

An Undiscovered Country

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, 32-12:2

Seventh Sunday after Easter, (Aug. 14) 2021

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*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.*

- Wendell Berry, from *Our Real Work*

In many of the wedding ceremonies and homilies I've done, I've read these words of Wendell Berry's: "The meaning of marriage begins in the giving of words. We cannot join ourselves without giving our word." Jane and I read this at our own wedding and today, they are framed and hanging on our wall at home.

Wendell is writing about marriage but what he says is also true of baptism and the Christian life. "We cannot join ourselves without giving our word." But then he goes on to say, "And this must be an unconditional giving, for in joining ourselves to one another we join ourselves to the unknown... You do not know the road; you have committed your life to a way" ("Poetry and Marriage" in *Standing by Words*, p. 92).

In our Scripture reading today, we are told that Sarah and Abraham set out to a place that would become their new home. They set out not knowing where they were going. They lived in tents and they looked forward to the City of God... They

were strangers and foreigners on the earth. They desired a better country; that is, a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:16).

They did not know where they were going. All they knew is that they had committed themselves to God to find a better country. They joined themselves to the unknown; they committed themselves to a way.

And the writer of Hebrews goes on, in this chapter that is known as the “roll call of the faithful,” to remind us of all of the others through the centuries who went out without knowing where they were going and who sacrificed and took risks, all because they had committed themselves to God and God’s way.

This past year, or few years, certainly has felt like we joined the unknown. None of us had any idea of what we would go through on this journey. And this morning, we pause and begin to look to the future and we know there is much we don’t know. Yet, we are committed to go on even though we don’t know where we’re going. We have joined ourselves to God, to one another, and to the unknown.

In Shakespeare’s famous soliloquy, (the “To be or not to be” speech) Hamlet speaks of that “undiscovered country, from whose bourn/ No traveller returns, puzzles the will” (Act 3. Scene 1). An undiscovered country from whose boundary no traveler returns...

Sarah and Abraham, and many of those who have gone before us, committed themselves to the unknown – an undiscovered country – a journey together toward a home that God provides.

Like her namesake, our own Sarah joins ancient Sarah in journeying to an undiscovered country. On June 1 Sarah, along with Jose and Lelin, move to Houston. Now it is true, they do have a house waiting for them – they will not be living in tents – and it is also true they will be near family on Jose’s side and true that Jose has a job, but for now, Sarah is moving without a job. For many of us, that does not make sense.

For most of us, we only go forward when we know where we’re going, we take one step because we can see the next step in front of us. And preferably, if you’re like me, you like to see the entire path in front of you.

But not our Sarah. And not old biblical Sarah. They set out not knowing where they were going because God calls, and they trust God. To put it differently, they trust God more than they trust their fear.

Writer Rebecca Solnit has a wonderful essay on what she calls the art of getting lost and learning to be at home in the unknown. Early in the essay, she quotes the poet John Keats, who talked about what he called “Negative Capability, that is when a man [person] is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (*A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, p.6). For Keats, this meant being able to lose ourselves in the moment and in beauty. To give up assumptions and give up trying to know every fact and reason, and learn to be content with partial truth, partial insight. It means giving up control and as Keats said, “irritable reaching.” Or differently, it means giving up control and giving up angry efforts at regaining control.

Many people these days are angry about loss of control – especially White Evangelicals. When we feel like we’re losing control we get mad and we get our guns. It is instructive for me to realize my own tendency to get angry when I unexpectedly lose control. My car breaks down during a busy week and there is not one thing I can control about it – I get angry. I get sick and I get mad because I’ve lost control. I have plans, I know where I want to go and need to do, and all of a sudden, I’m in undiscovered country. I’m joined to the unknown and I don’t like it.

Solnit, following Keats, urges us to practice being lost, letting go and lingering in the uncertainty. To let go of control and enter into the unknown implies an openness to what might happen or not. The unknown is not necessarily bad; it is just not known. But it also means that perhaps something else might be known. Something new can be learned or experienced.

To go from John Keats to Disney and Pixar Entertainment, Ed Catmull, co-founder of Pixar, said, “There is a sweet spot between the known and the unknown where originality happens; the key is to be able to linger there without panicking” (cited in Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*, p.1).

To linger in the unknown without panicking, without fear. Or without getting angry. That is why Solnit says we need to practice, practice, practice getting lost – losing ourselves as a way of finding ourselves.

I bring all of this up because we’re all journeying into an undiscovered country as we look at the future. Jobs, family, health, climate, politics, personal issues and social issues, and church... with nothing exactly like it used to be. Even

as Covid seems to be winding down and we look at moving back into our building in joint worship on the first Sunday in June, we don't know what it all will look like over the next several months. Will you show up, come back to in-person worship or stay home with the convenience you've discovered over the past year? Will you give financially like you did previously? Will we hire another associate pastor, and can we afford to? How and who will take up the slack in the meantime? All of that will be going on while we figure out how to adapt after Sarah has journeyed on.

