

21st Sunday after Pentecost
St. Anne's Episcopal Church
October 29, 2017

The Best Part

I am going to begin this morning with a question to ponder: What is the best part about taking a trip somewhere? Let's call it a trip that you *want* to take; to a family gathering, a favorite conference where you always learn new things and catch up with old friends, or an important business trip where you get to spread your wings with new responsibilities or challenges. Or maybe one of those "once in a lifetime" vacations to see and do something you have dreamed about for a long time. In any case, what is the *best* part of the trip? Is it the earliest moments in your imagination of what the experience might be like—the place, or what you will do there? Is it the research and the planning—looking at pictures online of new and interesting places to stay, to dine, and to explore? Is it the scheduling and the packing and arranging to keep your everyday life intact while you are gone—finding someone to look after the house, water the plants, take care of the pets, and then—at last—pushing *submit* on the "away message" for your email that lies and says, "I will be away from my desk without access to email for the next (however long) and will be happy to respond when I return?" For some, the best part of the trip is the traveling across time and geography—by plane, train or automobile, or even by boat—taking in stride all the uncertainties of travel in the 21st Century, because the traveling itself is a reminder of how big and beautiful and diverse the world is. For others, the best part might be in the getting there—shaking off the road dust, taking off their traveling shoes, stretching their legs, and taking in a new place full of possibilities and surprises.

This would be my favorite part—that time and space of first impressions, before reality sets in with the inevitable disappointment in my own great expectations. This is the perfect moment, after the stresses of daily responsibilities have been left behind—including all the last-minute crises that always arise when a trip is being planned and getting underway. I used to say in my medical practice that the patients could smell it when I was about to be gone for a while, scrambling into the office with last minute reports of serious symptoms they had kept to themselves for weeks, going into labor with babies in distress, or choosing the last hour to have that heart attack—and this was

not counting how they would make me pay for leaving after I got back. And then there was the inevitable child-produced crisis—like the time Owen at the age of 2 decided for some reason, unknown to this day, to take a very large jar of pickles out of the refrigerator door—while we were packing the car—and then to drop it on his big toe, requiring a detour to the clinic where I worked and had just escaped, to tend to the painful hematoma under his toenail. It was always something that delayed the start time. So, for me, that moment of arrival, of having survived all the trauma of getting there, was always the best.

I suppose it is the memory of arrival that helps me to identify with Moses from our reading today from Deuteronomy. We have come to the end of our story of Moses, which began with his mother hiding him in a basket and sending him down the river, and continued through his upbringing in the Pharaoh's household and his escape to Midian. Then there was his call from God in the burning bush, his leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt at a dead run, through the parted Red Sea and into the desert wilderness—for 40 years. We followed Moses as he listened to God, argued with God, and pleaded with God on behalf of his band of stiff-necked people, becoming in fits and starts the leader that God called him to be. And now we have arrived—finally arrived—with Moses at the top of Mount Nebo, where the Lord has shown him the whole land that he promised to the descendants of Abraham—from the sea to the desert and the valley of Jericho—as far as the eye could see on a clear day. Moses had finally arrived—years after his imagination was first kindled, years after the stresses of leaving were just a bad memory, years after the travel through a very big world full of new and alien places. Moses had arrived, shaken off the dust, taken off his traveling shoes and straightened up to breathe in the blessing of new possibilities and surprises in this new and promised place.

Moses had made it; he had imagined and prepared and packed and persuaded and cajoled his large unwieldy family to follow as he trekked across a wilderness sustained by manna and water from rocks and the promises of God. And then it was over. He was done. He was so done that at the ripe old age of 120 he died—right there on the spot. He had loved the Lord his God with all his heart and all his soul and all his might as he had been commanded by the Lord to do, and as he had long ago taught God's people to do. And then he died, was buried in a place that would not be marked,

was mourned by the Israelites for a short time and left behind. The Israelites kept going, because they had places to go things to do—because in the end, the story was not about Moses, but about God’s plan and God’s will for God’s people.

Hey, wait just a minute here, we might think. Moses suffered through all that, and that’s all he gets? Just a *glimpse* of what they had been traveling and struggling toward all those years? What kind of payoff is that? We are all about taking a trip now and again, but we do not want our travel reservations cancelled at the last minute. We do not want our luxury hotel suite given to someone else, leaving us to scramble for any port in a storm. We do not want to arrive at a conference to find that our time to present work for which we are exceedingly prepared has been left off the program. Because in our world—the one we live in and make our plans in and dream our dreams in—our world is *always* about us.

So, what is our take home message today? Should we stop trying on new things or avoid adventures full of new possibilities and surprises because things might not turn out like we want or expect? Should we walk away from burning bushes, or run back to Egypt, where if we keep our heads down at least there is bread to eat? We have already learned some hard lessons on this journey with Moses—not to hoard manna and to think twice when our attention is stolen away from the Commandments of God towards a golden calf. And we have in the most desperate of times learned that from the parched desert, rivers of water can flow out of a rock.

Most importantly, we have learned that though we do not always see where it is we are going, if we are faithful, if we show up, if we love one another as God first loved us, if we are willing to sacrifice—with our whole selves and all that we have—that our Lord God will lead us where we need to go, and provide the guides to get us there.

I identify with poet and writer Jan Richardson who says that the older she gets the more she thinks of God as the Ancient of Days, the Holy One of the Long Haul, who seems deeply fond of working things out over vast expanses of time¹. This is a reassuring image held up for the people of God as we stumble and resist God’s call on our lives—as we turn away from a full-on and life-long commitment to become transformed in Christian community. Our whole world every day pushes and pulls us in

¹ Jan Richardson, *Through the Advent Door*

so many different directions that we scarcely know *who* we are, much less what we should *do* from one day to the next. Following Jesus like we mean it, giving ourselves the space to grow into a deeper, fuller life as Christians often gets a pass—until we have more time, more resources, less distraction, more bread in the larder. And when we reduce God’s call on our lives to just one more thing on our to-do list, we miss the out on the promises of love and grace and direction and peace that stretch from the sea to the valley of Jericho.

This call is not simple. The call God has placed on his people requires attention and faithfulness, learning and worship, and passionate love and care for what—and whom—God loves. This call requires imagination, and discernment in community, and planning and willingness to step up and into some places that might be new and unfamiliar. It requires time for living together, praying together, working out conflicts together, and keeping faith together that the Holy One of the Long Haul has the map, the destination, and the way forward for the trip of a lifetime well in hand.

And what is the best part of the trip a community of faith takes with God? *All of it*. The dreaming, the visioning, the planning, the trying and succeeding and failing. The regrouping and starting over. The walking through the sea as if on dry land, being fed enough for each day and drinking water from a rock. The traveling and seeing that the world is bigger and lovelier and more in need of us than we had imagined—filled with those whom God loves and wants us to love. The arriving and seeing the promised land—even the dying, the mourning and the moving on—all of it is the best part when our commitment to the journey is taken together, and is blessed by our God of the Long Haul who is always, always, present.

Of course, we know the story of the Israelites did not end with Moses. They followed Joshua into Canaan fighting their way through foreign lands full of indigenous people, suffering setbacks brought on by bad leadership and their own self-centeredness. They loved the Lord their God and built a Temple and saw it torn down—twice—and got carried into exile and back again, repenting and forgiven. They learned and prospered and loved and carried new generations forward into places of possibilities and surprises. And when I wonder what the people of God would say was the best part of the whole trip, I imagine that they would speak from a memory of a faithful God—the Ancient of Days—traveling with them and say, “all of it.” Amen.