

**PILGRIMS ON A JOURNEY**  
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March 23, 2014  
Third Sunday in Lent  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Exodus 17:1-7**

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

**John 4:5-42**

So Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting alone by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" [*Jesus was weaned on the cultural notion that Samaritans were half-breeds and anything Samaritan was contaminated. And the Samaritans thought the same of Jews.*]

To journey without being changed is to be a nomad. To change without journeying is to be a chameleon. To journey and to be transformed by the journey is to be a pilgrim. **Mark Nepo**, *The Book of Awakening*

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The death of my mother-in-law Betty Egan is a significant milestone for me. I met Betty in 1970, 44 years ago, little knowing that her 14-year-old daughter would one day be my wife.

Betty was sitting behind the desk in the office of the Mt. Olive Presbyterian Church in Whittier, California where I had come to apply to be its youth director. I was 22 years old and a student at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, which required a church internship.

I was born and raised strictly Baptist and was taught to stay away from *those infidel Presbyterians*. The week before I had applied for a position at a Baptist church. The senior pastor interviewed me and then said, *I'm not going to hire you.*

*Why?* I asked.

*Well, he said, if you were once a Baptist, you are no longer a Baptist. In fact, he added, I'm not sure you're a Christian. I will pray for your soul.*

And I guess he did.

For soon thereafter I found myself on an amazing journey. I wandered into a Presbyterian church, met Betty Egan, married her daughter and ended up serving this blessed congregation in West bygod Virginia for 38 years.

*Ain't life interesting?!*

Whether we know it or not, life is a journey. It's full of twists and turns, ups and downs. We can take it as a nomad or take it as a pilgrim.

For the past 40 years or so, I've been a pilgrim even when I didn't know it. And maybe the same is true for you.

When I came to Shepherdstown in 1974, I thought I was just passing through like a nomad. Little did I know that two years later I'd be joining this congregation on an incredible journey through a wilderness, the way the Israelites trekked through a wilderness on their way from Egypt toward a promised land, from bondage to freedom, from one world to another—always on the way, never quite arriving.

That journey—as told by our Great Ancestors—is the paradigm of our own and so many other journeys. On the way, the Israelites' understanding of themselves, the world and God would be radically transformed.

For example, they learned that to become human they would have to stop working at least one day a week. Otherwise they'd become slaves again, slaves to work. *Six days shall you labor and then you must stop and smell the roses.*

They learned that to live as free people they would have to find bread and water on their own, no more handouts from their lords and masters in Egypt. They would have to probe the secrets of the material world in order to survive. And thus they would find manna and water in godforsaken places by seeing the world with new eyes and educated minds.

And along the way they would learn that god is a verb, not a noun—something to follow not something to carry around for protection.

They would discover that at the heart of everything is just one thing that is nothing at all, what we know as energy, and what they knew as spirit, breath or YHWH—the verb *to be*—the unspeakable name for the Holy Mystery. *I Am Who I Am, or I Will Be What I Will Be.* Leave it at that and don't say it out loud.

*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One.*

That was unheard of simplicity in that world and a hint of what we know as the Big Bang, reality arising from a singular burst of radiant light and love 13 billion years ago, setting in motion an evolutionary process through which the Creator would send Christ, the iconic human, into the world, not to condemn it, but to make it whole.

Like the Hebrew people, we too are pilgrims. Evolution is now our grand and glorious story. Evolutionary spirituality is how we make sense of the Christ story. God is future. That is to say, God is a lure and alluring like that forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Reach up. Reach out. God as future.

Forty years ago who could have known that the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991 would prompt this church and Asbury United Methodist church to reach out and have serious face-to-face conversations about latent and not so latent racism? It was a hard place to be, but we broke ground and found living water springing forth.

And now nearly 25 years later we are one of the lead churches in another initiative to bring races together in our county for courageous conversations. Building Community Bridges will be launched Sunday, March 30, at 4:00 in the auditorium of Jefferson County High School. I know many of you will be there. For it's yet another stage on our journey.

*From the wilderness the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.*

What are you thirsty for?

Forty years ago who could have known that the national Presbyterian Church would impose a ban on LGBT persons in 1978, preventing otherwise qualified persons from serving the church as deacons, elders or ministers? That ban compelled this congregation into territory it had never walked before.

Forty years ago, I for one didn't think such persons should be embraced by the church, and certainly never allowed to marry. But life is a journey. Who knows what will finally happen or where we will be sent? We walk by faith and not by sight.

A few weeks ago, one of our youth presented her project at the high school social science fair. The theme of the fair was "rights." Most entrees dealt with the "Second Amendment," the right to bear arms.

Her project was one of a kind. It was about equal rights for LGBT persons. She included one of our rainbow scarves that she herself had knitted to promote marriage equality at our church's national assembly this summer. When one of the judges heard of her own and her church's openness to equal marriage, he mocked and berated her in front of others. But you know what? She stood her ground.

That young woman is one of our six confirmation students and she can recite by heart what she has heard here many a Sunday: *the way of Jesus is not a way out of this world into some other world. The way of Jesus is a certain way of being in this world, of being madly in love with all that God has made and standing up for justice for all God's children.*

Life is a journey and sometimes we have to build a bridge or take a road less traveled—the way Jesus once took the "unapproved" road through Samaria. There he met a Samaritan woman at a well.

And though everything in their mutually divided worlds banned inter-racial, inter-gender and inter-faith conversations, they talked and listened and discovered living water. They tapped the spirit that heals broken relationships and societies time and time again.

Sometimes you just got to have faith that something good will happen.

The world is a big place with many historic rifts. But this morning, I'm wondering whom you bypass daily in your small world without ever giving them the time of day.

Could this be the week for you to notice that person and take a step toward a conversation—you know, to be as Christ to them? Who knows what will finally happen or where you will be sent.

Just remember: the journey of a thousands miles begins with a single step.