



"Companions"

Scripture – Acts 8:26-39

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, May 2, 2021

The countdown has begun! Students and teachers are checking off the days to the end of the academic year. I suspect most of them can tell you precisely how many days remain before the summer break. Those who are graduating are especially riveted on how many days until the celebrations begin.

On that thrilling day they march across the platform, are handed their diploma and flip their tassel from right to left, a voice inside will say, "Yes! I did it!" Like a runner who has been racing and racing, many will feel the ecstasy of hitting the finish line. That feeling will no doubt sink in during their commencement ceremony.

Our grandson, Matthew, who lives in Richmond, will be graduating the end of the month and Camilla and I will be there as proud grandparents to salute him on a job well done. But, there is a funny thing about a commencement ceremony. While, many of the graduates will experience it as marking the **end** of a process, that is the opposite of what the word "commencement" means. To commence is to begin, to start, to launch. A commencement ceremony marks the beginning of the next stage on the journey of life.

Life IS a journey – a journey that includes the mundane and the exciting, the predictable and the surprising. True confession: as a child growing up in Oklahoma, I would have had to search very hard to locate Delaware on a map! I certainly never would have predicted that this is where I would spend some of my best years.

What about your life journey? Are you where you anticipated you would be at this point? What dreams never materialized? What surprises delivered unexpected joy? What unforeseen obstacles made your journey more burdensome? Which obstacles did you conquer?

A colleague shares a pivotal moment in the Lewis and Clark expedition. "After fifteen months of traveling upstream along the Missouri River, Meriwether Lewis thought he had finally found it: a water route that would connect to the Pacific Ocean. Lewis thought all he had to do was walk his men up a gentle slope with their canoes on their backs, and then ride a downstream current all the way to the Pacific. Instead, when Lewis and his party crested the top of the slope, they discovered that everything everyone thought they knew about the geography of western North America was totally wrong. Instead of a navigable river running to the Pacific, they saw unending miles of snow-covered mountain peaks – the Rocky Mountains. There was no gently flowing water route to the Pacific. This was a range of mountains unlike anything these men had ever seen. As one member of Lewis's party later said, these were 'the most terrible mountains I ever beheld.' Tod Bolsinger writes that 'at that moment everything that Meriwether Lewis assumed about his journey changed. He was planning on exploring the new

world by boat. He was a river explorer. They planned on *rowing*, and they thought the hardest part was behind them. But in truth everything they had accomplished was only a prelude to what was in front of them.”¹

While it’s doubtful you have ever faced such a grueling physical challenge, I suspect you can recall a moment in your life that seemed so daunting that you wondered if you could overcome it.

This gift of a life journey includes times that are frightening and intimidating, but also spells that are delightful and beautiful. Thank goodness we do not travel solo. We are joined by others along the way – some who spur us onward when we are determined to quit and some who add spice to our path. Then there are others who reveal new insights and point the way to promising horizons.

That is the story we find in today’s text from the Acts of the Apostles. A court official of the Ethiopian queen had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship. As he was beginning his path homeward, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. God’s Spirit nudged the disciple Philip to catch up with the court official to ask if he understood what he was reading.

The man replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” That was the invitation Philip needed to point the man’s life in a new direction. Philip had experienced God’s love firsthand, and as one of the apostles, he knew how to live a rich, purposeful, and joyful life. So, he began to teach the court official about the way of Jesus.

As they continued down the road, they came upon a stream and the court official asked Philip, “Is there anything to prevent me from being baptized?” He ordered the driver to stop and Philip baptized him. The man never saw Philip again, but returned to his country a changed man.

Philip was with him for a very brief time, but it was a pivotal time. Prompted by God’s Spirit, Philip made a powerful impact on the man and altered his life forever.

Perhaps you can recall someone who made a decisive difference in your life – someone who opened your mind to new insights or someone who brought out the best in you or someone who helped you start moving again after being mired in a losing situation. Who are some of the people who have helped you grow in your spiritual life?

Each of us has a unique journey, and different people help us along the way. Our parents shape us in countless ways. Perhaps you can recall a professor who helped you see the world from a new perspective? Have you had a mentor who provided vital guidance?

