

June 2, 2024
Rev. Lisa Schrott
Exodus 13:17-22
Leaving Home

The Book of Exodus tells us that the time the Israelites had lived in Egypt was 430 years. Following the institution of the Passover commemoration, the Lord brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, company by company. Hear these words Exodus Chapter 13:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer, for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness bordering the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “God will surely come to you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.” They set out from Succoth and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Leaving Egypt was not a pleasure excursion for the Hebrew people. The story of their pilgrimage in the desert in the Book of Exodus reminds us that traveling, moving, leaving home, is part of our Judeo-Christian tradition. Each of us finds ourselves sometime in life needing to leave the familiar in order to grow and to thrive. Beginning a journey involves leaving “home”—whether that is a physical place in order to explore another part of the world, or changing a mindset that keeps us from expanding our spiritual capacity.¹

What must we do to embark into the unknown? This is the question the Hebrew people were asking as they began their journey. After 430 years in Egypt, they were leaving behind a deep and rich history. While the majority of those years were as an enslaved people, subject to whims of their Egyptian captors, they had a sense of place and community. When Moses decried to Pharaoh- “Let my people go” and God unfurled a wrath of plagues, did the people really know what this meant? As they began their journey into the unknown, were they excited for what lay ahead or already experiencing regrets as anxieties and fears pushed the cobwebs of remembered captivity to the side?

During the month of June, we are exploring what it means to Quest – to journey – to travel as a spiritual act. As you heard in our Opening Sentences, to quest – to journey – doesn’t require a passport and tickets to an exotic location – although it might. It can be to see your local surroundings through new eyes – to ask and seek what you can learn about the world, and just

¹ Marcia McFee. Sermon Fodder for Quest. Worship Design Studio. www.worshipdesignstudio.com/quest

as importantly about yourself and your relationship to God and to others through curiosity and wonder. The metaphor of our life of faith as a journey has become so familiar that it has become a cliché. In fact, the term “journey” was chosen as the number one word to avoid in 2024 from the branding group Big Duck. They say

“This term has become overused in every way possible. Any experience — transformative or evolutionary, reaching a major milestone, or overcoming a difficult obstacle — is labeled a “journey.” Countless organizations use the word “journey” to describe the pursuit of a significant goal. However, reaching a goal is not always a “journey.” Unless you have traveled a notable distance like Frodo and Sam in *Lord of the Rings*, you have probably not been on a journey. Let’s try being less flowery with our descriptions and, instead, explain achievements for what they are...”²

I get what Big Duck branding is saying and appreciate that the overuse of the term “journey” can trivialize the significance. However, I quibble a bit that a Lord of the Rings-eque adventure is the only type of journey that truly counts. Scripture is full of journeys – some of them long and arduous, like the one the Hebrew people are beginning in our scripture passage this morning or the return from exile in Babylon, or like Paul’s missionary trips through the Mediterranean and Asia Minor. And yet other journeys represent shorter geographical distances, but none-the-less are significant because of the change in identity and understanding that happens as a consequence. I think of Rebekah leaving her homeland of Haran to be Isaac’s wife in Canaan; of Mary and Joseph leaving Nazareth to Jerusalem for the census, and Jesus and the disciples traveling through Galilee teaching and healing.

In each of these situations the journey – the quest – no matter how long or short began with a first step - Leaving Home – recognizing that as part of the quest, you will need to step outside of the familiar, step outside of the comfortable, step out of the routine. For the Hebrew people beginning their journey from slavery to freedom meant stepping out in trust that the God who showed tremendous power in defeating Pharaoh would continue to provide for them after leaving Egypt.

In his commentary on the book of Exodus, Old Testament scholar Terrence Fretheim, titles this section of scripture “Providence and Planning.”³ I think this is an apt description of what we see. The opening sentence sets the stage – “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer, for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” The Hebrew word that is translated “lead” has very rich and deep meaning. It is more than just an arrow pointing the way. It is used to describe a “figure of guidance in prosperity and righteousness.”⁴ God knew that leaving home

² <https://bigduck.com/insights/words-to-avoid-2024-edition/>

³ Terrence Fretheim. *Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Exodus*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. p150.

⁴ **hdjñ** nachah. F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. (abridged) BDB. Accordance Bible Software. OakTree Software; 2001/

was going to be challenging – and if the Israelites faced immediate conflict, they may not have the fortitude to continue on and may just return.

