

The Journey's Not Over

Return from Sabbatical – Luke 12:13-21

Preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 4, 2019

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I am very glad to be back here with you this morning! I have had the chance to worship with our friends at several of our neighboring parishes, something that just isn't possible since I am generally busy on Sunday mornings, but I haven't found any to match the beauty, and closeness, and the quiet spirit of this home.

The last three months have been a real journey, but in line with Jesus' parable in this morning's Gospel lesson, it was not quite the journey I had planned. By the time I shared our sabbatical plans with those of you who were here the last Sunday of April, and the first day of my sabbatical, we had already made a lot of concessions to the new realities dictated by Jenny's cancer diagnosis, but even that altered plan got altered. My camping trip to the Mexican border, for example, already downgraded to western Missouri, was further modified by the very-first-night recognition that my beloved Hadley Grace is most definitely not a fan of tent camping. And though by the last Sunday I was with you, Jenny and I had already given up the idea of visiting our friends in Montana, in deference to a couple visits to the ER, we ended up abandoning the substitute trip to Michigan's Upper Peninsula as well. There were a lot of changes to the plans, but in addition to the air trips to Israel and Belize, we still managed to put something like 5,000 miles on Jenny's Subaru and another 6,000 on my truck – in just three months.

One of the things one does on one's sabbatical, I have often heard, is catch up on one's reading. Now, I admitted early and often that I wanted my sabbatical to be distinctly non-productive, more like the biblical concept of sabbath than the academic model. So perhaps it won't surprise you too much that my sabbatical reading followed that philosophy as well. I share a subscription with my sons to an Amazon service called Audible that allows me to "read" books with my ears rather than my eyes, and I definitely got my money's worth during those 10,000 plus road miles. My reading list included a couple heavier pieces: Flavius Josephus' history of The Jewish Wars, and psychologist Steven Pinker's Enlightenment Now – oh, I know you are all jealous on both counts – but the list was much more heavily weighted toward Harry Potter and Tom Clancy. I almost stumbled into my favorite "read" of the whole journey, however, right here toward the end of the trail, finally listening to the last few "pages" just this past week during a quick trip back here to visit a sick friend from a cottage Jenny and I had rented in Murray for our last away time.

Unless you are considerably younger than I, you know at least some of the work of literary giant John Steinbeck. But I had never read his last major work, *Travels with Charlie in Search of America*. At the end of what was undeniably a phenomenal career as author and social commentator, Steinbeck set out on a three-month circumnavigation of much of the lower forty-eight with his standard French poodle, Charlie. From just that description, perhaps you can see why I picked this one for my list. But I hadn't gotten through the first chapter before I discovered just how wonderful a fit it was for my own sabbatical journey, as the author laid out his own philosophy of the journey: "Once a journey is designed, equipped, and put in process," Steinbeck began, "a new factor enters and takes over. A trip, a safari, an exploration, is an entity, different from all other journeys. It has personality, temperament, individuality, uniqueness. A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. And all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless." Hearing especially that last line as my own deeply altered journey was quickly approaching its conclusion, I felt a real connection.

"We find after years of struggle." Steinbeck concluded his opening argument, "that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us. Tour masters, schedules, reservations, brass-bound and inevitable, dash themselves to wreckage on the personality of the trip. Only when this is recognized can the blown-in-the-glass bum relax and go along with it. Only then do the frustrations fall away."

For over seven-and-a-half years now, I have tried to remind you that the Christian life, the Christ-like life, the life in Christ, is by far more a journey than it is a destination. There are bends and turns

along the way, as we seek to understand Christ's call to follow him. There are confirmations and changes to whatever we thought we understood the plan to be, as we seek to conform our lives to the loving, trusting life of the one who is our companion and guide. There are peaks and valleys in the landscape of our journey as we more and more find our reason, and our refreshment and rest, in his near and constant presence. "Only then," as Steinbeck says, "do the frustrations fall away," so that we can truly live into our Master's simple, but oh so complicated plan to love God and love each other.

"In the beginning of this record," Steinbeck begins to bring Travels with Charlie to conclusion, "I tried to explore the nature of journeys, how they are things in themselves, each one an individual, and no two alike." "That discussion, however," he continues, "did not go into the lifespan of journeys. This seems to be variable and unpredictable." "Who has not known a journey to be over and dead before the traveler returns?" he asks. "The reverse is also true," he answers, "Many a trip continues long after movement in time and space have ceased." Steinbeck describes an old man from his youth who in his own younger years had travelled to the South Pacific. That journey, he recalled, continued for the rest of that man's life. "We could watch him in his rocking chair on his front porch, his eyes squinted half closed, endlessly travelling to Honolulu."

Though I am mostly glad that the "movement in time and space," along with the odometer on my poor, tired truck, has finally slowed to a more manageable pace, my sabbatical journey is nowhere near an end. I suppose it is an occupational hazard that as I traveled through the three months of the precious gift that this congregation has given me, I collected a bunch of stories and meditations that I look forward to sharing, for better or worse, as I engage the seasons and the Scriptures of the next year of newsletters and sermons and conversations.

As our Parish leadership continues to look for the best ways for us to live out our mission to serve our Lord, and our ministry to serve the world around us, admittedly making assumptions about what's around the next corner, and the one after that, and the one after that, I look forward to the next few years of our journey together. I pray with all my heart that our Father will give us sparks of imagination to readily perceive the sometimes subtle movings of the Holy Spirit among us, the courage to look beyond terms and tenures to serve the Parish and community that we may never see but love already, and the strength and perseverance to carry out the work that Christ himself would have us to do.

I hope that in these last seven-and-a-half years, I have also told you often enough how grateful I am that you have invited this "blown-in-the-glass bum" to share your journey together in this beautiful home, and in this wonderful community. Thank you again for the tremendous gift of the last three months. Thank you to all those that filled the gaps that were left by my absence from you, especially your Wardens, Susie and Mike, and our dear, dear Deacon Larry. And thank you most of all for the continued love with which you always surround me and my family.

God bless you all.