

“SACRED JOURNEYS”

Luke 24:13-25

May 3, 2020

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We had made plans to meet my brother and his wife in Stratford, Ontario at the end of this month. When we were in Pittsburgh for our other brother Mike's funeral, we talked about how we ought to get together more often. We hit on the idea of taking in a couple of plays. Janet and Nancy worked out the arrangements and I was really looking forward not only to the plays, but also to the opportunity to foster a closer relationship with my family. We heard some time ago that Stratford had canceled all performances through May, but I remained hopeful that we might be able to reschedule for later in the season. Last week we got the news that they had canceled the whole season.

This is not of course the worst impact of the coronavirus, but this pandemic has for many of us undercut the joy that comes with looking forward to travel and activities. Some of you are wondering when or if you'll be able to go camping this summer. Others have had their plans for celebrations and get-togethers canceled. And still others are wondering when they'll be able to leave the building without incurring quarantine upon their return.

I've read this story of the road to Emmaus many times and thought how wonderful it would have been to be there when Jesus broke the bread and the disciples understood that they were talking to Jesus. I've wanted to be a part of the heart burning within as they listened to Jesus or even part of the scene where they share with the other disciples their experience. But I've never been envious of the walk itself. I have no idea whether the road was rough or smooth, hilly or flat; whether any danger lurked nearby. I think I read somewhere that it was a walk of about seven miles, which is still doable for me, though I'm sure there'd be a price to pay for returning that same day to Jerusalem.

When I read the story this time, the walk jumped out at me. To be able to go somewhere with a destination in mind and to return with even greater purpose sounds like just the thing for these days. Oh, we're walking today, perhaps more than usual, but for most of us, it's to relieve the boredom or calm the anxiety. We walk to add variety to the day that feels like an endless waiting for the bad news to turn good. We walk for a change of scenery, to reduce the tension, or as an antidote to our impatience. Our hearts are not on fire. We feel perhaps like God has gone silent, and our faith journeys on hold.

People of faith have always walked. They've walked to freedom, to the promised land, to the kingdom of God. We hardly ever arrive, but we know where we're going and why we're going there. We've often said that it was about the journey. Our faith tells us that we are just alive, but that we are living, on the move.

So it's no surprise that as we feel our lives on hold, we walk if only to remind us that the sacred journey is part of our nature, part of who we are becoming in Christ. The temptation we face in these days is to believe that we need to walk... and anywhere will do.

In this Easter season, I want us to remember that “anywhere” will not do. Certain aspects of our lives may be on hold, but Jesus’ followers are never on hold. We are either walking to Emmaus with Jesus by our side, deepening our faith and understanding, and learning to recognize Jesus or we’re marching back into the fray of Jerusalem, celebrating the new life, and living into God’s kingdom.

Worship is a walk to Emmaus. We gather not just to praise God, but to listen to God, to have our hearts set on fire, to sit at table with Jesus. We make this part of the walk explicit when we celebrate the sacrament of communion. When we gather in worship or around tables as we do today, we are learning to recognize Jesus in our midst. When we pray, we are walking to Emmaus. When we listen to scripture, we are walking to Emmaus. When we reflect on our lives and events in the world, we are walking to Emmaus. We are not walking just “anywhere,” but to the place where we see Jesus.

When worship is over and we have recognized Jesus, we turn right around and head back to Jerusalem, where a good word is desperately needed. While we are sheltering at home, there is a danger of believing that the world is on hold too. But refugees are still looking for shelter. Women who are beaten by their husbands are in even greater danger. Children living in poverty are falling further behind in developing the assets that will help them succeed in life. It’s so easy to forget when we’re going nowhere. But the words that Jesus leaves us with when we get up from the table is “Remember me.” On our journey back to Jerusalem, we need to remember that Jesus should be recognized in those who are hungry and thirsty, in those who are sick or in prison, in those without homes, in the stranger and the enemy.

I don’t know when I’ll travel again or where I’ll go when I do. But in the midst of this uncertainty and so many more uncertainties, we have places to go, things to do, and people to see. The sacred journey for Jesus’ followers is not so neatly divided between Jerusalem and Emmaus as I make out here, but I think it describes the faith journey well. Our walk takes us deeper into the life of God and into the life of the world. We are both listening to Jesus and looking for Jesus. We are not on hold, rather we are walking with purpose somewhere between Emmaus and Jerusalem. Amen.