

## THE SACRED JOURNEY – PROVISIONS

John 4:5-15 Exodus 17: 1-7

January 31, 2010

Thomas D. York  
Knox Presbyterian Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio

Good Morning – Before launching into this sermon on the “Sacred Journey” I want to share a couple of reflections with you.

First, to the guests and visitors who may be with us this morning. Thank you for worshipping with us this morning. I hope you find our worship helpful and that you will worship with us again. It is not always easy to enter into the worship life of a faith community as a newcomer and entering in this morning might be even a little more difficult. I want you to know that if the worshipping community seems a little subdued and not as welcoming as you might expect, there may be a reason. And I want to share that with you.

Late this week members of Knox Church received a letter from me and my wife, Barb, which we sent from Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. The letter shared the fact that Barb had received a diagnosis that she is living with ALS, also know as “Lou Gehrig’s Disease.” Though Barb and I have had over a week to live with this diagnosis the members of Knox have had but a day or two. In the hopes that knowing that will be helpful to you as visitors, I share that with you.

To members of Knox – Barb and I are happy to be home and happy to be back with our faith family. Though neither of us are emotionally ready to respond to one-on-one expressions of concern (we will turn into a bucket of tears) we are glad to be here. Part of our mission is to be a “joyful community”. And though we all need to have a moment of grief, we need to recapture that “joy filled” mission which is ours. So next Sunday, when we share “Soup and Sweaters” I hope to hear the same buzz of excitement and joy that I heard the morning I walked in here for Mission Possible and the same buzz I heard when we arrived in the evening for the kick off Dinner for Phases of Faith. Disease may dictate how each of us dies, but it cannot be allowed to dictate how we will live. If it does, it robs us of too much. As a family we look forward to many joyful days ahead, in our own lives and in the life of this faith community.

Finally, to all who are worshipping – sermons come from the heart. And if they don’t they aren’t worth preaching and certainly not worth listening to. They come from somewhere close to where tears come from. So if, for a moment, I loose my composure I know you will understand.

The children of Israel assembled in front of Moses and said: "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?"

It's actually the third time it occurred. In fact, it happens so much that the Old Testament scholars have a name for it ... "The murmuring in the wilderness motif." Free of Egyptian slavery, wandering through the desert, the people are murmuring all the time: "What shall we drink?" (15:24] A little later they are hungry and the whole congregation murmurs against Moses and Aaron and this time it's eloquent.

"Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into the wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." [16:3)

For several weeks we have been thinking about the idea that life is a Sacred Journey, an adventure to which we are called – a sacred journey because of God's presence.

The theme runs throughout the Bible, beginning to end. It appears again in the great saga of the Exodus. What a wonderful story it is, with what seems to me an endless variety of ways to surprise us with its relevance and contemporaneity.

Remember that Abraham and Sarah end up in Egypt for a while because there is no food where they are. Several generations later the Israelites are back in Egypt again, once again because there is famine where they are. This time there are a lot of them, tribes of them. and this time they stay in Egypt, settle in, and thrive some more: thrive so much that the Egyptians become concerned and gradually turn them into slaves. It happens slowly, of course; first one right, then another is taken away. First they aren't allowed to live in certain neighborhoods. next they have to live in a ghetto and in a few decades they are the slaves, making the bricks for Pharaoh's ambitious construction projects.

Moses organizes them; stirs them up; presents their demands to Pharaoh; argues, negotiates, threatens - all the while God is urging him on. After several false starts, Pharaoh finally relents. and one night, under the cover of darkness, they leave. They pack up their belongings, gather their sheep and cattle, get the children and the elderly organized, look around at the old neighborhood one last time and walk into the wilderness.

Now the point is that even though they complained a lot, Egypt wasn't all that bad. As a matter of fact, Egypt was home: had been home for them all their lives, and their parents before them and their grandparents. It might look like slavery to a young radical like Moses, but it was also home. And so not long after they leave they begin to have second thoughts. "What in the world have we done? Traded our security, our stable, safe life for what? This is wilderness. There's nothing out here. Egypt isn't wonderful but at least we had a roof over our heads and food to eat and water to drink."

And at the same time, Pharaoh is having second thoughts too. His economic advisers, in the clear light of day, remind him that he has just allowed the labor force to walk out scot free. And so Pharaoh changes his mind, mobilizes his forces and sends the army out to catch the people of Israel and bring them home.

One of the best parts of this story happens when the people who have made it to the banks of the Sea of Reeds - a broad, shallow swamp - see the dust of Pharaoh's army approaching. This time it's not a murmur but a shout of terror:

"Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness. What have you done to us? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." [14:11-12]

What comes next is the unlikely escape at the Sea of Reeds and then the beginning of forty years of wandering in the wilderness of Sinai and the murmuring: "What will we eat? What will we drink? How will we survive cut off from the security of home?"

It is a universal theme. A universal human question. It has to do with our development and maturity as persons. It has to do with living life to its fullest. And this we must not miss, it has to do with faith, with living in responsible relationship with the one who has created us, given us our lives, and who calls us to live them with integrity and intentionality and courage. In fact, several thousand years before it was good developmental psychology, it was good Biblical religion.

