

Dear LAUMC: Letters to a Church in (Re)formation
You Are Discovering a New Path
Exodus 13:17-22

Often at the beginning of memorial services, I say something like, ‘It’s not the first or the last moments of a life we will remember so much as all the moments in between. It’s the long middle of a relationship that creates the memories you will carry with you.’ I’m trusting that’s true as I come to the end of my time with you. I’m conscious of how much we have not yet had time to say to each other, and how inadequate these last messages are in conveying what I hope you will remember from these days we have spent together. God will keep speaking to you long after I retire, no doubt; it’s just that I hate to miss those conversations!

I’ve imagined this last series of sermons as a set of letters to you about how I see you as a congregation. We’re skimming along the surface of our life together, and I’m pointing out a few peaks, among many sights we could linger at. We’re doing the same thing with our origin stories from the Bible. It’s like a series of snapshots; we’re leaving out whole chapters and years in between. Last week we talked about Moses at the burning bush; the story we read today comes from years later, after the people of God had escaped from slavery in Egypt.

They’ve already walked across the Red Sea miraculously; the cuffs of their pants didn’t even get wet. Now they’re out in the wilderness, the desert, on their way to the promised land. They’re not quite sure where it is they’re headed, but they are on their way. They still look over their shoulder occasionally in case the Egyptian army appears in the rear view mirror, but it should be a quick trip. God promised them safety, security, freedom. That means it’s as good as done. Right? It should be two weeks at the most until they arrive. Distances aren’t that big in the middle east. Uh-huh.

The writer of Exodus says, ‘God didn’t lead them by way of the shorter route. God led the people by the roundabout way.’ That’s might be a little historical revisionism written into the Bible here. The journey from the Egyptian border to Canaan, that might have taken fourteen days of walking, took forty years. With long retrospect the biblical storytellers could see that there were lessons the people needed to learn along the way, and that God had been directing them the whole time; but most days—let’s tell the truth—they felt lost. They spent every day trudging through sand that stretched out interminably. I imagine it felt a little like a pandemic with an endless array of variants that surge, one at a time, endlessly...

But being lost doesn’t mean that God wasn’t with them. Their path wasn’t quite the GPS ‘fastest route’ directions they were counting on, but neither were they abandoned. In those first days, the people’s biggest fear was that they weren’t that far away from Egypt yet. It could be only a matter of time before the Egyptian army, the most technically advanced military in the world, would find their own way across the Red Sea and catch up with the Israelites, march them straight back into the factories and slave-quarters they’d escaped from. How is it, the people asked later when they told the stories, that that didn’t happen?

It was the most amazing thing, the storytellers said. Every day, as the sun came up and the people listened for the thunder of horses bearing down on them, a cloud appeared behind them. Like a curtain that blocked them from view, the cloud protected them from whatever danger might be approaching from behind. And then, every night when darkness fell, when the sun stopped beating down on them and it was a better time to move, weirdly, the sky would fill with lightning. The brightness of fire, lighting the way ahead. A pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. Not exactly turn-by-turn directions. They didn't know why they got lost, or how to avoid it. But somehow, every day, there was enough to keep them safe. Enough to keep them moving toward the promised land, no matter how long it took. It was like God was saying to them, 'I brought you this far; I'm not leaving you alone now.'

I want to hold that story up next to another one, a story from the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew (14:22-33). Jesus' disciples are out in a boat. That was not unusual for them; they're fishermen after all. Jesus stays behind on the shore, to pray. While they're out there, one of those freakish storms comes up, the kind that happens in that part of the world and that often capsizes small boats, throws its occupants into the sea. The disciples are terrified. They're bailing water with every container they can find. This is an all-hands-on-deck kind of moment.

They look up and see a figure coming toward them. It looks like he's walking right on top of the water. 'Don't be afraid,' the figure calls out; 'I'm coming. You'll be OK.'

Peter, like he often does, gets out in front. He raises the ante. He shouts, 'Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you!' Notice that this wasn't Jesus' idea; it was Peter's. The rest of the disciples are muttering, 'Are you kidding me? Is this the time for a magic trick?' I imagine Jesus rolling his eyes a little, the way you do when your child insists on jumping off the high dive. Is this really necessary?

