

Sermon, Labor Day Weekend 2020

Good morning First Congregational church, friends and guests. I'm Jonathan Goodell and I'm speaking from my home in Winchester.

We're not ready to go back to the Y, so walking is one of the things that Betsy and I like to do each morning. We walk around Horn Pond. There's something about a daily routine that is reassuring and anchors our day. It is paced well. It gives us time to check in on each other.

We have our walking companions, people who we expect to see each time. For a while there was the guy who walked with the clanking lopsided sound of his golf bag as a training tool. He always passed us and it was eerie to hear his strange foot steps coming up the path. And then there are the three guys with the black cockapoo with the white face. Who could forget that face! But wait, there was that morning when the same dog was walking cheerfully with two women. Do we detect a covid pod?

Some mornings I am leading the way and some days I am frankly lagging, my brain needing its first cup of coffee to keep up with Betsy's ambitious steps.

The loop has its many moods... the water itself can be beautifully clear or misty or disturbed by the wind. The arching oaks can create a sense of spaciousness and the close pine grove with the sandy soil and the bushes closing in. And when our conversation becomes too knotted there is always something that lifts our gaze up or out, a whiff of freshness, a park bench, a memorial plaque ... something that gets us out of our tightly wound world.

Last week Betsy and I did something different. She had listened to a podcast on walking and prayer based on the Camino pilgrimage in northern Spain. She wanted me to hear it. So I took her phone and listened to her podcast, walking one way as she walked the other and we passed each other deep in our own reflections.

Today's passage celebrates walking ... and living out of a suitcase, or a camel bag or a dusty knapsack. It begins what will be a forty year journey for the weary and uncertain people of Israel. Everything has been knocked loose by plague and political upheaval. And they have been given a narrow space to escape and to develop into a people no longer enslaved. They are being offered spiritual freedom. And the cornerstone of that freedom seems to be the celebration of the Passover, with their bags packed.

This is how you shall eat the Passover lamb: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD.

It seems to me that what this passage was originally telling its readers ... and what it may still be saying to us ... is that we are people on the move. Let's imagine Thanksgiving celebrated this way. You are at the tender age of fifteen. Will you settle down with a game on your ipad on your Aunt Martha's couch! Or maybe you have a book to read for class. There is always the Macy's Thanksgiving parade to watch. Or the Detroit Tigers on TV if you want to watch with the older guys. But wait... the turkey comes out of the oven, the amazing side dishes, some of which only get served once a year appear. Your mom's famous rolls come warm to the table. And just when you are ready to sit down you hear "okay everyone get your coats on" and you come to table with your coat on and your Aunt Martha, who has been slaving all day says ... okay eat up, we have just a few minutes before we have to get going. It's sort of strange. It goes against every natural instinct to settle in and get comfortable with all this wonderful food.

But the message is clear. This is the Lord's passover. This is God on the move. Are you going to keep up? Are you going to walk ahead, or are you going to stay back and play your games and read your book and watch the football game.

I like to remind myself that walking is very much a part of our story. In Genesis 12 the story unfolds with the dusty, hot sandals of Abram and Sarai. It continues last week with Moses taking off his dusty, hot

sandals ... by a burning bush ... and then putting them on again having heard the call to walk ... back to proud Egypt.

And now, after hundreds of years of slavery the people of Israel, the people of Abram and Sarai, are being asked to pack and move and live on the road. There will be times on that difficult journey when the static life of slavery will actually seem better. But they are today passage being given that beautiful chance to walk out in hope... although without a road map!

The Christian idea that goes with the Lord's moving among us and moving us along ... is pilgrim.

Like the people of Israel we are invited to greet our strange journey through pandemic as pilgrims. The pilgrim sets out with a minimum of material goods. The pilgrim will need to find hospitality from the kindnesses of others. The pilgrim strips away distraction in order to be more alive to what is going on. Our pilgrim creates space. Or submits to the space around her, around him, around them.

Our Passover text is not the end of an ordeal! It is the beginning of a refining journey that will shape a whole nation. A history of terrible abuse will be sorted and sifted, clarified and resolved around law and a hovering, holy God whom the nation begins to trust as a Presence wanting the best for them. It will not be easy. But it will be a journey toward a greater peace, stability, freedom and joy.

We are all on a refining journey of our own. In March I began by grasping for easy answers and quick solutions to the pandemic. If only bright and capable people could consider this or that. I think we all had trouble accepting just how vexing this illness is. We have had our sense of optimism stricken by facts. Will we wander for forty years? I hope not! But will things be changed for good ... I believe so.

It is said “not all who wander are lost” ... and I suppose the counter response to that is “not all who march in a strong, purposeful line have found a way!”

But the third option, in these uncharted times, is the way of the pilgrim, the way of hope based on listening, openness and courage.

The day I walked the other way around Horn Pond, I didn't get so far or log in so many steps. To begin with, the calming voice in my ear encouraged me to breath deeply and set my breath and my steps in relation to each other. After I had done that I found myself looking up at the canopy of the trees and not just down at the path. My eyes traveled out to the water and I noticed more detail, more life around me. I walked with more awareness. And the thing I was most impressed with was the Camino practice of picking up a stone and carrying it. It is meant to be a reminder of a concern, a challenge, a bit of the earth, to keep you grounded, in touch with your need for others and for God, in touch with the parts of you that bring you down to earth.

Whatever your work this fall, let's bring a pilgrim awareness to it. I am aware that for me, as a pilgrim, it starts with simplicity... a small pack and a simple tuning to voices around me and within. I hope to keep my breathing and my foot steps aligned. Like the Camino pilgrims I will be carrying a rock in my pocket ... to remind me of my frailty, of the heart ache in my life, of my impulse to speak way ahead of my ability to act.

But I will also, especially, remember that I walk this road with others. We eat together to discover that again. And if we have our bags packed and ready to go, our meal can lead us out into the world, into mission, and into God's heart.