**October 29, 2017**

**Exodus 34**

Having traveled from a young age, I love airports. I love dreaming about my next trip. I even love dreaming about other people’s next trips – wondering about those in planes passing overhead -- where they’re going, where they’ve been, and what stories accompany them. Where we live, I watch planes align for landing at Farmingdale and JFK each day. On my morning runs, I love seeing the international flights arriving. I feel like a greeting party of 1, sending up silent “welcome to America” thoughts up to their planes. I give thanks for their safe arrival and pray for their miles ahead. And if I’m actually at the airport, I’m fascinated by the arrivals and departures areas. I love watching travelers disembark with bags of goodies, crushed by the arms of waiting friends, and on the other side, young adults carrying HUGE bags for some grand adventure, parents tearfully saying “goodbye” to children, and businessmen trying to avoid any emotional entanglements with the rest of the crowds. As faces overflow with joy and fear and sadness and confusion and annoyance and hope, they all hold one thing in common: every greeting and farewell is loaded with questions of what’s next.

Every journey changes us; no one goes home in the same condition that they left. We must relearn how to be ourselves and how to be together (with others) after the traveling is done. Both those leaving and those staying sense the changes afoot, and the question, “what’s next?” floats across each encounter… He’s leaving, so how am I going to manage these kids by myself?... You’re home, so what are we going to do now?... She’s just been gone for a few days, but she’s different. What should we talk about now? … Can you do this by yourself?...

The saints are those people who stay with us through our journeys’ beginnings and endings. They coach us from the sidelines, keeping us on track and moving past obstacles. The saints do not expect us to stay the same, but instead expect us to learn from the miles and be transformed by the journey.

The death of my maternal grandfather was the loss of a significant relationship in my life, and in my family. He was a tall, strong, working man. Although my grandfather wasn’t an overly talkative man, he made conversation with those whom others would overlook. The sparkle in his eyes and easy presence drew people in. He gave personal assistance to those in need, bringing home a ragtag band of helpers who were hungry for friendship as well as a day’s wage and hearty meal. As he lived his life, doing justice in the ways that he could, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God, my grandfather built bridges across the community, as well as at home… My grandfather was imperfect. He suffered and caused suffering as all people do, but to me (and to many others), he was a saint. Time with him was sacred. His opinions and advice were taken more seriously than others’. As his strength weakened and death inched closer, our family members grabbed for one last conversation. We each pulled one more story, one more memory out of him. We couldn’t imagine living beyond him. And yet, after he died, somehow, we picked ourselves off his grave and went home… without him… Somehow, days passed, months passed, and here I am. I have changed since his death almost 6 years ago. Although I have undoubtedly done things differently from how he might have advised or expected, I believe that he would be proud of the life I have lived and the person I have become.

My grandfather was one of many saints who paved the road for me to travel this far. He loved me and taught me as best he could. He did not want any of us to stop living just because he died. That would have been absurd. Instead, he loved us enough to delight in the places we would go, and the people we would become… even without him. I have reformed because of him.

We all have saints in our lives who enabled us to become the people that we are today. Parents, grandparents, friends, teachers who led us through transformations. People who accompanied us through life’s ups and downs. Saints who opened our hearts and minds, perhaps by simply modeling God’s love in life. Perhaps by boldly seeking justice. Knowing these saints changed us and our lives, defined and redefined us in large and subtle ways. Some of those names are listed in our bulletin, while others are held closely to our hearts.

Over the past month, we have journeyed through our congregation’s reformation, while following Moses’ footsteps in the wilderness. We have remembered significant people and significant occasions in the life of our Christian family – John & Judy Wallace, the Baylis family, Zopher Ketcham, Rev. Nehemiah Brown and Old First Presbyterian Church who had the vision and courage to be reformed into 2 congregations. None of these people are here today, but we are still here because of their work and witness. We are different from who we were when they knew us; we are transforming into something beautiful because of them. Just as Zopher Ketcham wrote in his poem about the founding of Sweet Hollow:

“We think the cause was good and just

and in the Lord we’ll put our trust

a bad beginning, who can tell,

may end for good – and all be well.”

We are a work-in-process. The end is unknown. The beginning (and some steps in between) were difficult, but we keep going. We haven’t given up. God continues to speak to us and through us, so we continue to follow God’s voice, moving closer to God and one another, moving farther down the road, little by little.

Just as the Israelites journeyed out of Egypt. They wandered through the wilderness, complaining and lamenting every step of the way. And through each mile, God re-formed them and reclaimed them as the chosen people. For God was not going to leave them as they were. God had a plan for them that was not in Egypt. The plan was not slavery or suffering or starvation. God called them to be free to live and love and worship as God intended. Getting there was hard work. The changes cost tears and toil and lives and leaders. No one finished this journey as they were. Moses didn’t even live to cross the finish line.

Moses was a working saint. He had no pretense of trying to stay the same. From his story’s beginning, floating down the river in a basket, there was no way that he could go home as if nothing happened. From the burning bush, there was no denying his special call God had for his life. Through the wilderness, he suffered with the people. He frustrated God and was frustrated by God, but he didn’t stop walking or call it quits. He frustrated the people and was frustrated by the people, but he didn’t give up on them or leave them to figure it out on their own.

Moses’ vision was God’s vision. Moses had more hope for them than they had for themselves. He had dreams for them that were bigger than his life. Moses trusted in God’s reformation of the people, beginning generations before him and lasting generations after him.

That’s tough. Not to see the end of the story. That’s hard not to reach the satisfying conclusion.

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes proclaimed centuries later that all things come to an end. “For everything there is a season,” but all seasons will turn and end. Even later, the prophet Isaiah wrote that “the grass withers and the flowers fall; only the Word of God stands forever.” Which means that change will happen. The grass will die. The flowers will wilt. The leaves will fall. The seasons will change. The leaders will shift. The people will move. God alone remains. God alone is unchanging amidst the rest of life’s shifting sands.

Moses handed the Israelites to the care of Joshua. As one season ended, another season began. Only the Word of God would outlive them all. The law which Moses received became bedrock for the world’s faith. YHWH, who gave the law to Moses, who steadfastly led the Israelites through the wilderness and to the Promised Land, God alone remains to lead us through our wilderness today.

Through Sweet Hollow’s almost 200-year history, pastors and elders and saints have handed the church’s care and future to others behind them. Classes of church officers were elected, with hope and trust that their vision would be God’s vision. They stewarded us into dreams bigger than their own lives. They trusted in God’s reformation, beginning generations before themselves and lasting generations after them. They understood that our end would go beyond where they could reach. To be good stewards of their legacy, we, too, must look beyond ourselves. We must listen for God’s voice ahead of us. We respond to God’s voice around us, not stopping in the path, not giving up, but activating, caring, listening, studying, questioning, and becoming stewards ourselves. Each of us is invited to take up the mantle of “steward.” Each of us is invited to practice “stewardship” in a prayerful, thoughtful, Spirit-led way.

Reformation was not a historical event that ended with those first reformers. Reformation is an ongoing experience. Our reformation continues when we wonder what we *actually* believe. Our reformation continues when we recommit to following God instead of others on earth. We continue with the church’s reformation when we pray for God to show us, “what’s next.” It would be absurd to think that we could stop, remain the same, or go back unchanged. Instead, we gladly follow the Spirit into the Promised Land. Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. Amen.