

### GETTING THERE

--If you were one of the 45 people in attendance at worship on my first Sunday as your Interim Pastor, then you may remember something of the sermon that was preached that morning. (I know, that's probably hoping for a lot, but what else have you come to expect from me?)

The sermon was entitled "Feeling Like Moses," because in those days, I was feeling a lot like him.

After all, it was a young Moses who was just out there in the fields keeping watch over his father-in-law's flocks, just going about his daily business, more or less content with his current lot in life--and so was I, just supply preaching in the area, like some sort of pollinating bee, buzzing casually from flower to flower and then flying on.

Moses wasn't seeking anything out of the ordinary, wasn't pining for something with which to break his routine or test the limits of his strength and resiliency--and neither was I, still getting accustomed to being retired, with perhaps only a toe or two dipped the waters of anything more demanding, as I drove into a town, dropped my load of homiletical pearls, and then drove away--no muss, no further fuss, no complications.

Moses wasn't hoping to be singled out by God for some special mission; he sure wasn't looking for a job--and neither was I, naively smug about the fact that I purposely had never pursued the formal training for Interim Pastors, that way thinking myself protected from any congregation's overtures for me to be their Interim. I figured they'd be thinking, "Well, he's not too bad, but he's not a real Interim, you know, so we'd better look elsewhere." (Yeah, how'd that work out for me?)

As he stumbled about the stony hillsides, Moses never saw that burning bush coming; I'm sure that must have amused God, given what would happen next. I'm sure that God was equally amused the first time I stumbled across the threshold into this building and strolled into this sanctuary, never seeing, either, what fire was flickering in my path.

Isn't that, though, just like God? Taking people who are perfectly satisfied with the way life is and then messing with it, so they end up someplace they never expected to be and doing all sorts of things that they never expected to do. I'm sure that Moses would see it like that--and so do I. My having been here at St. John's over these months is as God-engineered an experience as is anything else I have known in my life. That, I suppose, is the very essence of a "call."

--Now, like the older Moses in this morning's reading from Deuteronomy, which occurs not only at the end of the book but also at the end of Moses' sacred charge among the Israelites, I, too, find myself at the end of this chapter in my life, and at the close of this experience with you.

For forty years (a number, you may remember, that signifies a long time), thanks to his original call at that burning bush, Moses has been an integral part of seeing through all manner of ups and

downs that take place between Israel's time in Egypt and this specific moment, when they prepare, finally, to cross the Jordan River and move into the Promised Land.

Over those years, he has been instrumental in the nation's release from captivity under a harsh Pharaoh, he has been witness to the primary redemptive act at the Red Sea, and he has guided them into and through the wilderness, eyes always attuned to the omnipresent God, symbolized by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

And that shared experience from over those years has brought them, Israel, and brought him, Moses, here to this place, at the very threshold of crossing that river into Canaan. It is not really an end, understand, simply a new beginning.

Of course, it's not been forty years since I first arrived at St. John's. It may just have just felt that way for some of you. If so, I do apologize for that. Counting the months since that Sunday that was imagined to be my "one-shot preaching gig before moving on," I have been here just over three years. I have experienced it as decidedly not being a long time. I can't believe the speed with which these months have passed.

And while the length of our journey together hardly compares to Moses' four decades of dealing with those Israelites, we have had our experiences, too, of struggling against getting stuck in bondage to a past that threatened to stifle our brighter future as a congregation. We have had our wilderness moments, too, where we weren't sure where we were headed next or how we were going to get there, and where it might have seemed at times like we were going more in circles than anything else. (That's what you get for hiring someone who wasn't a real Interim Pastor.) And we have had our redemptive moments, too, where, with God's unmistakable help, we have broken with old ways and put ourselves on a challenging, energizing new course for the future.

--And that's where Moses in Deuteronomy, and I in Lewisburg, find ourselves perched at this moment--as we, here, look back over where we have come from, consider the territory that indisputably we have covered together, and prepare to take that next step into the waters of our coming transition into the next chapter of St. John's congregational history.

It happens that Moses will not make that crossing of the Jordan with Israel. He will not personally accompany them into the Promised Land of what God has yet to bring to life with them and through them. There was likely some sadness about that. But he tells his people to take heart, for another has already been called and accorded that responsibility and that privilege of getting there.

With or without Moses, the people will go on. They positively have to. They must go on, because, you see, they're not yet finished. The journey has much more in store for them before the will of God is to be further fleshed out and more fully accomplished in the world.

Knowing the rest of the story, we can take significant consolation and encouragement from the fact that they do get there to the other side of the Jordan, and that they will get there to the Promised Land. A new leader is called to guide them skillfully into the next stretch of their experience, as Moses is succeeded by Joshua. For St. John's, "Joshua," it turns out, is a "she."

--At this very pivotal juncture, then, the Lord of Israel--often erroneously imagined as being only wrathful and judgmental--is revealed to be anything but mean-spirited or harsh.

As Moses is discharged of his duties, the people are reminded, "It is the Lord who goes before you. [God] will not fail you or forsake you. So, do not fear or be dismayed" (Deut 31.8).

It is a reassuring message that we people of St. John's would do well to take to heart also. Going forward--the only way that God would have us go--we will never be failed or forsaken, either.

If St. John's Church steadfastly persists in following the lead of this abiding Lord in bringing about a better world, why would we ever think that it would be otherwise for us?

It is with sincerest gratitude, then, for all the ways that, over these three brief years, you have figured into Hue's life and my life that we say simply, "Ikke farvel, men på gensyn." (This isn't goodbye, just we'll probably be seeing you again.)