

“Thou art the journey and the journey’s end.”

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab
5th Sunday of Easter, Year A. April 20, 2008. (Text: John 14:1-14)*

Recently we drove out to California to spend time with Joan’s brother, who is very sick. I’d never made a road trip to California before, so I spent a lot of time on the computer, looking at MapQuest, and figuring out the roads and possible places to spend the night. I planned a careful itinerary. I wanted to go the fastest possible way – allowing for one night on the road since the shortest route is 1,200 miles.

We left here and went west on I-70, then diagonally southwest across Utah to Las Vegas. Leaving Vegas, we drove across the Mojave Desert, then up the central valley of California to Gilroy, “the Garlic Capital of the World.” (Your nose can lead you there if you lose your map.) From the garlic-processing plants it’s a straight shot over to San Jose at the southern end of San Francisco Bay.

The route included unforgettable scenery in Utah – spectacular canyons and fascinating rock formations. But it also included mile after mile of desolate, gray desert landscape in Nevada and California. When I look back on it, I see that route from here to San Jose as a good metaphor for life: some parts were exhilarating and others were miserable. We passed through some places so pretty that we decided we’d go back and enjoy them at our leisure in the future. Other places were so grim that I wanted to get through them as fast as possible and – if I have a choice – never come back.

There are people who like to drive. Maybe you’re one of them. But not me. When we have to take a long car trip – which I always avoid if possible – I want to go the shortest, fastest way. When we have to drive rather than fly, I like to get on the Interstate, put the pedal to the metal, and get the trip over with.

Joan is different. If we never drove on a freeway, that would be fine with her. She likes the two-lane back roads that meander through small towns. Lots of stop lights. She likes to see every aspect of the countryside up-close and personal: farms and ranches, little mom and pop grocery stores, seedy antique stores, grain elevators, and roadside restaurants with funny names and gas pumps out front with signs reading, “Eat here, get gas”. If it takes three days to make a one-day trip, that’s o.k. with her. If we never go faster than 55 miles an hour that’s o.k. too. In the Mojave desert she thought the Joshua trees were fascinating.

I can enjoy that sort of thing now and then if we’re just exploring, just looking around and seeing the sites for the fun of it, as we hope to do some day in Zion National Park. But if I have a *destination*, I want to get there as fast as I can. Only when I reach my destination can I relax and begin to enjoy myself. When I have a destination, the journey there is a necessary preliminary to get through as quickly as possible —just something to endure, like a visit to the dentist.

But for Joan, the journey itself is something to enjoy. Maybe that’s “a girl thing.” Or maybe it’s a sign of her greater maturity. (Probably the latter.) There’s something to value about every journey, even ones that take us through territory we’d prefer to have avoided and end up someplace that turns out to be quite different from what we had in mind when we started the trip. That’s why stories about journeys are so common in all the great spiritual traditions. And when we’re planning a journey somewhere, we need to choose a “way,” a road, a route, a path to follow to our destination.

We’ve heard over and over, especially from people who tell us they’re “spiritual but not religious,” that all spiritual paths lead to the same place. They remind us that if we’re seeking to have a relationship

with the One True God, it shouldn't matter which path we take because they all lead eventually to the same place. I'm willing to admit that there's some merit in that. But if the journey is just as important as the destination, then finding the best path is essential.

It's easy to see why the passage from the Gospel that we read this morning is used at funerals. It's very comforting. Jesus says, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."*

The King James Version says, *"In my Father's house are many mansions."* Those words made generations of Christians imagine that when we depart this mortal existence, Jesus will take us to be with him in heaven, where we'll each live forever in a place that looks like the plantation house in *Gone with the Wind*. That seems pretty fine. Folks where I grew up used to say, "Heaven is my home. I'm just passing through down here."

But the "passing through" part is a lot more significant than we think. If the journey is as important as the destination, then the path we take matters. The disciples asked Jesus for more information. Thomas said, *"Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'*

Jesus was telling Thomas and his friends, in effect: "I am the way, the road, the path. I am the Truth. I am Life. Nobody gets to know the Father except by me. And, if you haven't realized this before, I want you to understand it now: to see me is to see the Father. To know me is to know the Father. I am in the Father and the Father is in me. The Father and I are one."

Jesus spoke these comforting words to the disciples just before he went with them to the Garden of Gethsemane, to a time of agony and horror, to a time when he would ask his Father if there might not be some way of escaping his painful destiny. That may seem ironic, but it really isn't. To know Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life is to know in *his* life the deep meaning of OUR existence, in the openness of *his* being the mirror of perfect integrity for US, and in *his* journey the one WE too take with him.

A Christian philosopher named Boethius, writing in that frightening time when the barbarians had taken over and Roman order was disintegrating in Europe, pondered the mystery of Christ and put that mystery into these words: *"To see Thee is the end and the beginning; Thou carriest me and thou goest before: Thou art the journey and the journey's end."*

The root meaning of the Greek word for truth is *"that which reveals itself."* Truth always uncovers itself; it never hides from view. Like Love, Truth cannot keep itself secret. When Jesus was sad, he wept. When thirsty, he asked for water. When troubled, he trembled. Yet in all of this he was still one with the Father; his life was a dimension of God's life. It still is. There are indeed other roads that wind their way toward God. But only Christ is both road and destination, journey and journey's end.

I know that we will have to drive that long road to California again some time – pass through the beauty of Utah's canyons and cross the desolation of the Mojave. But when we travel that way once more, I will remind myself that every mile of every journey in life is a gift of truth and a revelation from God.