

The experience of being a candidate for the episcopate is over. Episcopalians in Nevada selected another nominee and so the journey for Evelyn and me is ended. It was a good journey, a voyage of discovery. We learned things about our home state we might never have known. We met and formed relationships with interesting people, one of whom is the new bishop of Nevada. We discerned things about the church there and about ourselves. We grew and we changed, and that is the most important thing.

It really does not matter that I was not elected bishop. That was never the guaranteed end of the journey, as I kept cautioning all of you. No end of any journey is ever guaranteed. But what is guaranteed is that along the path of every journey we will learn things, we will find new things, we will meet new people. Every journey is a voyage of discovery and an opportunity for growth and change.

The people of God in exile in Babylon were on a journey – not one they took voluntarily, but nonetheless a journey. They had a choice about the journey, as every traveler does. They could sit at the side of the road or they could move on. If they had chosen the first alternative, they would die. The Babylonian conquerors would have killed them. End of journey! No learnings, no discoveries, no growth. Just death.

Their journey did not end when they arrived at the place of exile elsewhere in the Babylonian empire. In truth, it had just begun. About 4,000 important Jewish men and their families were moved from Jerusalem and its environs to various places near the city of Babylon, perhaps 18,000 people or so in all. They originally expected their exile to be short, but Jeremiah the Prophet, who wrote to them the letter described in today's Old Testament reading, suggested otherwise. He expected it to be at least 70 years in length and perhaps as long as seven generations. So on behalf of God, he wrote them some advice.

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

In a word, Jeremiah's (and God's) advice is simple: "Get on with your lives. Don't just sit there and stagnate. Move forward." In other words, the journey continues, continue to journey. And, again, the people of God had a choice about the journey. They could sit or they could move on.

And, again, the consequences of sitting would have been the same: no learnings, no discoveries, no growth. Just death.

This is also the lesson we can take from today's story in Matthew's Gospel. This is not a parable, a story told by Jesus with some esoteric meaning we have to dig deep to find. This is simply the report of one of his many works of healing, but in it we find again the message that it is the journey, not the destination, that holds promise.

Remember what happened. Jesus was traveling through the countryside and encounters a group of ten lepers who call out to him. Rather than simply wave his hand or do some bit of what might look like magic, he says to them "Go show yourselves to the priests." This, of course, meant that they had to make a journey to the Temple in Jerusalem. This was in accord with the Jewish law which requires that a person afflicted with a skin disease and therefore considered "unclean" and an outcast, must be examined by and certified by a priest as healed before they may re-enter society.

The thirteenth chapter of Leviticus sets forth the regulations and instructions on how a person with any form of skin eruption was to be handled. Such a person was to be taken to one of the priests for examination to determine if the eruption might become an infectious skin

disease. Such an eruption made on ceremonially unclean, so after the first such examination the person would be placed in isolation for seven days. Then another priestly examination was performed. If the problem had cleared up, the priest would perform ritual cleansing lasting another seven days, an animal sacrifice would follow, and then the priest would issue a pronouncement that the formerly infected person was now clean. It was this procedure to which Jesus sent the ten lepers, but it was not this procedure which worked the healing. It was the journey which worked their healing. As Matthew tells us, “And as they went, they were made clean.” And one of them, the Samaritan, discovered something ... he learned who Jesus was and that the destination was not as important as the journey, so he turned away from his intended path to the Temple and made his way back to Jesus, to give thanks and perhaps to learn more.

The lepers, like the People of God taken to Babylon, had a choice to make. They could sit at the side of the road or they could move on. If they had chosen the first alternative, they would die. Their disease, or its complications, would have killed them. End of journey! No learnings, no discoveries, no growth. Just death.

Most sermons that I have heard or read about this story from Matthew’s Gospel focus on the need to give thanks and make a hero of the

thankful Samaritan. There is nothing wrong with that focus and I believe we all need to examine our own consciences from time to time to ask whether we have given sufficient thanks for the blessings we have received during our life's journeys.

However, today I want to focus not on the cured Samaritan leper's thankfulness, nor on our own. I would like to focus our attention on the lepers at an earlier time in the story and on the People of God in exile in Babylon. I want to look at them at the point where they had to make their decision to move, their decision to get on with life, their decision to be on the journey not just sitting at the side of the road. And I want to suggest to you that that is precisely the point where we at St. Paul's Parish are and where we have been for some time ... and that we have to make a decision. We have to decide whether to get on with life's journey or continue to sit, as we have done for years, at the side of the road doing nothing but getting closer to death.

