

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY I

Ordinary Time

Exodus 14:19-22
Matthew 28:20

A Sermon Preached by
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Scripture:

Review: The story of the Exodus of the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land – it's one of the great stories of faith. At this point in the story God has brought a series of plagues to Egypt and the Pharaoh has begged Moses to take his people and leave their land. However once they had left, Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the people of Israel to bring them back and hold them again as slaves. Moses has led the people of Israel to the edge of the Red Sea. God's presence is with the people of Israel in the form of a great cloud. Here at the sea's edge, it looks like they can go no further and their journey will end here; but the story doesn't end. Hear this first Scripture reading from the book of Exodus.

Exodus 14:19-22¹

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

A second scripture reading are the very last words in the Gospel of Matthew. After all has taken place, Jesus says

Matthew 28:20²

"... I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

I have walked through many lives, some of them my own.

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was.

... And I am not who I was ...

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989, Old Testament

² Op Cit. New Testament.

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I have walked through many lives,
some of the my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.³

What life are you walking into? ... And is it your own? ... And what life are you leaving behind today to walk into that new life?

We begin today a year-long preaching series that will take us all the way to Pentecost Sunday at the end of May. And during it, we will be talking about migration and about the journey of migration. We will be talking this fall about what it takes to prepare to leave home; during Advent and Epiphany, leaving home; during Lent, the lostness of the in-between when we're not home yet; and in Eastertide, what it means to come home again. It's the cycle of our lives and, of course, we are in this journey *all* of the time. And, in fact, each and every Sunday along the way we begin right here again. Where am I called to step forward into life that is calling me from the life that I had?

In your bulletins you will find – if you haven't made a paper airplane out of it – an envelope. In the envelope is a card. This is just for you. This is just for you. But here's an invitation. It could be an invitation to write who you think is going to win the Emmy awards tonight. But I would encourage you to think about it this way, as well. Take the card and during this service – during the sermon – three questions. I wonder for you this: I wonder if you would write down *where* you want to be headed to next May. By next May where are you going? Perhaps it is place: I really want a new job. I want a new relationship. But perhaps, better, it is a quality that you're seeking: I want to tack [sic] the joy this year. Where are you headed? The second thing is *what* do you and I need to leave behind – what do you need to leave behind so that you can get to that place. And the third question is *how* do you want to *be* along the way.

Where you going,
What do you need to leave, and
How you want to be?

Write your name, write your address on it, leave it in the box at the end of service or leave it with Mikhail in the church office. And we'll mail it to you. It is yours, a reminder along this year ahead of where you hope you're going, what you need to leave, and how you want to be getting there.

At the end of World War II there were 1.1 million refugees in the world. Today there are 17 million displaced people in the world. Seventeen *million* people in the world. We're going to be following their journey and ours during the year ahead.

Prayer:

God of all journeyers,

Along the way, may you, journeying God, travel with us

³ Stanley Kunitz, from his poem, "The Layers" in *The Collected Poems of Stanley Kunitz* ©1978 by Stanley Kunitz (W.W. Norton, 2000). Information from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54897/the-layers>, accessed 10/27/2017.

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And may we know your presence with us and always before us,
With courage, with strength, with feeling
With our hearts set for the wider justice and the deeper joy.
God, travel with us all, travelers along the way.

Together we say: amen.

And so we began our story in our series this Sunday with the story the first "undocumented immigrant."⁴ His name was Moses. Moses heard a call from God. And he heard a call from God to go to Egypt and to bring his people out of slavery – God's people out of slavery. At this point in the story Moses has been successful at extracting people in slavery from their bondage and bringing them here to a river's edge and Pharaoh's army is right behind them. God has been pulling God's people forward in the form of a great cloud and then God moves behind them in the form of a great cloud, pushing them ahead.

I wonder how it is for you. Is God pushing you, pulling you to a new place in your life? For many people in the world, they are being pushed – pushed out by violence, by fear, by famine, and by flood; pushed out as people always are and always will be, if there is not *food* at home, if there is not *work* at home. And so we have gone out and we will continue to go out to seek jobs and to seek food and to seek safety. Most of the people the world or traveling from south to north.