At the same time, I'm facing an undiscovered country of illness that I did not expect. Thinking I had a kidney stone, I've discovered that I have what the doctors call "a pseudo-tumor" on my kidney and they're referring me to Houston for another opinion. They assure me they do not think it is cancerous but want an oncologist to look at it. We'll see. But it is definitely entering into the unknown.

Flannery O'Connor, who suffered from Lupus, once wrote that in a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe. Or in the words we're using this morning, sickness is like a journey to an undiscovered country.

For us, to enter into this journey is to enter into God's call. It does not mean that God calls us to be sick or to lose our job or endure Covid. And it certainly does *not* mean that as we face incredible change and the unknown that we respond with fear and wall-building and getting our guns. It does mean that we trust God. God is present in the journey with us and in us and alongside of us. God-with-us changes how we journey because not all journeying is the same.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman analyzes our modern world of constant

change and journeying. Sometimes people have to move all the time because it is forced upon them, often just to survive. We call them refugees. Then there are nomads and vagabonds who wander and move and looking for a place, looking for a new this or a new that, in a kind of chronic restlessness.

Bauman says there are also tourists. Also constantly on the move, never settled, but moving by choice. Tourists are always looking and experiencing but never with a sense of overall purpose.

But there is another category that Bauman talks about and which fits with us this morning. Pilgrim. Pilgrims are on the move, traveling on a journey but with purpose. They have a sense of what they're looking for. They walk into the undiscovered country with eyes wide open.

Pilgrims learn, if they don't know already, that the point of the journey is the journey itself, not getting to the destination. Being a pilgrim is less about what we discover at the end of the journey and more about how we're transformed as we make the journey.

Fourteenth century mystic St. Catherine of Siena reflects the perspective of the pilgrim when she said, "All the way to heaven is heaven because Christ is the Way."

One of the essentials of being a pilgrim instead of a wandering nomad, is that we have a sense of orientation. The country in front of us might be undiscovered but we want to make sure we're not simply walking around in circles. Worship on Sunday morning is where we followers of Jesus and his Way,

get re-oriented. All week we are tossed this way and that, it is easy to get disoriented; easy to get lost. On Sunday mornings we come together to get our bearings again. To be oriented is literally to “face east.” To turn toward the rising S-U-N and the risen S-O-N. We are reoriented as we walk again with the risen Christ.

Worship is where we are fed and nourished for the journey. We are renewed as God feeds us on the Word, at the Lord’s Table, through music and hymns, and by the Holy Spirit through one another.

Worship also is where we stop and take inventory of ourselves, in the light of Christ. What are we taking on our pilgrimage that we don’t need to take? Are we carrying too much baggage? Writer Annie Dillard writes about the early Arctic and Antarctic explorers and the kinds of things they packed. The Franklin expedition in 1845 packed silverware, a library, a full-sized pump organ, and many other needless things. Their clothes, for those sub-freezing conditions, were nothing more than the uniforms of the British Royal Navy. A gentleman didn’t wear anything other. Of course, they all perished. Because they had too much baggage, and the wrong kind of baggage, they didn’t survive.

The analogy is apt. If we do not learn to lighten our loads, to travel light then we won’t make it. Journeying into the undiscovered country means being able to move, improvise, change directions, and think on our feet. This is partly why we practice repentance, confession, and forgiveness. Confession is learning to lighten our loads. It is a garage sale of the soul.

Sarah is about to embark on an extraordinary journey. It is a new chapter in

her and her family's life and I am convinced that they will have wonderful adventures in their days to come. (And I'm convinced it will not be boring as long as Lelin is on the journey.) They are not leaving us forever so that we will never see them again, after all, Steve and Kay, Michael and Amy and the boys Oliver and Everett, and Grandma Francis are all still here and they'll be back often.

I want to remind you that Sarah, as she has in so many ways over the years, shows us how to make the journey into the undiscovered country. She goes with an extraordinary faith in God. She trusts God more than fear and she embodies courage and perseverance – all virtues essential to following God's call.

For us as a congregation, I'm convinced that our best days are in front of us. New challenges mean new opportunities. Remember the earlier quote Pixar's Ed Catmull, "There is a sweet spot between the known and the unknown where originality happens; the key is to be able to linger there without panicking" I trust we're looking at days where originality will happen.

God is calling us to an undiscovered country, so let us open our hearts and minds and bodies to God's creative Holy Spirit. Look for grace and goodness we are not accustomed to seeing. Let's be open to surprise. And together, by God's grace, instead of panicking we can learn to love the unknown.

I began with quoting Wendell Berry and I come back to him here at the end. He wrote: *It may be that when we no longer know what to do/ we have come to our real work,/ and that when we no longer know which way to go/ we have come to our real journey.*

Sam Wells says, “Most of the Christian life is faithful preparation for an unknown test” (*Improvisation*, p. 80). So, for Sarah, for me, for you – looking at the undiscovered journey we have to come to our real work, the real journey begins. But hey... God has been preparing us for such a time as this our whole life.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.