Philip played a key role in transforming the court official’s life, but the man had to open his mind and his heart to someone’s help. He had to admit that he did not have all the answers.

Timothy Hart-Andersen, the senior pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, recalls a conversation with a friend after the man returned from Cuba. “He had been visiting Presbyterian mission sites in remote rural areas. His driver had never been to those places and there were no road signs. Nonetheless, they reached each of their destinations because the driver kept using what he called ‘the Cuban GPS’: stopping every few kilometers to ask for help.”² That is probably the most accurate GPS you can find.

The journey of life is not a solitary affair. We make it with others and we make it better when we ask for help.

Not only was the court official able to accept Philip's help, his heart had to be open to change. He had to be willing to grow. He had to possess the courage to cross a new threshold.

A few years ago, some religious leaders from the U.S. met with Muslim leaders from Pakistan to launch a process of dialogue. Their goal was to break down barriers and rigid stereotypes to see if they could improve relations between our countries.

"Amir and Noor, two Pakistani scholars were from a fundamental brand of Islam. They approached this gathering with considerable anxiety. Neither had ever met a Jew and prior to this gathering their language had been filled with prejudicial remarks about Judaism in general and Jewish people in particular. The U.S. delegation included both a conservative and an orthodox rabbi."

"On the first evening, the whole delegation traveled together in cars to a location for an initial get-together ice breaker – a boat ride. Amir and Noor just happened to sit next to Ari Hart, the orthodox rabbi in the group. Within minutes, they were chatting together as if they were old friends.

At the end of this three-day gathering, Amir and Noor gave everyone gifts; and in Amir's closing remarks, he spoke about how Christians, Muslims and Jews need to work together for peace. Then he did a remarkable thing, thanking one of the rabbis in the group. Amir said, that this rabbi had mentored him like a father during the conference. Through his body language, the clutch in his voice, and the words he used, it was easy to see how this had been a transformational experience. The world view of this leader in fundamental Islam had spun 180 degrees."³

Of course it never would have happened had he not dropped his protective shield to let others in, and a willingness to learning something new. Poet Boris Pasternak said, "When a great moment knocks on the door of your life, it is often no louder than the beating of your heart, and it is very easy to miss it."⁴

In our *Book of Common Worship* there is a brief prayer that goes like this: Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love is supporting us.

Our journey is best when we make it with friends, when we can drop our pride and ask for help, when we are open to new perspectives, and when we trust God's love and guidance.

NOTES

1. Amy Starr Redwine quoting from Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), p.27.
2. Timothy Hart-Andersen, "Where Are We Going?" June 3, 2018.
3. Robert Chase, "Mountaintops and Intersections," *Day1.org*, February 10, 2013.
4. John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1997), p. 8.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of the Waters — whose Spirit danced over the face of the deep and stirred creation to life; whose prophet liberated Israel through the waters of the Sea; whose voice boomed over Jordan: "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased" — by water, You create and re-create. And, by water, You fashion us into a people — one community in Christ.

We give thanks that you claim us in the waters of baptism and call us to life with you. Pour out your Spirit upon us, like you did at Jesus' baptism, and sustain us for our common calling.

You bind us together as siblings in Christ and charge us to care for one another. Some among us are suffering, O God. We lift before you those who grieve: those who have lost loved ones and the joy of companionship; those who have lost hope and the courage to dream. We remember those whose bodies are weary or aching from disease; we remember those who suffer each day from anxiety or addiction. Breathe your Spirit upon all in need of healing, we pray, that they might know your peace and experience your wholeness. And breathe your Spirit upon us, stirring us toward compassion, that we might bring comfort to sisters and brothers in need of care.

Great God, from generation to generation, you have been faithful to us. We give thanks for people who have formed us in faith: for parents and grandparents who sowed seeds of trust; for teachers who guided us toward greater understanding; for mentors who modeled generosity and service; for friends who joined us on the journey. May we, too, be mentors and teachers, servants and friends ... instruments of your love and witnesses to your grace. Form and transform us, we pray, that we might be the people you have called us to be. And send us out, renewed and restored, to share your love with the world.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, and offer the words he taught us — saying together:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.