There is a sense in which life always calls us to leave comfort behind if we are to do and be all we can: a sense in which life is diminished to the degree that we invest it in the provision of comfort and security only.

“Murmuring in the wilderness is a universally human experience.”

The stories of Harriet Tubman and the underground railroad and slaves running away and living in the wilderness for months - traveling at night, hiding during the day, living off the land - are powerful and inspiring and instructive because for many runaway slaves, slavery began to look appealing after a day or so of freedom. Plantation life might be cruel, inhuman, demeaning, but there was food and shelter and security. The wilderness is the place where we are able to see with clarity how dependent we have become on security, safety and comfort. But, says this wonderful old story, the wilderness journey is also the place where we find God or God finds us.

God comes to Moses in a burning bush in the wilderness. In a period of tempting in the wilderness, Jesus encounters subtle temptation but the angels also come to him in the wilderness and it is in his wilderness experience that his sense of the meaning of his life and therefore his courage and determination is given to him. Part of the wilderness experience is the solitude in which mind and heart and spirit turn to God; an extended period for aloneness, reflection and quiet.

The mystics, the people of deep spirituality, know that to experience God you must detach, back away, let go of everything. That is part of what Israel learns in the wilderness. And it is not an easy lesson for those of us who are privileged and blessed with abundance.

Henri Nouwen has a wonderful little book on prayer which makes the point that you cannot pray with your fists clenched. It's an important observation. Prayer is less than a vital spiritual exercise for most of us because we feel threatened by letting go of our securities and standing before God with our hands empty and open. Nouwen talks about seeing a woman brought into the emergency room of a psychiatric hospital with her fists tightly clenched, holding on to one small coin, as though she would lose her very self if she let go of that coin. Nouwen writes:

"When you are invited to pray you are asked to open your tightly clenched fists and give up your last coin. You hold fast to what is familiar, even if you aren't proud of it. You find yourself saying: 'That's just how it is with me. I would like to be different but it can't be now ... ' Once you

talk like that you've already given up believing that your life might be otherwise. You feel it safer to cling to a sorry past than to trust in a new future." [*With Open Hands*. p. 4]

The old story suggests that God calls us to be on a journey, to let go of the securities upon which we have become dependent, to trust God for our security and in the process to become the free and whole people God has created us to be.

The story also makes a very daring promise. God will provide. God will give us the resources we need for the journey. God will provide not necessarily what we want but what we need. God will provide water for our thirst - living water for that profounder thirst deep inside everyone of us.

But, Moses discovers water only when the people are in the dryness of the desert. Manna is provided only in the wilderness. The Samaritan woman who encounters Jesus at the well is thirsty. She is an outcast, not fit for polite company in her own village. She's at that well at high noon because the other women get water in the evening and she is not welcome. She is desperate. "Give me living water," she asks Jesus - "Give me food and drink that will sustain my spirit."

"The threshold of religion," one commentator proposes, "is at that point when the thirsty soul stands squarely in front of the hopeless, barren desert, the seemingly impossible."

God's gifts are given only when we know our hunger and thirst; only when we need them.

So, for each of us comes a day when we must leave security behind, a day like the one years ago when we walked down the sidewalk, away from the insular safety of home on the way to school and began the adventure of becoming, a Sacred Journey that is still going on.

- or the day years later when our parents dropped us off at college and drove away;
- or the day when we started a new life with a stranger to whom, standing in the front of a church, young, immature and terribly unprepared, we just committed our lives "for better or worse, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live";
- or the day in middle years when our company down sizes, realigns management and we find ourselves in the wilderness of unemployment or an unplanned second career;
- or the day when we and others decided we could no longer cling to the old realities and remain alive and we find ourselves alone and starting again;
- or that day when the mortgage is paid, the dog has died, the last youngster has left for college and instead of the promised land you find yourself in a new wilderness of loneliness, purposelessness, depression and remorse;
- or the day when the reality of aging becomes unavoidable, a dear friend dies, or a routine task becomes difficult, or a life-long dream has to be abandoned and you know in a final way that you are not going to live forever.

Comes a day for all of us – and each of us – when we know that our own resources are no longer adequate: that if all we have going for us is our own strength, vigor, intelligence, or our own professional accomplishments, our position in the community, or our possessions, our bank accounts, stock portfolios, and pension plans, we really are rather poor and weak. Comes a day

for all of us when we are hungry and thirsty and know it; when we are powerless to deal with the realities of our humanness, particularly our own mortality, our own death – at the hands of the approaching Egyptians, or the hunger and thirst burning with us, or simply the inevitable ticking of the clock....And on that day the promise is that God will provide.

The mystery of faith is that in Jesus Christ we are called to lives of intentional insecurity.

The greater mystery of faith is that when we trust God ... when we open our hands ... when we know our hunger and thirst. ... there will be bread and life and living water. God calls us to a Sacred Journey. God provides what we need ... Thanks be to God. Amen