

SERMON TITLE: "Journey Together with God's Direction"  
SERMON TEXT: Exodus 13:17-22 and 40:34-38  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: October 16, 2022, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

In early September, my husband, my mother, and I went on a trip to Oregon. Because we had many places to go and many people to see, I had spent a lot of time carefully planning our route, coordinating with relatives, and making reservations where we were going to stay. Most of our trip went well, and we had a really nice vacation. But our journey together got off to a rocky start. On the afternoon of our first day, we had just barely passed Ontario, Oregon, on our way to Pendleton, when all traffic was diverted off Interstate 84 due to a wildfire that had just started along the freeway. With no alternate highway to Pendleton, we had to make some major changes to our driving route and rearrange our hotel reservations. Thank goodness for cell phones and Google Maps! Forced off our familiar roadways, we would have been pretty lost without that internet guidance and digital direction.

In this month of our stewardship drive, we're talking about our "Journey Together." Last Sunday, with the help of Abram and Sarai, we talked about our "journey together with our people." Next Sunday, we're going to see what Isaiah can tell us about our "journey together with rejoicing." On October 30, when we bring our pledge cards back to church, Jesus and the disciples will inform us about our "journey together with purpose." Today, though, with the help of Moses and the newly-liberated Hebrew people, I invite you to consider with me our "journey together with God's direction."

### **1—THE BONES OF JOSEPH**

As you may know, the biblical book of Exodus is the story of how God used Moses to rescue the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and lead them across the Red Sea toward the Promised Land. The wisdom and faith of Moses, God's provision of the Ten Commandments and other laws, and the

establishment of worship rituals were all important aspects of God's guidance. But Exodus 13 and 40 indicate that God had some additional devices of divine direction.

The first of those is found in Exodus 13:19, where we're told that the Hebrew people carried with them the bones of Joseph. That one little verse is a reference to a big part of Hebrew history. Maybe you remember that Joseph was the 11<sup>th</sup> son of his father Jacob. Because father Jacob favored Joseph, his brothers were jealous and sold him into slavery in Egypt. After overcoming many obstacles, Joseph became very successful in Egypt and rose to a position of great power. When a time of terrible famine came to the region, and Joseph's family came to Egypt in search of food, Joseph was able to forgive his brothers and save his family. Joseph moved them to Egypt where he could make sure they would have enough to eat. Joseph made it possible that his people would not only survive, but even thrive. Of course, Joseph eventually grew old, and before he died, he asked one thing of his family. He told them that, when the day came that their Hebrew people could return back to their homeland, he wanted them to carry his bones with them so he could be buried in that land of promise.

This dying wish of Joseph was like a super power for Moses and the Hebrews. God was able to use those bones of their ancestor to remind them who they were. Joseph's long-held request was a source of motivation and vision for their journey together. Through the bones of Joseph, God was able to give them the direction they needed. Like the valley of dry bones described much later by the prophet Ezekiel, one day God would use Joseph's old bones to raise up new life for his descendants.

Today, in our journey together as God's people, we also carry the metaphorical bones and dying wishes of our fathers and mothers in Christian faith. Whether we're thinking of the old church at 26<sup>th</sup> and Jefferson or this new building that the congregation inhabited in 2008, many of you can recall their hopes and dreams to build a ministry that would be vibrant and life-giving. Even if you're new to our congregation and you don't have that connection to particular Ogden United Methodists, you probably know the kind of people I'm talking about. Maybe they were your grandparents. Maybe they were your

Sunday School teachers or pastors in another place. They were people who endured big challenges and made great sacrifices in order to keep ministry alive and Christian faith thriving.

When we journey together as God's people, we carry with us the bones and vision of those good folks. And God, who is guiding our journey, uses those bones to give us direction.

## **2—A ROUNDABOUT ROUTE**

It's common to speak of the period between the Hebrews' escape from Egypt and their entry into the Promised Land as 40 years of "wilderness wandering"—as if it was a total waste of time. For sure, the journey was prolonged because of the people's stubbornness and lack of faith. Frequently their rebellion and sin caused self-inflicted harm. Far too often they refused to accept the direction God was trying to give. But throughout that 40 years, God was always with them, leading them along and giving them guidance.

