

Are We There Yet?

Sermon for Campbell UMC

June 25, 2017

Deut 31: 1-8

Acts 1: 6-11

I. Annual Conference

Share about transitions and feelings about new Bishop presiding; lots of new expectations; different feelings about the theme. Learning each other, experiencing difficulties and also pieces of her that were welcome and prophetic. Ultimately, I think the theme of the week was how the community, the body of the annual conference wrestled with the newness and change.

II. Exodus community in similar position

Can imagine that the Israelites on their way to the promised land must have wrestled in a similar way. What would it mean that Moses wasn't going to be with them? What would this new guy be like? What would change? And, to be fair, these are folks who have already been in transition for a long time. This journey, which could have taken about two weeks on foot, would wind up taking them over 40 years. Keep expecting the transition to end, for the destination to come into sight and be realized. Doesn't quite work that way.

From Exodus to Joshua, I keep expecting them to get there, cross over, and live in the land of milk and honey. They've worked and waited so long to get there! The transition has surely been enough! But then, Moses says he won't be there with them, a new guy is going to be in charge. They pass into the land that has been promised to them, but it's not quite the way we might imagine it. Not vacant and welcoming; filled with other tribes and people that they have to be opposed, conquered, and removed... a job that

wasn't ever quite finished. The Old Testament continues to be about how the Israelites keep trying to figure out how to be in community with God and with each other in a way that God approves, in a way that leads to peace and settlement.

The struggle continued... leading up to the point of our text in Acts, where the disciples ask Jesus if he's now going to restore the kingdom of Israel.

III. Disciples expectations upset

Expectation was that the Messiah would come and restore the kingdom of Israel on earth. They had to be reeling from the transitions, too. They had lost Jesus, and then they had regained him. This expectation that he, as the Messiah, would now fulfill what had been expected for so long had to have been so present in their minds. Instead, he leaves, leaving an open, unanswered space of what was to come next.

These are very difficult spaces in which to dwell, spaces of the transition from one clear place, practice, or expectation to the next space that may be very undefined, or may have some definition but is not yet seen or known. LIMINAL - expand.

IV. Community

There are a lot of reactions that I could imagine and understand in response to the repetitive nature of these stories of struggle and transition - frustration, exhaustion, or even distancing - that's their story from that time, but not my story today. Rather than give into these reactions, let us hold space for what else might emerge.

What is the point of all of this, of these stories? It wasn't Moses, it wasn't Joshua. In truth, it wasn't even Jesus. Jesus didn't come for Jesus' sake; he came for us, for those who lived beyond him, for those who came after.

And while that might be true for each of us individually, there's no where in any of these stories of transition, upheaval, and recreation that points to the importance of the individual story.

It is all about the community. The gathered body. The folks who were brought along, lived through the trials, grew and loved and fought and messed up and grew some more together. There are some challenging things about being in the United Methodist Church, one of which is that we sometimes have our pastors moved when it's not our choice, but there's at least one thing that our larger church system gets right - it is not about the pastor. It is about us. Pastors come and go, beloved or bedeviled, and their transience continues to highlight that the heart and meaning of the church lies in the congregation.

When Bill and our family joined this congregation earlier this year, it was for many reasons. We live half a mile from Los Altos UMC, but we will continue coming here. Because of you. Because of the feeling of community that is in this place. Because of the beautiful plurality of faces and experiences. Because of the sincerity of the hearts that we have experienced in worship with you. We will miss Kathi, there is no doubt, but we are still Campbell United Methodist Church.

V. Progression of focus

This is not to undermine the importance of leadership, or of pastors. We've gotta have a starting point, as people, we have to have a place to begin. Almighty Love, Vast Grace, Divine Absolution and Salvation... these are beautiful and amazing things, but we're not really equipped as humans to walk right up to those concepts and swallow them whole. We need a place to begin, and that place is usually another person. A loving face. An interpretive voice that we find compelling and accessible. And so, we have pastors. We have pastors who create communities, with more

faces and voices and welcoming hands, we hope. And once we find a combination of those things that feels good enough, we feel like that might be it. That might be enough. But we are not gathered for our own sakes; we are gathered as the body of Christ, with Jesus as the beating heart. Our community is built around the story and person and ongoing life of Jesus, and forgetting that would be like a hand or leg believing itself to be independent of the heart, forgetting that the blood coursing through it, keeping it alive, comes from that vital organ.

The stories and life of Jesus are the lifeblood flowing through any healthy and vital community of faith - the stories of liberation, forgiveness, and engagement show us the way that we are meant to live and give life. The modeling of gathering, listening, eating, and taking time to pray nourish us for the work of the journey. And the death, the final release of Jesus from this world endlessly points us to the deep truth that we are called to love each other and the hope God has for this world even more than we are to love our own lives. And the truth that our salvation in this world is more dependent on others than on ourselves - on what and how others give to us than what we can give to ourselves.

We start with the pastor. Who forms the community. Who is gathered to join with and learn about and grow in love for Jesus. And surely, that is enough. We are there, right?

Marcus Borg, a current theologian, once gave a talk I was able to attend, in which he gave a very helpful illustration. Astronomer and moon :: Jesus and God. Our Creator. The one with whom we have our first and most sustaining relationship. God the Eternal, who goes before us and comes after us, the one who is continually loving and nourishing us, extending grace, and luring us in directions. In the midst of transient life, God abides, and when tides change and the wind shifts, God flows with us.

This is a hard Sunday. Pastor Kathi preached her last sermon here last week, and it is hard to say goodbye. Next week, we will have a new pastor here to guide, shepherd, and nurture us, and it can be hard to say hello and begin again. In between, we are here today, the gathered body, the church. This is the Sunday of holding our breath, of feeling the absence, of waiting and wondering and hoping.

It is in times like these that it is good to have ancestors in faith, those who have walked the road and left a story behind, like echoes through a mountain pass. Let us hear once more what they call for us to hear... Deut 31: 3, 6, 8