

Markers on the Journey
Exodus 33: 12 – 23
Trinitarian Congregational Church, UCC
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Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ, the head of the church. I bring you greetings, blessings and all manner of good wishes from the 70 churches of the Metropolitan Boston Association as well as the 360 congregations of the MA Conference. It is good to be together to worship God and lift up our covenant connections as the body of Christ and the particular manifestation of Christ's body in the United Church of Christ. I am especially glad to be here to help bless the ministries that Bob and Jean are enacting among and with you in this transition time. Their gifts will serve you well.

It has been an honor to walk with your leadership to date – to say goodbye well to Rev. John Lombard, to discern leadership for this in between time, and to help launch the Transition Team. I have witnessed your great passion for this church and its ministry and invite you to take just a moment to reach out to one another and thank those around you for being part of this ministry together.

Working with churches in a time such as is before you, I have heard it described as feeling like uncharted territory. Uncharted territory just might be a definition of wilderness and many churches have testified that a time of transition feels like wilderness. I am confident that God will lead you in this wilderness time because time and again in the scriptures and in the history of the church this is what God does! The experience of Moses and the people of Israel moving from the bondage of slavery to the Promised Land over a span of forty years of wilderness wandering may have some guideposts for your journey in this transition time. Let's dive into their story and look for the markers God has for you along the way.

While tending sheep Moses had an experience of God calling him from a burning bush to an extraordinary task. God's plan was to move an entire nation out of its enslaved state to freedom in a far away land flowing with milk and honey. And Moses did that- leading the people on a wilderness survival course that would span four decades. At times the guaranteed slop and water that passed for sustenance while engaged in enforced labor back in Egypt looked a lot better than the uncertainty of freedom and an unknown path through the desert. But God provided food and water everyday and led them by a pillar of cloud by day and of fire at night.

Halfway through the journey they stopped at the base of a mountain which Moses climbed to consult with God about just who these people God had led away were going to become. Moses came down from the mountain with Ten Commandments. These were much more than laws to abide by, they represented the shape of who God envisioned them to be. But while Moses was up the mountain receiving this great vision plan from God, the people were playing a dangerous game. Because they momentarily lost sight of their leader Moses and because they were impatient to await word from on high, they pooled their jewelry and fashioned a golden calf to worship. Immature faith and an unholy impatience threatened to ruin them.

Enter the scene we have just heard in our text today. Moses is back up on the mountain trying to coax a second chance from God for the wayward people. God is still miffed about the people's creation of a golden calf and, subsequently, chooses to pause in traveling amidst them. That God has withdrawn from the people does not sit well with Moses and he intercedes. He argues that if God isn't willing to be present to the people, there is no point in sending them to the Promised Land. Although God makes it clear that what happens to this stiff-necked people is in God's hands alone: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and show mercy on who I will show mercy" (verse 19), God relents.

Then Moses asks for something rather bold. Though they have spent time together and spoken to one another "as if" face to face, Moses asks for and is given a special viewing of God's glory. God lifts Moses and places him safely on a rock, hides his eyes with a hand to shield him from seeing God's face, and passes by Moses in all glory.

Moses comes down from the mountain with a face still shining from his encounter with God's glory and he has in hand a new set of tablets with the Big Ten on them. With a renewed sense that God is in this with them and that God has given them some "what" to God's "why", the people press on in their Interim time.

I see some common pieces in this transition story of the people of Israel and for you Tri-Con. There are at least three guideposts to highlight: forgiveness, vision and trust.

The first guidepost, forgiveness. It comforts me to see that God has a hard time with forgiveness. I know how hard I find it to forgive someone who has hurt me or to forgive someone who clearly has done something wrong. There is no doubt it was a great offense the people committed thinking an inert golden calf could substitute for the devotion and care God had shown the people by taking them out of slavery and claiming them as God's own people.

Clearly God had every right to leave the people in the middle of nowhere. Moses had to work over-time convincing God to forgive their transgression and not abandon them. "You've brought them this far God, can you let go of the golden calf thing and press on to the work at hand?" "They did repent and gave up all of their ornaments," Moses might have pled.

Every community has people in it! And where there are people there will be disagreements and conflict. On this transition journey check in with yourself asking – is there someone I need to forgive here or someone from whom I need to seek forgiveness from here that will help keep us moving into God's future for this ministry? As Moses said to God – "Let go of the golden calf!" But it was also the work of the people to leave their past behind. Their idol-worshiping days dated back to slavery in Egypt.

In other words – do not let the past get in the way of your forward progress! The practice of forgiveness is releasing the grip of the past. This is not to say that the past has no place in shaping the future – it does. Jews rehearse their past in their practices at Passover. They rehearse God's deliverance more than their captivity. The practice of forgiveness is letting go of the past that drags you down and holds you back. It happened to God – it happened to the people

of Israel - it happens to us – if we let it. Make peace with your collective past – forgive and open yourself to the new thing God is doing in the present moment.

The second guidepost, vision. Nothing less than vision motivates people. In this case – the vision of becoming God’s people, motivated the people to boldly leave their chains and take a chance on a journey to a Promised Land. We take for granted what it was like to embrace a vision of being God’s people in an age and land where multiple gods ruled the day. To pledge allegiance to one God and swear to be that God’s people was a daring experiment. I am sure they did not know it would take forty years to get there when they took those first steps. One can only imagine that all of that wandering felt like a colossal waste of time. But catching a vision is like that – it takes time and it is so worth it!

When I met with the Transition Team in December we viewed the second most watched Ted Talk delivered by Simon Sinek together. Through the lens of Apple Computer, the Wright Brothers and Martin Luther King Jr. Sinek draws the listener into the importance of knowing your “why.” People are great at describing “what” they do and even “how” they do what they do, he says, but most are not proficient in stating “why” they do what they do. The “what” and the “how” are not the drivers of our behavior – the “why” takes care of that. “People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it,” is Sinek’s mantra. When speaking about Martin Luther King Jr. and the 1963 March on Washington he notes that it was the vision that MLK painted that drew 250,000 in the dead of August to the Washington mall. Sinek reminds us that it was not the “I Have a Plan” speech that MLK delivered that day, but the “I Have a Dream” speech. And that dream, while as yet still unfulfilled, fueled a movement and expanded rights to an oppressed people.

Consider how well worth the wait, time and effort it is to capture a vision, a mission, a purpose, a why! Think about the staying power of the people of Israel’s vision of being God’s people and how it still holds today. It still shapes national policy and the identity of the Jewish people.

Listen for the vision, the mission, the purpose God has in mind for you dear Tri-Con. Wait for it, for it will surely come – and when it does, in the words of the prophet Habakkuk – “write the vision, make it plain, so a runner may read it. For there is still a vision says the Lord.”

The third guidepost, entrust the future to God’s hands. You might think Moses was disappointed to not have his wish to see God’s glory full on. But I think what he did receive was even better. Moses needed a little more certainty, he asked God for this, “Show me your glory, I pray.”

So God walks by, and with a hand, covers the opening in the rocks where Moses stands peering upward. So he sees God’s palm. Then God, having passed by and facing away, removes that hand. As Moses glances up he sees God walking away, sees God’s self, but only God’s back. I wonder what that means?

We know this for sure – it means God is with Moses. God listens and responds. Since Moses only sees God’s back, where is God? God is moving ahead of the people, leading them!

Seeing the behind of God means you have someone moving ahead of you, someone willing to go ahead so that you can follow. That is something Moses needed to know. And it is something we need to know too. We need to know that God is there, listening and responding and moving ahead of us encouraging us to catch up.

And how much more important is it to be grateful to see God's backside than in these days of uncertainty? In these shifting sands of race, culture and society we need to steady our gaze on the one who goes before us blazing the way and accompanying us on the path. You can trust that this wandering has purpose when you trust in God who leads the way.

As you continue this trek through transition and change reach for these guideposts along the way: forgive, write the vision and deepen trust in the One who does not forsake us. And as you do, may God bless you with a faith-filled future and a compelling "why" of your existence so that others may be drawn to join you in living into God's dream and make it so. Amen.