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“The Journey Is....Required”

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Hebrews 11:32-40

A woman was trying hard to wake her husband for church one Sunday morning and he would not budge. She said, “Honey it’s time to wake up and get ready for church.” He pulled the covers over his head and said, “I don’t want to go.” She said, “You have to go.” He said: “I don’t want to go. The people there really don’t like me.” She said, “Yes they do you need to go.” He said, “They are mean to me, and they talk behind my back and criticize me constantly. Give me one good reason why I should go.” She said: “How’s this for a reason: You are the Pastor!”

Sometimes it is tempting to stay in bed, to give up, quit, disconnect and feel sorry for ourselves. But this journey through life requires that we keep moving, stay engaged, and keep showing up.

There is a cycle of growth and movement at the heart of things, a cycle of transformation that governs our journeys through life. This cycle of birth, growth, diminishment, death and rebirth applies to everything that lives. It is a process, a movement, a journey, and it is sacred because it is designed and guided by God.

For the next 6 weeks I will be doing a sermon series on different aspects of our sacred journeys through this life, using the themes of several Biblical characters from Abraham and Sarah to Moses to Ruth and Naomi to Jacob, to Paul to Jesus. We will consider different aspects of their journeys and gain insights for our own.

I happen to believe that if God speaks to us at all in this mysterious life, it is in a deeply personal way. Somebody dies. A child is born. An act of cruelty or kindness moves us to the depths of our souls. An accident humbles us. We fail someone. Someone fails us. We go about the business of our days—working and worrying and trying to get ahead, and in the midst of all of it, God speaks. There is nothing through which God cannot speak. God captures us, convicts us, connects with us, and we only need to develop the sensitivity to realize it when God speaks. And while God’s reaching out to us is always quite personal, it is also universal, because on some level the journey of any one of us is profoundly connected to the journey of all of us.

Throughout the Bible journey is a theme for being apprehended by God. It is a symbol of the movement of life and how God interrupts, intercedes, and changes things. People make careful plans for their lives when suddenly they are taken in a different direction altogether, because God has spoken to them, sometimes quite directly, and sometimes through other people.

Here are some dramatic examples of how God has spoken to various people:

“Two of the disciples were walking to the village of Emmaus, about 7 miles out of Jerusalem. They were deep in conversation, going over all of the things that had happened. While they were talking, Jesus came along and walked with them.” (Luke 24:13-16)

“Moses was a shepherd of the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law. He was grazing the flock in the wilderness when he came to the mountain of God, Mt. Horeb. The angel of God appeared to him in flames of fire, blazing out of the middle of a bush. He said, “What is going on here? I cannot believe this—why doesn’t the bush burn up?” God called to him from out of the bush, “Moses, Moses...remove your shoes, you are standing on Holy ground.” (Exodus 3:1-5)

“Jacob came to a certain place and camped for the night. He dreamed of a stairway set on the ground reaching to heaven, with angels going up and down on it. Then God was in front of him, saying: “I am God, the God of your father Abraham and Isaac. I am giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and your descendants. They will be as the dust of the earth; they will stretch from the west to the east and north to the south. All the families of the earth will bless themselves in you and your descendants. I will stay with you until I have done everything I promised.” (Genesis 28:10-16)

“Ruth said to her mother-in law Naomi: “Do not force me to leave you. Where you go I will go, where you live I will live. Your people are my people, your God is my God, where you die, I will die. Not even death itself will come between us.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

“In those days Jesus came up from Nazareth to be baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately the heavens opened up and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven saying: “This is my beloved Son; with him I am well pleased.” Then the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” (Mark 1:9-11)

“All of the time Saul was persecuting the Master’s disciples, out for the kill. He got arrest warrants to take to Damascus so that if he found anyone there he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem. When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground he heard a voice, “Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He said, “Who are you?” “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Go and enter the city and I will tell you what to do next.” (Acts 9:1-6)

The Bible is filled with examples of people who were unexpectedly apprehended by God, very often against their wishes and better judgment. They were invited to do something they did not want to do, finding themselves with unexpected people in unexpected places. Yet because their journeys had these detours they were changed, blessed, enriched with sacred meaning and mystery. Their journeys meant leaving the familiar and moving into the strange, going from the domestic and tamed to what was wild and untamed. And it meant moving not just in physical terms, sometimes not in physical terms at all, but in psychological, emotional, theological terms. Sometimes the journey is from the head to the heart.

