

PREACHED IN THE PARISH OF ST JAMES, MONCTON

Pentecost 11, August 21, 2022

Jesus said to the woman: You are set free.

Well, how are we? I expect you feel a bit like orphans this Sunday. I'm glad I can at least be a familiar face.

The word parish which we used to use as a geographic term, actually means to sojourn---its Greek---to be on the way to a destination, and to be ready for whatever comes next. Sojourning is more than a metaphor for what life feels like, moving on, leaving behind, looking forward, it is actually what life is. Physically we've come here by walking and driving, many of us from another place, and most of us have lived in plenty of places. We've also come here time wise---some have been here for months, others decades, and this is a parish, a sojourning place where some can say they've been here from the very beginning. 1957 was it? And the sheer physical moving and the passing through time changes us---we age of course, some of us better than others we think, but we also change internally: hopefully we deepen in ourselves as we live through experiences---I suppose that should be out of experiences since ex means out of. But we also get beat up-or down, to a certain extent. Things that mattered here in this place decades ago, now don't matter. Things that we never dreamed were going to matter, now do. With the sojourning comes both anxiety and confidence---only a fool doesn't see the things that threaten us, but having lived through unimaginable changes and not only survived, but done better for it, gives us a certain relish to take on whatever is coming next. Nor is sojourning, travelling, a solitary reality. Gwen and I used to say we could write a book about the kindness of strangers---people who helped us out in our travels when we couldn't speak the language. They all had stories of how they in their turn had been helped. Through time we develop friendships, and work through disagreements, finally forgive when that's necessary. Through time families are made, and parishes can become communities, also a family for us. Parishes are ranked in their ability to welcome newcomers and reach out to those who cannot

no longer travel here. And we are forever saying good by to people who have to go on elsewhere, not to mention the good byes that we'd really like not to say when someone dies. But even then we use our language of sojourning, travelling. Those who die have passed on, they go to heaven, we still keep their company as we remember them. Parishes always were places of memorial, often literally surrounded by the graves of those who have passed on. The buildings are most often beautified in memory of those who sojourned here during their lives: windows, precious vessels, vestments.

So it should be no surprise to us to realize that sojourning, travelling, moving on, with fear and faith, is the theme of today's readings from sacred scripture.

We have Jeremiah, the prophet of the exile, when the people of Judah had their grand derangement—driven from their home into exile in Babylon. He was so young, so lacking in confidence, no idea what he would say or if anyone would actually listen. but the Lord said to him, Do not say, I am only a boy, for you shall go to all to whom I send you and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

We have the strange and wonderful words of the letter to the Hebrews. Perhaps written to former Jewish priests after their temple has been destroyed by the Romans and they have been scattered as well throughout the empire. Nothing I could say can equal the great invocations of the letter to the Hebrews. But did you know that some of those words have made it onto the Canadian Coat of Arms: I won't give you the Latin, but the words are from Hebrews, chapter 11, a great celebration of the staying power of faith which is built upon the past but oriented to the future. The words, “They desired a better country.” It's that same letting go of what is no longer by looking ahead that lies in the great vision of today's reading, which also envisions a journey: “You have not come to something that can be touched. A blazing fire, and darkness and gloom.” That was Mount Moriah in the desert days long past, the forty years of wandering, the terror of the giving of the law. Rather, as the letter also says, faith, the faith that propels us forward, that sustains us in the journey, is the hope for what cannot be seen. “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the innumerable angels in festal gathering and to the assembly of the first born who are enrolled in heaven, . . . .and to Jesus, the

mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” That’s heavy stuff, but in our hymns and our art that is the great vision that lies ahead for all of us, that sustains us through this life’s journey and through death.

But Sunday by Sunday we are embarked on another journey. We stand as we hear the gospel proclaimed, and in a three year cycle we have guides who bring us along with Jesus. Jesus was no stationary professor----he called the disciples to follow—that’s what the word actually means. Follow him as he walked the boundaries of the promised land—way up to the norther boundary, out to the sea coast, on both sides of the sea of Galilee, often into foreign territory. Sunday after Sunday we are with him in the presence of people caught up in the upheaval of empire, social dislocation. All seeking to survive, all longing for a better country. Soldiers, merchants, tax collectors, children, religious leaders, fishermen. All of them trying to find their way. Finally Jesus leads them down the Jordan valley, further and further to the very spot where the people first entered the promise land under Joshua, and a thousand years later returned after exile in Babylon. We’re with Luke this year. And like Mark and Matthew, he reminds us, as Jesus reminds the disciples, that the Lord has set his face to Jerusalem, that they are on the way.

This Sunday---the Sabbath---he’s teaching in a synagogue. And a woman, who is greatly impeded in her mobility, her ability to journey, comes into the gathering. Bent over. Quite unable to stand upright. Again and again and again the gospels Jesus meets those who are in danger of being left behind. He heals, feeds, and encourages. “When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” And when the leader of the synagogue, you might see him as the desperate defender of the status quo, becomes indignant, Jesus invokes simple humanity. We free animals when they need, exactly, when they need, so why we would not free this daughter of Abraham, set her free from her bondage.”

This Sunday begins your seeking new leadership----though the priest is only one part of the leadership you already depend upon. The vision of the journey, remains the same: to the heavenly Jerusalem. And the mission? be good to all

those we meet along the way. We can go out from here, on from today, following the words of the final hymn that has been appointed:

Lead on, O King eternal: the day of march has come.

For not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums.

But deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom comes.