



*“In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out – until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels” ~Exodus 40: 36-38*

Dear Partners in Ministry,

Are we there yet? Any parent will tell you that they have heard this question called from the back seat of the vehicle any number of times, and not only on the longer car rides. Parents learn pretty quickly to prepare their children for the extended trip; gathering toys, games, and books, a favorite pillow, movies, whatever they can find to keep the children busy for the duration of the journey. Because without a sense of time or distance, children need to be given context, or other cues as in, “We will not arrive before supper time” or “We will be there before dark.” Such preparation helps the children be more resilient to the demands of travel. Knowing they will be in the car for awhile helps them settle in for a longer journey.

I wonder, if the Israelites had been more prepared for their wilderness wanderings, if that would have helped. The book of Exodus is full of accusations of being a “stiff necked people” as they complain about the conditions of their journey and never getting an answer to their incessant question (which isn’t actually recorded, but may as well have been) “Are we there yet?”

The Israelites didn’t arrive for 40 years. And while the actual question is not explicitly recorded, what we do have is a record of their disobedience, their complaining and doubts, the challenges of leadership, the lack of acceptable food and water, the weariness of the journey, and how people had trouble getting along. And yet, in the midst of all of this, all the griping and angst, the overwhelming witness of the book of Exodus and what is interwoven throughout this journey story, is the immediate, close, and faithful presence of God.

God travels with the Israelites, guides them, even feeds them. During this journey, the Israelites enjoy a relationship of intimacy and care with God, unequalled anywhere else in the whole history of salvation. I think of Charles Dickens’ words, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”. It was worst because the people struggled and suffered. There was uncertainty. There was pain and death. But it was also the best of times as God’s presence was visibly and palpably with them. Despite all the complaining, never before or since were the people of God so utterly dependent upon God’s care and guidance. Their trust was out of necessity, but it was trust well placed.

Our religious tradition is thick with wilderness stories and analogies. Wilderness times are marked by uncertainty and pain even as they are synonymous with complete dependence

on God, and a deepening of that relationship, borne of desperation yes, but do we not cling to God all the more fiercely when our need is greater? The season of Lent is often likened to a wilderness time. Or the journey of grief. Or a time of healing from an illness, or any other time of trial and tribulation.

The Israelites wandered in the wilderness 40 years. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness 40 days. I suggest that this time of pandemic is also a wilderness time and a journey that is blessed with trust and dependence on God.

Like any wilderness story, our current time is marked with uncertainty. And as people of faith, we are blessed to once again and always depend upon the Spirit of God in Christ Jesus to sustain and guide us, weary travelers that we are.

Because the difficult truth is, we are not going to “arrive” for some time. We would do well to prepare ourselves and our children, our congregation members and our neighbors, to understand what it will mean to learn to live with this new virus until a vaccine is readily available, or until 60% to 70% of the population is immune. Such preparation creates resiliency. And we will need to be resilient to the demands of this journey else we start to gripe and complain and not get along well with each other.

The lifting of government restrictions does not mean that the virus is no longer a threat. Nor does it mean that life, and worship, can return to pre-pandemic rhythms. Even as we are legally allowed to gather in groups of less than 10 and then less than 50, we and those we love are still at risk and precautions must be taken to protect the most vulnerable among us.

Watch for the cues: We will arrive when widespread testing is available, when tracking is possible, and ultimately, when there is a vaccine. Like the Israelites, we do not have a map. Like the Israelites, our arrival time is still far off. And like the Israelites, we will arrive a different people than when our journey began.

But we are a resilient people, striving for patience and faithfulness in these wilderness days. Know that God travels with us, guiding us, sustaining us in our weariness.

Again, I ask you to seek out the blessing that is in these days. God is ever present, ever faithful, and will bring us to that day when there is an answer to the question, “Are we there yet?”.

For now, the answer is no, not even close. Settle in for a longer journey. But we’ll get there, and we’ll get there together.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan

