

Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25

Psalm 78: 1-7

I Thessalonians 4: 13-18

St. Matthew 25: 1-13

Pentecost 24 2023.

“Therefore comfort one another with these words.” I Thessalonians 4: 18

One of the ways to think about the Christian life is to see it as a journey; a pilgrimage. We are not wandering aimlessly, though – we all have a purpose, and a destination...

This morning, I propose that we go on kind of a journey through the scriptures, beginning with the first reading, and concluding with the New Testament...

The first reading is from the end of the Book of Joshua... Let’s recall that God’s people have left slavery in Egypt, and have been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. They have been on their own pilgrimage, their own journey. Their destination is the Promised Land... But... Why were they journeying for so long?...

It would normally take only 3 or 3 and a half weeks to travel from the Nile River in northern Egypt to present-day Jerusalem. It seems that there was a spiritual process – a maturing; learning to be a cohesive nation, that the Israelites needed when they were wandering. This took time – 40 years!... The Israelites needed to leave behind decisively “the flesh pots of Egypt;” to live into this new covenant relationship between God and his people. Some of that time wandering in the Arabian peninsula was a miserable time for God’s people, but this pilgrimage was a process, to prepare them for their new place...

Now, I venture to guess that none of us have been wandering for 40 years – although if we are struggling in our pilgrimages, or hurting, it might sometimes *seem* like 40 years!... Are we willing to consider that even during our hard times, even during our times of struggle, God might still be at work, for our own development or sanctification?...

When they were wandering in the wilderness, God’s people often grumbled under their breaths. It’s usually translated that they were “murmuring...” But it’s also clear that God doesn’t want us to be in a state of grumbling or complaining in our pilgrimages. Instead, we are to learn to cooperate his Spirit together, with an attitude of hope... Hope...

So, that’s the context of today’s first reading. By now, the people are just on the verge of entering the Promised Land. There will be battles ahead with the local tribes; there will be times of hunger and frustration. But they’re just about there. By now, the great leader Moses has died, and his assistant Joshua is now leading the people. They might be ready *physically* and *socially*. But are they ready *spiritually* for what’s ahead?...

Joshua is looking for the people to re-commit themselves to God's service, and not to be enticed by the idols of the local tribes – the Amorites and so on... The leader Joshua makes it clear where *his* spiritual allegiance lies: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord (Joshua 24: 15b)...” The people choose heartily to follow the Lord God of their ancestors; the living God: “Then the people answered... therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God (vv. 16a, 18b)...”

Let's notice that this faith commitment during the nation's pilgrimage has both individual and a corporate dimensions. That is, the head of each household had a *choice*. They made a decision of the will – a choice to follow the Lord God alone, and no idol-substitutes... These verses are also a commitment of a community, of a nation... Part of their identity, part of belonging, is their common commitment to enter into this covenant relationship with God himself..

That's true for *our* spiritual pilgrimages too... Let's take baptism: A decision is made; a commitment to follow Jesus Christ. It's either made by the baptismal candidates themselves (if they are old enough), or else by the parents or other heads of the household if they are very young. Yet there is still the same expectation that each one will choose for him- or herself, if they will adopt and follow the faith of their families – or *not*... So, for every single one of us (whether the process is gradual or sudden), we need to choose where we stand: Do we dare to trust; to follow – or not?... Our liturgy puts it this way: “Do you profess and follow this faith?...”

We can choose to admire the idols of the Amorites if we like, with all their glitter and tease. We can choose to be self-centred and selfish, rather than truly loving... It's up to each one of us. We make a choice of the will: Do we dare to believe the historical facts of Jesus Christ, and dare to try this new way of living – or not?... There will be cost! It will be sometimes an effort. But I'm absolutely persuaded that it's worth more than anything the world can offer...

So, there is an individual choice, to follow Christ... Yet, let's keep in mind that baptism also has a corporate dimension; a community dimension... We are baptized into the fellowship of the Church family. Belonging together is a wonderful part of the Christian package. It's by belonging – learning to live with one's another's beauty and foibles – that we are being moulded into the moral character of the Lord Jesus...

First Peter 2 puts it this way:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy...

So, we see that the beginning of our pilgrimages necessarily have both individual and community elements...

We are blessed with the gift of our lives, to learn together how to live in response to God's earth-shattering, sin-destroying work of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. Our baptisms are not *the end*. They are a new beginning, a new start. "If anyone is in Christ," St. Paul writes, "he or she is a new creation (II Corinthians 5: 17)..." Something new has begun in us as we learn to live in response to God, and God has given you and me a lifetime to grow into holiness...

During our lifetime pilgrimages, there will very likely be good times and bad, times of joy and times of struggle. The wedding vows put it this way:

From this day forward, for better, for worse,
For richer, or poorer, in sickness and in health...

We will all likely have misadventures as well as adventures in our earthly pilgrimages. Yet God in his mercy is with us – in us – every step of the way...

Our pilgrimages are not endless wanderings; nor are they an endless spiritual loop, over and over... Christians believe we have a destination; a purpose; an end. Jesus Christ died, rose again, and is ascended into heaven. Where he is, by the grace of God, we too can be one glorious Day!...

John (not likely the apostle John, but another early Christian) had a kind of glimpse or vision of heaven. He described it this way in part:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,
'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' (7: 9-10)

We have a purpose; a glorious destiny. We are to be in fellowship with Jesus Christ, and with all the faithful...

One of the old hymns puts it beautifully:

Oh, what their joy and their glory must be,
Those endless Sabbaths the blessed ones see!
Crowns for the valiant, to weary ones rest;
God shall be all, and in all, ever blest.

In our reading today from First Thessalonians, Paul reminds us that we are being prepared, ultimately, for heaven. Here are his words of encouragement:

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died... For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

In today's gospel passage, the Lord Jesus tells a parable about 10 bridesmaids, waiting to meet the bridegroom. In ancient Israel, the wedding receptions were long affairs. Sometimes, the groom would try to surprise the wedding-guests about when he would show up... In the same way, we don't know when our lives will end. We don't know when Christ will return. We are simply to be ready always to meet our Saviour and our Friend, the King of kings. We must not be like the unprepared bridesmaids, who missed out on the celebration. Instead, in contrast, we need to be spiritually ready, humble and full of hope, as we anticipate the glorious end of our pilgrimage, "where every tear will be wiped away," and we are embraced in the divine Love, who never leaves us; now and for ever.

Amen.