

SERMON FOR SYNOD SUNDAY

7 October 2018

prepared by LCA Bishop John Henderson

Exodus 29:45

'I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God.'

Dear Christian friends,

The satellite navigation system in my car has what it calls 'waypoints'. Waypoints are places you can visit along the route to your destination. I must be very careful when I use waypoints, as entering the wrong data, or sorting them into the wrong order, will mean taking a much longer route to where I want to go.

The Old Testament Israelites, just three months out of Egypt on route to the Promised Land, came to just such a waypoint. They arrived in the wilderness of Sinai, where they stayed for two years, two months, and twenty days.¹ While they were there God gave them, among other things, a covenant, a brand new set of laws, a priesthood, and instructions for the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle in which to house it. They spent much of the time waiting for Moses to come back down the mountain from his meetings with God. Was that waypoint their destination? Not at all – it was only preparation. They had 40 years of hard travelling in front of them.

The Israelites certainly took the long route to the Promised Land. From the beginning they let God down. They were impatient, stubborn, and wandered a long way off course. Even early on in Sinai, while Moses was away with God, they wanted having new gods who would suit them better. So Aaron made them a golden calf.² This was a major breach of God's covenant. If they had been attentive and more patient they could well have reached the Promised Land within twelve months. As it turned out, progress was so slow that by the time they did arrive it was too late for Moses. God had the next generation, led by Joshua, cross the Jordan into the land.³

Our theme text this morning is a tiny snippet of the time in Sinai. It comes from God's instructions for the new priests of Aaron in the Tabernacle.

The instructions are quite detailed. They were getting ready for a major journey. As they travelled, they would need to remember where they had come from, where and why they were going, and who was going with them. So God told them to build a special tent called a tabernacle. In those people believed that most gods were just local spirits. But the Tabernacle, with the Ark of the Covenant inside it, told the people that their God wasn't like that. Wherever they went, however far they travelled, God would still be with them.

That's the point of today's theme verse, *'I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God...'*

The Old Testament is an account of divine promise and human failure. All through it, despite everything they throw at him, God remains committed to his people. God does not give up on them because of their lack of faith. The God of promise keeps his promises. The problems human beings generate do greatly extend the journey, and there are many waypoints, but at the end God is faithful. That remains true today: whatever future we have, we find it in the faithfulness of the God of promise.

The LCA's 2018 General Convention of Synod has also been a waypoint in our journey, the journey of the LCA. The destination still lies ahead, we don't know how far. Perhaps, as with the Israelites, it won't be us, but the next generation, who will finally cross over. And then again, that's probably optimistic, given how long the Christian journey on earth has been

¹ Exodus 19 to Numbers 10

² Exodus 32:1-6

³ Joshua 1:2

these last 2,000 years. As in the Exodus, God's instructions are clear, but we humans can still manage to take the longer route.

But, like Abraham, the father of the Israelites, we are people of faith. We live in two realities. God has put us here in the world for a brief time. While here we are to worship and serve God, loving and serving those with whom we share this planet. And then there is the kingdom into which he has redeemed us for eternity. When we reach our destination we will see God face to face. For the time being these two realities overlap. We already have our Promised Land, but we are still on the journey to get there.

As Christians we don't need a tabernacle to show us that God journeys with us. The kingdom has already broken through. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, has already changed our world. He lives with us now through the Word, written, spoken and enacted; in the Holy Supper, physical and real; and in the Spirit, with whom we are baptised. When, as people of faith, we come to the altar this morning to receive Christ's body and blood, in, with and under the bread and the wine, we will know that God has torn the veil that separates heaven and earth. Back in Sinai, Moses wore a veil when he came back down the mountain from seeing God. That's because the glory was so bright. Like Moses, we now have access to God's glory, but for us it is veiled in the flesh of Jesus. In Jesus Christ, it's not we who go up to God, but God who stoops down to deliver us.

Yes, we are delivered, but that doesn't mean our journey is over. It's just beginning. Have you ever noticed that going somewhere you haven't been before seems to take longer than coming home? We're going to a new place. The way there can feel long, with many unexpected twists and turns. We don't know what lies around each corner. Sometimes we hesitate about which route is the right one.

Is that what our waypoint in this Convention has been like? Have we made decisions that will help us take the right route? I pray so, and I trust God for that. We will know how wise we have been when we start putting the decisions of this Convention into practice. Maybe one day, when we have finally arrived in our heavenly home, we will see how it was that God was with us for every decision, every step, every twist, and every turn. And just when we feared we might have turned away from him, we will see that he was still with us all along.

So now we must leave this waypoint and move on. While here, God has encouraged us. When we needed it he exposed our fears, anxieties and failings. Where we sinned, he offered forgiveness. And we in turn have supported each other and learned, more than ever, to trust our God with our lives, our church, and our future.

On the route to our destination, there is still uncharted territory to cross. God given us the overall direction, but not necessarily a map of all the details. We have God's Word as our guide. By faith we will be able to do what we need to do. We will press on because turning back is not an option. Like the Israelites, who could not go back to Egypt, however daunting their journey, our only option is to press on to whatever God has in store for us.

As we take the next steps, let's be patient with God and kind to one another. Let's put into practice the grace and forgiveness we ourselves receive daily. Jesus taught us to pray, *'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.'* In that spirit, untied by the bonds of Christ's love, the church is an indomitable force for good. Yes, we Lutheran Christians can and will achieve far more than we ever imagined was possible. We are here for a purpose. Together, let's discover that purpose. God has given us work to do. Until our dying day we will work, and wait, and pray to be ready for the time when all that we needed to do has been done, and God will say, *'Well done, good and faithful servant.'* Then we will know that we have fulfilled the purpose for which God has preserved us.

Along the way, and until we reach that goal, God will keep his promises to us – be certain of that. Today we return to our everyday lives. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, with the sure and certain hope of our destination, the resurrection to eternal life. Whatever comes, however long the journey, nothing can rob us of our hope in him.

Thanks be to our God, now and forever.

Amen.