martin Luther, *Defense and Explanation of all the Articles* (1521), LW vol. 39.
- 6 <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2014-05/resurrection-recognition-and-revelation>