'Come,' Jesus says; but I wonder if the original Aramaic wasn't something more like 'Whatever.' Peter climbs over the side of the boat and starts walking. He sinks, of course; but Jesus holds his hand out, lifts him out of the water, and deposits him back in the boat.

We often tell this story as an illustration of Peter's stuttering faith, like Jesus asked him to test his belief, to do some heroic thing no one else could do. But that's not what the story says. When Jesus asks Peter 'Why did you doubt?' what's the doubt he's referring to? That Jesus could walk on water? That Peter could do it? Or was Jesus asking Peter, 'Why did you doubt the boat? Why did you doubt that I was coming to save all of you?'

When he stopped rowing and bailing and left his friends to fend off the waves without his help, I wonder if Peter just made a bad decision. Jesus put Peter back in the boat; he didn't re-set his feet on top of the water. Maybe because in the boat is where Peter should have stayed all along.

When I look at these two stories side by side, one about lostness in the desert, one about lostness in a storm, I wonder. Maybe it doesn't matter so much how you get lost, or in trouble. You can think you hear Jesus calling you to get out there and walk on water and be wrong about that. You can get lost in the wilderness and not know whether it's because you weren't paying enough attention to the GPS lady, or if it was God leading you the long way around for a good reason.

Maybe it doesn't matter. What matters is that God will not leave you out there alone, lost, in danger--in the lake or the wilderness or any of the other frightening places we find ourselves. No matter how we got there. You cannot venture farther than God's reach. There is no 'will of God' that blesses one route and leaves the rest of the territory unprotected...because there is no place labeled 'lost' or 'out of bounds' on God's map of the world.

Long ago, LAUMC, you staked out an identity as a church with a willingness to go out farther. Starting with the small group of people who imagined a church on a corner occupied by an apricot orchard, people of this congregation were restless on the path that had already been marked. You built a youth program like no other church around here was doing. You started ministries and programs that reached far beyond the world of 'church people': Compassion Week, Hope's Corner. You defied the barriers of your denomination and decided to make this a reconciling church, inclusive of every person, no matter who they are, no matter who they love.

In the last five years we've walked even out further on this uncharted path. As we began the Changemaker Initiative, we invested in partnership with Ashoka, an entirely secular organization with no ties to the Church, so we could learn what they knew about how to be entrepreneurs, how to make change in the world. We've expanded our partnerships with others—non-profits, community foundations, rotary clubs, the County, religious groups from other traditions—to expand Compassion Week and everything else the church does into an invitation to anyone, everyone. We turned a sleepy church campus in downtown Mountain View into a hub that bustles every day with activity that's about simply being neighbor to one another, believing that neighboring itself is holy work. We've ventured into spaces we didn't know much about: offering art classes to high school students from families who don't generally come to churches like this one; using our kitchen for training people to work in restaurants; developing and promoting an online app for people who are seeking something for their souls that is *not church*.

We've stretched beyond what we knew. We're off the familiar path. We've ventured out into the wilderness. Sometimes we have stepped out of the boat and tried to walk on the waves, and we sank right through the surface of the water. Sometimes we thought we were hearing God's voice say 'Come;' and now, looking back, it seems like maybe God was saying, 'Whatever. Go ahead and try. I'll see you out there.'

Every time, even when we felt most lost, God has been there beside us-- cloud and fire, a hand reaching over the waves. Not because we were doing the right thing all the time, but because this is who God is. This is what God promises. God does not offer GPS. There are no turn-by-turn directions for where you are trying to go, or who you are called to be. The promised land is not a particular place. It's a particular connection. It's leaning on the right shoulder.

This is your calling, Los Altos United Methodist Church. To keep moving, risking, sometimes falling. Trying new things, pushing beyond where you and the rest of the Church have stepped before—even when the outcome is not entirely clear or predictable. You are following a God whose words of greeting aren't 'Be careful;' they're 'Do not be afraid.' Whose action—in our stories and in our lives, says 'I am with you always.' May it be so for you. It *will* be so for you.