I wonder about you. I wonder if your story and mine is connected at all to theirs. I'm wondering if God is pushing you. I'm wondering if you are safe – I mean, safe where you live, safe in your home. Is this a time when God is pushing you out to find safety? I wonder if you have food and I mean, yes, spiritual food, but real food as well. Is God pushing you?

Animals: Animals are pulled they're are pulled by something that we call instinct. Birds: birds follow the magnetic pole of the universe ... of the earth. I don't that even know what that is. They follow that. Mallards – ducks – they follow the stars, do you believe it? They can navigate by the stars. Porpoises, they migrate following the ocean floor. And salmon (*sniff, sniff*) they smell. They just sniff their way back to that place that long ago they were born, right the way back to that little stream were they were born, to go to again.

What about you? Is there something innate, intuitive right there in you that says there is a journey here ahead and I've got to take it. Remember that card you have? I wonder what you might write there. Are you being pushed? Are you being pulled forward? For Shizuko and Jiro, they were pulled forward because of an Executive Order, an Executive Order in a time of war time that they took as their government seeking to keep them safe in a time of war. Cora: Cora left the plantation that night, after the day her master looked at her – looked at her *that* way. And that night she fled.

Where you going? And what are you heading for?

And what will you bring? What will you take along this journey?

⁴ Note from Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz: 'In the original, I used an offensive word that was much more offensive than I thought. "Undocumented immigrant" is what I should have said, what I wish I had said.'

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Well, whenever I'm going on a journey, I follow Rick Steve's advice. I take all of the stuff I think I need, which is a lot of stuff, and I put it all out on my bed. And then he says, look at all and take half of it all. And I throw away with pain that second pair of shorts. Maybe I don't need that T-shirt, but I really need this favorite T-shirt. And that sweater, well maybe, maybe I don't need that. And I try to leave it behind and take what I really need to take. Are you taking the right stuff with you?

Shizuko and Jiro, they had three days. They said, "Take, take whatever you can carry." Take whatever you can carry? "When are we coming back?" No word. "Will anything be here when we return?" No word. Take what you can carry! Take what you can carry ... How the world to decide what to put in your little bag?

My friends, Brenda and Jeremy, live in northern Saskatchewan. Can you imagine: all summer long it's fire season. They have a firebox. They put it right by their front door. In it they put everything that they need to take if they've got to run. If they've got to run to escape the fire. Jeremy says, "Brenda. You gotta take the cello." Brenda says, "Jeremy. The cello doesn't matter!"

My friend Ann is moving to Horizon House. She said, "Peter, I'm thinking about taking the piano and ditching the couch." We laugh about what it would be like to have tea parties together sitting in pillows on the floor. What about you: Are you taking the right stuff with you? And are you leaving behind what you need to leave?

Here's the story, those people that fled with Moses, those people that fled with Moses came heavy burdened. It was going to take them forty years to empty out, empty out everything that they took that they didn't need.

Remember that card. How about pull that card out. Are you taking the right stuff? What you want to take, what you need to leave, so that you can get to that place where you want to be going?

Cora: Cora took a sweet potato. Of all things that night that she fled from the plantation, she took a sweet potato. She took a sweet potato because her mother had taken a sweet potato – and her mother never came back. Her mother never came back to get strung up. She took a sweet potato with her because a sweet potato was a sign of hope and that she, like her mom, might make it to safety.

Most people in the world, I imagine, don't have the privilege of even wondering what to take or not to take. I imagine if I was fleeing across the Mediterranean Sea, all I would want is a good set of teeth – or enough teeth, just enough teeth, please to just bite onto the raft. Or maybe really all I really want and all I really need is just enough strength to raise my hand above the waves with a hope and a prayer that there's going to be another hand there to reach and catch mine.

Anna Tinker: Anna Tinker left for college a couple weeks ago. And she wrote and said, "I had to leave a lot of things to go on that journey. But there are two important things I had to leave. I had to leave my friends here. I mean I had put some of those friendships down so I can make room for new friends in my life that I want to have. And the other thing, the other thing is this: I had to put down my fear of the unknown. I had to put down my fear of the unknown, so I could enter into it."

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And there's a journey for us at this point today: The people of Israel and Moses have come to a place where there is no way – there is *no* way – and how do you make a "way" out of "no way"? There is a sea and it's a big one. And you don't got a boat. And you don't have a map. And you don't know if there IS a way round. And all you know is, if you're going to go, if you're going to find a "way" out of "no way", you gotta go through *that* impossible way.

