

O God be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace, that we may leave this place less of what we use to be, and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Having recently returned from travels that took my family from Atlanta, to Boston, to Rhode Island, to North and South Carolina, I was struck once again in reviewing our lessons for this Sunday in the way that the Bible is full of its own stories and images about journeys.

The story of Abraham and Sarah describe a couple that journeys in response to God's call from the city of Ur (in the center of present day Iraq) to what would eventually become the promised land of Israel.

In fact the pivotal event of the entire Old Testament, the Exodus, describes a people who escape slavery in Egypt and journey to discover their new purpose and identity as God's chosen people at the foot of Mount Sinai.

And in the New Testament while Jesus himself, never leaves Palestine, St. Paul makes his way across the Mediterranean world, spreading the good news of the gospel, proclaiming in the words of our epistle lesson, "that while we were sinners, Christ died for us".

It sometime seems that the people of the bible are (like small children on an airplane they just can't seem to sit still for very long.....hmm wonder where I got that image.

The men and women of the Bible are always on the road..., but unlike summer travelers they are not sightseers or tourists.....they are not attending high school reunions.

Instead there is found in Holy Scripture a purpose for each journey, each crossing, each key moment and decision in life that these men and women make.

Each journey comes with a promise and proclamation. In our first reading, we hear how God blesses the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah with a child....Sarah at first...has a bit of trouble trusting that God will do what God has promised.

But by the end of our story, Sarah can joyfully proclaim, God has brought laughter for me, everyone who hears will laugh with me....Who would have ever said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

Jesus is also on a journey in our gospel lesson from Matthew....he travels about all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

There is a note of urgency in his travels....for our Lord knows the anxieties and helplessness of his people.....the harvest is plentiful, he says poignantly, but the laborers are few.

And without a good harvest to feed them...the people are going to starve.

Of course, this passage has always resonated in my own spiritual journey, I remember well being 23, out of college, and ready to attend seminary and join with other laborers to serve God’s people in the church.

and yet, being told by church leaders and others on commissions in the diocese, that I was too young, that I did not have enough life experience to work with the other laborers in the vineyard.

When my dad would listen to my complaints about church bureaucracy he would shake his head, and would always quote the same verse from Matthew about the harvest being plentiful but the laborers being few....and as a former Baptist, he never understood why the Episcopal Church didn’t want all the workers it could get.

Fortunately, in our gospel story, Jesus didn’t have to worry about submitting the names of his disciples to a commission on ministry.

We hear in the lesson how he chooses his new apostles to enter into the harvest (to start their own journeys) and to share the good news of God's kingdom with others.

His instructions to these apostles are direct and insistent....and begin with one simple word, "GO!"

No "ands", "ifs" or "buts, about it".....just "go" and proclaim the good news of God's love.

For now he tells them not to worry about gentiles or Samaritans...but go directly to those in need of comfort....the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

To these lost sheep Jesus tells his apostles to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near....to those who are infirm and anxious....they are to bring healing and hope....and to those without means...they are to give without payment.

His apostles offer to those in need the promise of God's loving presence.

This is indeed good news.....the apostles travel afar to proclaim that the kingdom has come near.....not a kingdom of territory and frontiers.

but a moveable kingdom accessible to those who yearn for it, for those who long for a closer and more intimate relationship with God.

God's kingdom is to be a place where the fearful are welcomed in....where everyone sooner or later belongs.....where all prodigals eventually have to go.

Unlike earthly kingdoms which are subject to wars and dissensions, the kingdom the apostles proclaim brings reconciliation and peace.

Yet this kingdom of the heart is not a promise of pie in the sky.....if you leave this morning with one message from my sermon....I hope that you will remember that proclaiming God's kingdom is not about the promise of some future and yet unrealized hope.

No, for I believe that a true proclamation of God's kingdom cannot ignore the real pain and suffering of our human lives.....a true journey in scripture and for each of us always involve some kind of loss and gain.

Abraham is called to sacrifice his son, Isaac.....Joseph is sold by his brothers into slavery....the Israelites leave behind shelter and food in Egypt to go out into the desert.....St. Paul, who after being knocked off his horse in Damascus by Jesus never knows again a place he can call home.

In modern stories, think for a moment about Frodo Baggins in the Lord of the Rings, in seeking to destroy the one ring of power, at the end of the story he is possessed by its evil power and it is only the tormented figure of Gollum that bites the ring off Frodo's finger and then falls into the fire on the pit of doom.

In each case, the journey to serve God, to live into the promise that has been made through the proclamation of God's kingdom involves the challenge of confronting the pain and suffering of our human lives.

And when we get to that place of defeat, when we stand at the foot of the cross, the story of Holy Scripture reminds us that God's promise and Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom breaking into the world is made anew to each generation of God's people.

As the angel says to John in Revelation, "Bold I am the Alpha and Omega, and in my own time and in my own way, I will make all things new."

The story of scripture is ultimately a story about this kind of spiritual restoration, it describes a story of God's covenant that starts at the base of Mt. Sinai in the Exodus journey, and finds its fulfillment in the story of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

The kingdom of God is always near to those in need, to those who seek its comfort.

It is not bound to earth anymore than we are.....its gates are wide open...in spite of, or perhaps because of the reality of sin and despair.

We have a share in this kingdom as God's people by adoption...if the crowds of Jesus' day were harassed and helpless....like sheep without a shepherd as our Lord describes them.

the people of our present world both within and outside the walls of this church are hardly less anxious and fearful.

Two thousand years may have come and gone....but the human heart has not changed all that much.

Communities today are still fractured by mistrust and suspicion....Violence and wars continue to tear our world apart.

Diversity and differences among us...do not bring joy at the great gift and variety of God's purpose in his marvelous creation but instead are stumbling blocks to harmony and human understanding.

Yet despite all this...despite the misunderstanding caused by our differences and our sins....our misfortune and pain.

In order to be the church, to be authentic witnesses to Christ's message, we must have the courage to acknowledge that the kingdom has indeed come near to us....

the kingdom has come near to each of us.

The harvest that our Lord spoke of is full and ready to be gathered in....then as it is now not much of a harvest of grain or grape.....but it is an overflowing harvest of God's love and grace, it is a harvest that is full of spiritual nourishment and the sustenance found of being close to God.

The laborers are still much too few....but go and proclaim our Lord continues to command us in the story of scripture, our story,to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

No small tasks but then we need not travel far to find those in need of the good news of God's kingdom...they are as near to us as is the kingdom itself...in fact...they are the kingdom.

And for our part....we need only have the courage to start on our own journeys of promise and proclamation.

Letting the world know that God really is ready, to welcome each and every person into God's Kingdom.

The Feast is ready and God waits to welcome us back home.