We will not all receive such dramatic signs or directions, but this is the sacred journey we all share and it is required. You are given your life, and expected to live it out in the best, most positive way possible. To live it in a way that honors the God in whose image you were created. To live it in a way that helps and blesses other people, and to be devoted to something beyond the endless pursuit of personal happiness. Of course you can squander your life, throw away your potential, even take your own life, but while we are here God expects us to keep going, to listen, learn, love, and savor the journey.

So what are some characteristics of this required journey?

- It is **Solitary**. Only you can make it. As the song says, “Jesus Walked that lonesome valley, he had to walk it by himself. Nobody else could walk it for him; he had to walk it by himself.” Others are there to help you, sustain you, and encourage you, but ultimately the journey is yours and yours alone.
- It is **Shared**. Although your own journey is solitary, human beings have been making similar journeys for centuries—dealing with birth, death, and everything in between. Others have gone before you, have suffered, struggled, celebrated, blazed a trail and they are cheering you on. Our Scripture lesson from Hebrews describes this very thing—those pioneers in the faith who never gave up and are with us still. They had arduous and difficult journeys, they saw miracles and horrors, yet they did not lose hope, faith, or love. These fellow travelers supported one another, and the Bible suggests that they support us even now. This theme occurs again and again in the Bible, that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and there can be no real joy for anybody until there is joy for everybody
- It is **Difficult**. Things will happen to all of us that knock the wind out of us completely. Unexpected twists and turns will derail our most carefully laid plans. Life will bring setbacks, sorrow, and suffering. The human

journey is messy and complicated, with unexpected twists and turns.

Listen to how Norwegian actress Liv Ullmann described one such twist in her life when she was 17:

“After my audition for Juliet I stood in a corridor and waited for the list to be posted, of those who had been accepted. A tall, awkward boy placed himself next to me and read aloud the names of those chosen. Something was dying within me because I was not included. I stood in the corridor a long time until at last I knew all 10 names by heart. I walked out into the street and walked all night, shocked with a foreboding that this was the way my life would always be. I went home and cried my heart out. In the span of a night everything that was customary and familiar had been stripped away, and I was in the middle of a transition. There was something to learn from this, something hard to understand, that one carries one’s fate within oneself, and one’s fate is not dependent upon this kind of failure or success. To become conscious is a long process, to become open to sorrow, to see it as a part of living, moving, changing.” (Changing, Liv Ullmann, 73-74)

- It is **Blessed**. While these setbacks come to all of us, there are far more good and wonderful things that happen than we can ever appreciate or comprehend. Even things that at the time seemed like all waste or evil have the potential to shape and bless us. The fact that we are given life on this amazing planet, so much beauty to enjoy, not to mention having people who love us, people who forgive us. These are miraculous gifts far beyond our deserving, and we all have more of them than we can comprehend.
- It takes **Faith**. Faith in something beyond ourselves is what makes the journey bearable. A belief that there is a God, that good will come from evil, and that love is immortal and life is eternal. Faith sustains us on the journey and helps us to trust in that which we cannot understand.

This journey we make from birth to death is both shared and solitary, it is difficult and demanding, yet it is blessed in countless ways. We will look at the journeys of specific people in the days ahead, and consider the lessons they have to teach us. In the meantime, as you continue your sacred journey, listen to your life. For it is there that God speaks to you each and every day. There are lessons and meaning to be discovered, so embrace it all. And remember that God is with you now and has been with you since your journey began. Let us pray....