Scripture then tells us that God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness bordering the Red Sea. Now for those of you who remember the end of the story – namely that the people wandered for 40 years before entering Canaan - you may question whether God's leading was really in the spirit of prosperity and righteousness. I have wondered that myself, especially in those times in my life when getting from Point A to Point B was my goal. Who has time to meander in the desert? Well, as we are going to explore in the next few weeks, this wandering, meandering time may just be the point. It changes us. It changes our relationship with ourself, with God and with others. The Hebrew people needed time to become a community, needed time to understand who their God is and how they were to engage with God; how to be in a covenant relationship with God; how to worship Yahweh as the one true God. Coming from Egypt, with its multitude of small g gods, this was no easy feat. So when they arrived at Mt. Sinai, God called Moses to the top of the mountain and gave them a template for their community – a set of rules to live by. These Ten Commandments began with the words that they were to have no other God before Yahweh.

But before they could get to the stage of building community with a set rules to guide them, before they could live as a free people who could worship their God, they needed to leave home. Leaving home, the security of what is known, is hard. It was hard for the Hebrew people and it is hard for us. And even when it is hard, research tells us that more often than not, we don't regret it. Studies by psychologists about the types of regrets we have reveal that across cultures and demographics, we have more regrets "about what we *could have done*, not what we *did do* wrong. ... it's regrets about inactions that haunt more of us for long periods. So you're more likely to feel achy about never auditioning for that performing-arts school as a teenager, or never joining the Peace Corps, than you are to regret a bad real estate move or a nightmare job that you took."⁵ So down the road we may not regret the decision to take the journey set before us, and it still can be hard for us to take the first step because we have to live with uncertainty. And that can be a scary place to be.

Kate Bowler is a professor of Christian History at Duke Divinity School. She specializes in the study of the prosperity gospel, a creed that sees fortune as a blessing from God and misfortune as a mark of God's disapproval. At thirty-five, everything in her life seemed to point toward "blessing." She was thriving in her job, married to her high school sweetheart, and loves life with her newborn son. Then she is diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer. From this experience she wrote the book *Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)*.⁶ Today her cancer is in remission and she hosts a wonderful podcast called *Everything Happens*. She

⁵ Lila MacLellan. A new study on the psychology of persistent regrets can teach you how to live now. *Quartz*. June 10, 2018. <https://qz.com/work/1298110/a-new-study-on-the-psychology-of-persistent-regrets-can-teach-you-how-to-live-now>

⁶ <https://katebowler.com/books/everything-happens-for-a-reason-and-other-lies-ive-loved/>

recently interviewed Maggie Jackson, Author of *Uncertain: The Wisdom and Wonder of Being Unsure*. I have not read the book – yet – and it was not written from a Christian perspective, but Jackson and Bowler’s conversation on the podcast struck me as deeply theological. Bowler opens by saying

“... I’m not a fan of uncertainty. It’s just, there’s this terrible feeling that I feel like is the feeling of inching toward the edge of a cliff. Like, you can feel your little toes dangle over the edge. You feel the gust of wind making your knees shake. This feeling of living in uncertainty. You can’t un-know it. It’s anxiety and fear. And also requires us to have some hard-won courage. But these are uncertain times for so many of us. If you turn on the news, you hear more about the delicate geopolitical conflicts and fragile democracies. Not to mention our personal lives that are always riddled with unknowns and what-ifs. I’ve come to believe that the trick is not learning to escape uncertainty.”⁷

The trick is not learning to escape uncertainty. We live in a world that pushes us over and over again to the certain, the familiar, the comfortable. Our source of news is curated to our political leanings, lest we get uncomfortable hearing differing voices. Our social media feeds have become echo chambers, reinforcing the perception of the correctness of our opinions. Algorithms spoon feed us books, movies, TV shows, and music that we will like based on other things we have read, watched or listened to. In addition to dating apps, friendship apps claim to connect us to people who we will form a bond with based on questions we answer. We don’t want to waste our time meandering through a book or song or a conversation over coffee with something or someone we are not certain about. And yet as our words of preparation from Maggie Jackson share, “... research related to curious people show that one of the most important components of curiosity is tolerance of uncertainty. In other words, they are the ones who can be uncomfortable and ask the questions.”⁸

This is where we find the Israelites in our passage this morning. They are beginning a journey – a quest – where they will be uncomfortable – and they will question. They will question a lot. And they will put one foot in front of the other and continue on. They will develop practices that keep them anchored to God and each other. They will mess up and mess up again and mess up even more. They will continue to put one foot in front of each other and keep moving. And the Lord will go in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night will leave its place in front of the people. Friends, this is the promise God makes to each one of us. The world is uncertain. Our lives are uncertain. The journey that lies ahead is uncertain, whether we are graduating and off to college or a new job; whether we are headed to summer camp or up north to the lake; whether we are traveling around the world or digging deeper into our own histories. The world may change. Our lives may change. And neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night will leave its place in front of us. *Join me in prayer.*

⁷ <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-wisdom-of-uncertainty/>

⁸ *ibid*