"Wait," you will say to me. "We haven't just been sitting here. Since you became our rector nearly five years ago there have been lots of changes at St. Paul's." True, we've fiddled around with a lot of stuff in the past few years. We've changed service times and Sunday School schedules, and changed them again, and yet again. We've added music to services and

take music away. We've altered the content and shape of the liturgy, and we've changed it again. We've redesigned the bulletins, and we've re-designed them. We've added a midweek service and we've moved it around. We've fiddled around a lot.

But all our fiddling has been done while we sat at the side of the road! If you'll pardon a rather graphic image, I think what we've been doing is nothing more than sitting like lepers picking at the scabs on our sores. Why do I think that? It's simple ... every Sunday morning I'm required by the canons to record the attendance showing two numbers in particular – how many people were here and how many communions we served. Every year in January, I'm required by the canons to add all those figures up and average them and fill out a form for the national church. And every year we compare those Sunday morning figures and those annual averages to what was recorded and reported during prior years ... and do you know what? For years ... many, many years ... more years than many of us have been here ... those figures haven't changed! Oh, they may go up a little, or down a little at times, but for the most part over the course of years those numbers have remained stable, static, unchanged and unchanging. St. Paul's just sits at the same level, at the same place at the side of the road.

And there are other figures and other reports which show the same thing ... Annual pledges – Every year, about 100 households in this congregation make pledges (which means that about another 100 don't!) Every year, those 100 households pledge just about the same level of anticipated giving. Every year, based on those pledges we adopt a budget and except for things we have no control over, like insurance premiums or diocesan assessment, that budget stays the same. In the five years that I have been here, we have not given the staff any sort of salary increase. In the five years that I have been here, we have not hired a new staff person. In the five years that I have been here, we have not increased our budget for outreach or social ministry. In the five years that I have been here, we have not spent a dime on evangelism except in 2005 when I applied for and got a special grant from the diocese to try a direct mail campaign for a few months. In the five years that I have been here, for many years before that, our pledged support of the spread of the Gospel and our budget to do God's work in Medina have remained stable, static, unchanged and unchanging.

Living things ... including living and lively churches ... do not remain stable, static, unchanged and unchanging. Living things ... including living and lively churches ... are like the People of God in Babylon or like the lepers sitting at the side of the road. They make a choice: sit and die, or

move, change and live. Living things ... including living and lively churches ... chose to get moving, chose to change, and chose to live.

We are going to make that choice. St. Paul's is going to get moving. St. Paul's is going to live. St. Paul's is going to grow. And that means St. Paul's is going to change.

I suspect that when the People of God hit the road for Babylon, it was painful. I suspect that when the People of God began building homes in Babylon, it was painful. I suspect when the lepers got up from where they were sitting and moved their disease-riddle bodies, it was painful. I suspect that when St. Paul's starts to move, to grow and to change, it will be painful. No .. That's not true ... I don't suspect it ... I know it will be painful for some. And I know that some will not like the changes and some will complain.

In another story from the Gospels, Peter complained when Jesus told the disciples that their journey would take them to Jerusalem and probably to his death. Jesus rebuked him, and demanded that Peter recognize that his complaining was standing in the way of God's work. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said to him. Those are some of the strongest words in all of scripture, spoken to a man we know Jesus loved with all his heart. It was painful for Peter, but the work of the kingdom of God is serious, and Peter

and every follower of Christ has to learn to lead, follow, or get out of the way. I imagine one or more of the lepers also complained when their comrades prodded them to do as Jesus commanded, but their complaints did not deter the others and complaints will not deter St. Paul's from following Jesus's commandments either.

“Go,” he said to the apostles just before he ascended to Heaven. “Go and make disciples of all people, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Go ... healing and life and blessing are found not by sitting at the side of road, not in being static and unchanged and unchanging, but in the journey and the challenges it presents. “Go,” said God to the Jews in exile. “Go,” said Jesus to the lepers. “Go,” he said to the apostles. “Go,” he says to St. Paul's, Medina ... and we are going to get going!