

**August 26, 2018 - Annunciation Episcopal Church - 14th Sunday after Pentecost**

**Rev. Elizabeth Molitors**

***When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you?"  
John 6:56 - 69***

It is in the nature of God's people to always be on a journey...

Adam and Eve traveled out of the garden after God cast them out.

Abraham left his land and his home to travel to a new land and a new home, in Canaan, at God's request.

The story of Jacob has him almost constantly on the move.

Moses and Joshua. Ruth and Naomi. And, much later, Mary and Joseph and Jesus. And Paul. And Peter and Thomas, and all the other disciples.

It is in the nature of God's people to always be on a journey. If we're hoping or expecting to be able to sit still while waiting for the world to come to us, we've hitched our wagon to the wrong God. Because the story of God and God's people is about moving.... from slavery to

freedom, from death to life, and then sharing the news that God is what makes those moves possible.

The story at hand today is another journey story, this time about Joshua and the leaders of all the tribes of Israel coming together at Shechem to recommit themselves to serving only God. Shechem was the place where God made the first covenant with Abraham, the promise that Abraham and his too-numerous-to-count descendants would belong to God and God would belong to them.

But the path that brought the tribes together wasn't direct, nor was it easy. Moses lead the people out of slavery in Egypt and wandered around the desert for 40 years. 40 hard years...of people complaining they should never have left Egypt, complaining that God doesn't give them enough, then complaining that even though they technically *do* get enough manna, they'd really like some meat. (And then they got *too* much of that, and there was yet more complaining.) Forty years of saying that they're really committed to God, and yet their minds wander when Moses goes up the mountain for a little confab with God, and by the time he comes back down, the people have launched a gold smelting operation, melting down jewelry into idols. And on and on. No, it hasn't been easy.

Then, on the brink of crossing over into the promised land, Moses dies. He never actually makes it out of the wilderness. Which on one level seems kind of heartbreaking for him, given how much time and energy he's spent on this venture. Ran the ball all the way down the field, and never made it into the end zone. But getting the people out of the wilderness and into the promised land....that wasn't Moses' job. His job was simply to put one foot in front of the other, following the instruction of God. Every day, day after day, for all those years. Maybe part of the reason the people spent 40 years wandering through that wilderness wasn't that they were bad at directions or that the trip from point A to point B really required 40 years of travel, but that God wanted to give the people plenty of chances to notice and to practice what it means to trust and follow God.

Because this journey from wilderness to promised land wasn't at all about Moses, it was about God's people. Making the journey was *their* job.

Now, once Moses dies, the people need a leader, a point person, to help them make that final push into their new land. And how is Joshua identified as that leader? While he was still alive, Moses appointed 12 men - one from each of the 12 tribes - to sneak into the Promised Land as

spies, to check things out. Only Joshua and one other person return with a positive report. It's not that they've seen anything different than the other spies, it's that they're more willing to trust in God, that if this land is somewhere that God wants them to be, then God will help them get there and dwell there. Joshua doesn't have much, if any, clue about what it's going to take for the Israelites to come into this promised land and make it their own, but he's willing to suck up his fear and uncertainty, and throw himself into whatever path God has set for him.

It is in the nature of God's people to always be on a journey.

And so, Joshua is called on to be with them in this next phase, helping the people to, at last, make their way into the promised land. Except that the promised land isn't all that it's cracked up to be, it's not just easy. The book of Joshua is filled with all sorts of battles and mayhem, of the tribes of Israel attempting to take hold of the land promised to them, but the people who've been there for the last little while are reluctant to leave quietly and peacefully. And so even though they're in the "promised land" - with all that they've imagined it's going to be - all is not peaches and cream.

It's tough in the gospels, too. In this passage and in others, Jesus turns to his people and says "*Look, I am asking you to do something hard. I am asking you to work to heal what is broken in all of creation and doing that is not for the faint of heart. Resurrection comes through the cross, not around it.*"

Do you see where it says, "does what I am saying to you "offend you""? That's not a great translation. The Greek word is skandalon, which means stumbling block. Essentially, Jesus is saying, "does the idea that I am calling you to take on work that is difficult cause your faith to stumble? Is that a thing that will make you lose your momentum? Because if that is true, then you need to go find another faith."

It is in the nature of the gospel - of all the scriptures - to make demands on us. It is part and parcel of freedom and free will and being in a grownup relationship with God. As well, it is in our nature to fail to meet those demands. We are only human, and if we could follow through all the time on what God desires of us, then the Kingdom would already be here. It is in the nature of the gospel - of all the scriptures - for God to ask us to journey and change, and it is in our nature to fuss about it.

Yet even given the reality of our human natures, we are still called to be like Joshua, to say, in essence, "Yes, I'm scared. No, I don't know how it will work out, but God is with me and I will go where God leads me."

When Jesus went out recruiting followers, Jesus did not say, "put down your nets" and then the disciples said, "Well wait, for how long? What's the plan? What am I going to have to do? What's going to be our process for evaluating our success or failure in this venture?" No; Jesus said, "Follow me." Period. And then they put down their nets and they followed him. They went on a journey together where they were sometimes scared, sometimes uncertain. Jesus made demands of them, and sometimes they followed through and sometimes they ran away and pretended they didn't know him, or they huddled together in a locked room. Yet for all that, these are the very same people Jesus sent out on that Pentecost Day, to go tell the Jesus story and make disciples of all the nations.

That is what we are called to in this transition. All of us. You and me both. To keep moving and to complain about it. To work hard and to fail but to trust enough in the one who's calling us to put down our nets and follow wherever God is leading us. *Amen.*