

Proper 19 Year A  
September 14, 2014  
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Where to start? On a Sunday like today, where does one begin?

*“Let’s start at the very beginning”, sang Maria, the new governess, to her seven young charges almost 60 years ago now on the silver screen, “a very good place to start.”*

Those were the opening words of my sermon on the very first Sunday I was with you all here at All Saints – October 28, 2012. I had been in conversation with the wardens and vestry for over two months at that point, as first I had to wait a while so you could decide if you wished to call me as your Interim Rector, and then you had to wait a while for me to wrap up a number of commitments I had made with my previous job. But finally it all came together on a bright sunny October morning almost two years ago now. It was not the beginning of a journey. Rather, it was the beginning of a particular leg of a journey... a journey which began long before any of us showed up on the scene... and will continue long after all of us have moved on to greener pastures – either above or below that green pasture, if you know what I mean.

And what an amazing journey it has been. In these past two years, we have gathered for worship nearly 500 times – from our regularly scheduled services on Sundays, and Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, to our monthly gatherings at Casa Dorinda, to special services throughout the year. We have conducted 11 baptisms, and 12 marriages, and 37 funerals or memorial services. We have distributed well

over \$100,000 in support of various ministries and efforts in Santa Barbara and around the world. We have fed the hungry, and clothed the naked, and brought Good News to the poor. We have expanded our relationship with Westmont, and we have built a new school in Haiti. We have said good-bye to many old friends, and hello to many new ones. What a journey it has been.

Of all the memories I have of my time at All Saints these past two years, certainly one of the most visceral in my mind is a different kind of journey... it is the journey I experienced driving back and forth between here and my home in Altadena several times each week. I must say... I have learned that there are a surprising number of ways to make that journey... sometimes sticking to the main highways like the 101, or the 126, or the 118, or the 23, or the 134, or the 210 (I could go on, but I think you get my point), and sometimes getting off the highway and finding some back country road or side street to give me a new view or to help me avoid the worst of the traffic.

I remember the first time I drove up here to All Saints, and marveled at all of the construction just south of here between Carpinteria and Seacliff. Of course, if you were to drive that road today, you would marvel at all of the construction just south of here between Carpinteria and Seacliff. But you would be mistaken if you believed that nothing much has happened in that construction zone during the past two years. Even though the project is far from finished, it is an entirely different road than it was just a couple of years ago. And each time I traverse it, I see even more changes.

In many ways, All Saints is like a construction project as well. Now, you might take that quite literally, considering the two holes cut in the foundation walls

on either side of the church as a precursor to our sanctuary renovation project we are undertaking in the near future. But you might interpret that a little more broadly as well, thinking that there was a lot of work to be done when I arrived here... and there was a lot of work accomplished in the two years we have been together... and there is a lot of work lying before us in the coming days. But like the road between Carpinteria and Seacliff, you would be remiss if you believed that nothing much has happened here in the past two years. Just as the highway is a very different highway than it was two years ago, All Saints is a very different community than it was two years ago as well. I know that some of you remember that one question I asked of you all that very first Sunday was: “What in God’s name is going on around here?” Two years later, I can tell you that amazing things are happening in God’s name... that the gospel is being proclaimed, that lives are being changed, that new hope and new possibilities and new opportunities and new life continues to spring up around us... all in God’s name. What a journey it has been.

Moses and the people of Israel found themselves on a similar journey in this morning’s first lesson from the book of Exodus. If you remember our Old Testament story from last Sunday, you will recall that Moses and his band were trapped in bondage in Egypt, forced into a life of hard labor, struggling to survive under the harsh hand of Pharaoh. It was God who instructed Moses to direct the people that each family was to slaughter a lamb, and to spread its blood over the doorposts of their homes, so that Lord would pass over those homes and spare the occupants the fate which awaited the Egyptian families, as God struck down the first born child of every household. Following that horrific night, Pharaoh finally relented, and allowed Moses and the Israelites to flee. That’s where this morning’s passage picks up the story.

Escaping the clutches of Pharaoh was one thing, but facing the perils of the journey was something else entirely. God led them out into the wilderness, going before them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They didn't always know where they were going. But they knew that, if only they followed the pillar, God would lead them forward, God would lead them onward... that is... until... they came to the shore of the Red Sea. After releasing the Israelites, Pharaoh had had a change of heart. And so he had dispatched his army to destroy them. Now, with the waters of the Red Sea before them, and Pharaoh's army closing in quickly behind, there was no escape.

It was then that God acted mightily once again. At God's direction, Moses held out his hand, and God parted the waters. But that wasn't the end of it. For this journey to go on, the people still had to step out into the abyss, and follow the pillar of fire.

The journey of Moses and the Israelites continues to this day. As God led the children of Israel by that holy fire, so too does God lead us by that same fire. As God beckoned the Israelites to step away from the safety of the shore and walk by faith into uncharted territories, so too has God beckoned us to step away from the safety of our own shores and to venture forth into new and unfamiliar places. As God brought Moses and his followers safely to the other side of the Red Sea, so too does God lead us safely to the other shore. "Twas grace which brought us safe thus far. And grace will lead us home."

This morning we gather for Homecoming Sunday... ostensibly a day to mark the end of summer, and to welcome everybody back to church. The theory

behind it is that it's like "Back to School Night", where people have been away all summer, and now it's time to get settled back into the old routine. It's a flawed theory around here, of course, since, unlike so many schools which go on a summer hiatus, we were busier than ever this summer here at All Saints and just kept chunking on, day by day and week by week. Homecoming Sunday, then, has a very different meaning for me. Homecoming Sunday is a day to recognize that we are all in the process of coming home... but that none of us has yet arrived at the final destination... that God is doing great, grand, and glorious things in us and through us... and that God isn't finished with us yet.

And so, we mark the end of this leg of the journey together by reminding ourselves of what brought us into the journey in the first place. "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start." Just as Moses and the Israelites followed the pillar of fire into the depths of the Red Sea, so too have we been led by the Spirit of God into the depths of the waters of baptism. And just as God led them out of those Red Sea waters into a new life, so too has God led us out of our baptismal waters into the new life of grace. And so, as a remembrance of that holy act which has bound us to God and bound us to one another on this amazing journey of love, I invite you to stand as we renew our baptismal promises.