We've been through the impossible way and we'll tell you our stories. We've been through that impossible way of there's no way around the grief; I got a walk through it. There is no way around the pain; I have to walk through it. There is no way around the struggle; I have to walk through it. There is no way around the conversation; I have to walk *in* it.

How do you make a "way" out of "no way"?

The story of Ulysses, maybe the oldest ... one the oldest stories we got. The story of Ulysses is about a man's journey, a hero's journey – our journey – about how do you find your way through. How do you find your way home, when there is making "way" out of "no way?" And all the way along the way, Ulysses is tempted. Tempted, tempted, tempted, tempted. That makes it so hard to move through. And at this point in the story he comes across, he knows the Island of the Sirens is coming. And he knows they have big rocks and his little sailboat won't be safe if it runs into those rocks. He knows what is before him. So, he takes honey bees. He takes the honey of honey bees, takes the wax and he stuffs it into his crews ears, so they cannot hear. And then he begs his crew to lash him to the mast, so that he *cannot* gain control of the boat and go towards the Island of the Sirens. And he comes across the Island of the Sirens and the Sirens are calling out to him in beautiful, beautiful songs and saying, "This is remember. Remember who you were. *You* were that great warrior of the Iliad. Remember that young man you were. Come. Come. We'll take you back to who you were." Nostalgia. Nostalgia: the stories we tell ourselves over and over and over again, about how it was before and who we were before call all of us back perhaps at times. Ulysses begs, begs his crew please "Please, go towards the island." And the crew keeps on rowing and rowing and rowing. We are not going to make it through without people beside us. Who is beside you? Who is beside you so that you can make it through a "way" out of "no way?"

Who is beside you?

It had been 75 years; 75 years since Shizuko had been back to the Washington State Fairgrounds in Puyallup. And why the heck would you go back? I mean, really, when the journey with that little suitcase took you here to Cape Harmony, Cape Harmony where you would be held in detention all summer long, before you would be sent to a concentration camp in Idaho. What the heck is Idaho? And when you get there, it doesn't look like you government's out there to actually keep you safe, but the guns are pointed in. Why would you go back to the Puyallup State Fairgrounds you have to go by and look at the cows and sheep pens when that is what they made you live in. The only way they can make people live in places like that is to say, "Those people aren't really people. And they don't need what I need and think what I think. They don't have the same hearts and longings that I do". Why would you go back? But Shizuko went back. And the Japanese American community, so many went back who had never been back in 75 years to the Puyallup State Fairgrounds two weeks ago to remember. They took this with them, "This is what helps me make it through. I remember I had. I

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have! I have made it through." And they came back to celebrate those who helped them make it through a "way" when it seemed there was "no way."

And Cora: What about Cora with her sweet potato running from the plantation? Cora's great problem – great problem – is that she never ever ran far enough. She thought, "This place is safe. This place surely is safe." ... And then it would not be safe. ... And then she would run further and she'd think, "This place is safe." And it was not safe. ... And she had to run further. And the question I ask all of us is, Why is Cora still running? Why does Cora still need to run? Why, why, why does Cora still need to run? I thought St. Louis was safe. Then I thought Seattle was safe. I thought this country was safe; and this country is not safe. This country is *not* safe, if you are a person of color. This country is not safe, if you are one of Cora's siblings. It's not safe. And what does that have to do with *me*? What does that have to do with me? It has to do with me with what the heck am I doing so that Cora doesn't need to keep running, so that Cora can find home – I mean "here" – and a place of safety and care. ... What am I doing?

Here's the thing, every biblical scholar will tell you that the story of the Exodus never happened. Never happened! But every justice seeker I know will tell you this story happens all the time. This story is happening all the time. Why don't you become part of the story, the story that matters, a story from enslavement to freedom, a story to a promised land, and a story to call home?

I have walked through many lives
and some of them my own
and I am not who I was.
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

And the essence of that principle of being is this:

I hold in this prayer for us all is
that we're going to keep on walking forward,
We're going to keep on walking forward.
We're going to keep on walking forward.
– Amen

UCUCC: PI

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/10/25/2017