In fact, Exodus tells us that even the roundabout route through the wilderness was an important part of God's direction for their journey. In chapter 13, verses 17 and 18, we are told that God thought this out very carefully. If they had gone on a straight path between Egypt and the Promised Land, that would have taken them through the land of the Philistines, which would have meant battles that the people weren't prepared for. They would have become afraid and discouraged and would have wanted to turn back to Egypt. So, instead, God led them on a very complicated, winding path that avoided a war with the Philistines and gave the Hebrews no ability to retrace their steps back into Egyptian slavery.

Today we might think of this the way we talk about 20-20 hindsight. We don't always see the benefits of trials and tribulations when we are going through them. But later, we are often able to see the positives. We weren't "lost"; we say instead that we "took the scenic route." We didn't waste our time; look what we learned along the way! We weren't alone on the journey; no. As the "Footprints" poem reminds us, that single set of footprints on the sand wasn't created by us all by ourselves. Those footprints were God's, as God was carrying us through those difficult times.

On our journey as Christians, we journey together with each other. But all of us together also journey with God. God's direction may seem mysterious to us. In the moment, we may not understand why we are wandering so much. But God's direction is with us even on a roundabout route.

### **3—CLOUD AND FIRE**

Of course, the most obvious way that God led Moses and the Hebrews was with the pillar of cloud by day and by the pillar of fire by night. God's direction was with them 24 hours a day. There was no time or situation when God was absent from them. As long as the cloud or the fire was in the sky, they knew where to go. And, as Exodus 40 tells us, sometimes the cloud descended down upon the tabernacle, which was a sign that they should stay put for a time and rest. Only when God lifted the cloud and put it out ahead of them were they to pack up their camp and move forward.

There's so much for us to like about these images of God's presence and direction. We easily could wish for the clear guidance of a cloud or lightning bolt today. Of course, we rarely perceive God's direction to be quite that straightforward, do we?

While clouds could be like a north star, they also can be signs of confusion. Like the "brain fog" of COVID and other illnesses, we sometimes feel like the gloom and haze make it impossible to know where we should go and what we should do. After a natural disaster, an accident, or the death of a loved one, it's so common for us to feel like the gears of our brains are clogged up with mud. It seems like we can't think logically or make decisions, even if our life depended on it.

The good news of Exodus 40 is that, even when the Hebrews were stuck in camp because God's cloud had descended down low on the tabernacle, they weren't lost. God had given them very specific instructions about how to create that tent of meeting and how to conduct worship there. Their down time wasn't without meaning and purpose. They could pray for God's direction. They could receive cleansing and forgiveness of sin. They could practice rituals that enhanced their ability to see God's

glory. Even when they weren't moving anywhere at the moment, they were experiencing divine direction. With each other and with God, they were on the journey together.

The same is true for us today. In so many ways, it feels like churches everywhere are stuck. We long for a new vibrancy and direction. We wish God's cloud or fire would appear in the sky to tell us where to go that will bring more people into the church. But sometimes God just wants us to stay put and be faithful, so some folks can *find us* like our 11 new members did. And, as we come together to practice the spiritual disciplines God has given us, we prepare ourselves to go—in whatever direction God might send us next.

That's why it's so important that we do keep this tent of meeting, this tabernacle, this church, this congregational ministry going strong. We do that with our participation, and we do it by bringing our tithes and offerings to this place. Our pledge drive is one of the annual rituals of our worship. When we support our church financially—so we can pay our mortgage, maintain our property, and provide salaries for people to organize and lead us—it helps us to see the glory of the Lord. It helps us to know God's presence is here and that we are on this journey together with God's direction.

### **CONCLUSION**

Some years ago, a minister in our conference wrote a hymn called "In the Midst of New Dimensions." The five verses of the song describe some changes going on and the many human problems and needs in our world. The song asks the question, "Who will lead the pilgrim peoples, wandering in their separate ways?" The answer comes in the refrain:

God of rainbow, fiery pillar,  
 leading where the eagles soar,  
 we your people, ours the journey,  
 now and ever, now and evermore.      (Julian B. Rush, c. 1994)

May the God of rainy clouds and fiery pillars lead us, as we journey together with God's direction.