

DO YOU NEED A GUIDE?

(02/03/19)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:1-42

“Jesus said, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’” (John 4:13-14)

I don’t know if you have noticed, but the campaign for the 2020 presidential election has already begun. There are some Democratic primary candidates whom I find interesting—along with some vanity candidates that I wish would just go away. However, I do not look forward to 1½ years of ubiquitous sound bite advertising, each prospective candidate trying to convince us that he/she is the one and only person who can lead our nation forward into a secure, economically prosperous future.

I have a cartoon on my desk that I cut out and saved several years ago. In it, a prisoner begins the arduous process of tunneling out of prison. His project finally completed, he emerges from the tunnel. He rushes to a newsstand to purchase a newspaper to see what is happening in the outside world. When he reads that there is another year left in the presidential campaign, he jumps back into the tunnel and heads back to the prison!

We *do* need someone to guide us into the future. We have not been this way before. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to distinguish true guides from false guides. We don’t want to drink some cult leader’s Cool Aid and, like lemmings, follow this person over a cliff. We especially need to be conscious of our deepest values, the religious or spiritual values that can inform our vote, that can help us distinguish the true from the false, the wheat from the chaff.

This past week I found myself reflecting on my trekking pilgrimages through Nepal and Tibet. Considering the limitations placed on me by my total shoulder replacement this past summer, my dream of going “just one more time” is slowly fading away. Because I have a more than marginal propensity to be a little stubborn, if I were to go again, I would want to do it the same way I did before—as a trekking pilgrim, not a tourist. I would also want to do it with the right group and, especially, the right guides.

On my two previous trips to Nepal and Tibet, I had several guides. In 1999, Corey and I were accompanied in our trek through the foothills of the Himalayas in northwestern Nepal by

the Nepalese Sherpa Ang Phuri. Ang Phuri looked after me when I was sick from an intestinal parasite. As we traversed along a narrow ledge only two feet away from a precipitous drop, Ang Phuri literally stepped into my footprints the minute my foot left the ground. If I lost my balance, I believe he would have been able to catch me before I plunged to my death. Ang Phuri, a Buddhist, was introverted, contemplative.

Sue, who was from Tasmania, was the guide on this trip. She was knowledgeable, capable, and exceptionally well prepared. Of the several trekking groups that covered the same general route that we did, she was the only leader who had the foresight to bring a Gamow bag.

A Gamow bag is a sturdy canvass body bag. If you are suffering from HAPE, high altitude pulmonary edema, or HACE, high altitude cerebral edema, you lie on your back inside the bag which is zipped up and secured with canvass straps. There is a little plastic window in front of your face to lessen the feeling of claustrophobia. I have not spent time in the bag, but those who have say that that the little 4x6 window helps—but not much!

Your fellow trekkers take turns slowly pumping air into the bag. By slowly increasing the amount of air inside the bag, we basically increase the atmospheric pressure. This has the effect of bringing the person down several thousand feet in altitude. That might not sound like much, but the difference between the atmospheric pressure at 15,000 feet and 12,000 feet is considerable. Your brain and your lungs know the difference. Sometimes all it takes is one 3-4-hour session in the bag to reduce the swelling in your brain or help your lungs clear out the fluid that is making it difficult for you to breathe.

We had to use the bag twice while we were in the vicinity of Lake Manasarovar. One member of our group was suffering from cerebral edema. The bag provided only temporary relief, so we had to abandon our goal of circumambulating Mt. Kailas to get her down to a lower altitude. Even Sue, our highly experienced guide, came down with pulmonary edema and had to be bagged on two different nights. If she hadn't had the foresight to bring the bag, both of these women would have been in serious trouble.

In 2001, the Sherpa who accompanied us through Tibet and on our 33-mile kora around Mt. Kailas was Thon Drop. Thon Drop was strong, resourceful, and helpful. He short-roped me with my trekking pole when I was having difficulty reaching the top of the pass half way around

Mt. Kailas, an altitude of 18,600 feet, because of my paralyzed diaphragm and collapsed lung. Thon Drop had a wonderful sense of humor, infinite patience, and great inner and outer strength.

By the way, I am aware that I really didn't need to tell you that the altitude at the top of the Dolma La pass, half way through the kora around Mt. Kailas, was 18,600 feet. It probably wasn't necessary to mention this, and I am aware that doing so leaves me open to the charge that I am showing off. Nothing could be further from the truth! If I were really trying to show off, I would have noted that at the top of the pass, the air contains half the oxygen that it does at sea level and the atmospheric pressure, which pushes the air into our lungs, is half of what it is at sea level. I would also have noted that the altitude at the Dolma La is higher than base camp on Mt. Everest. I resent the insinuation that I am not as humble as I pretend to be.

Our tour guide on my second trip was Diane. Diane was from Australia. She had a deep feeling for the Tibetan land and its people. She was free-spirited, upbeat, and enthusiastic. When we ran into difficulties, like the massacre of the royal family at their palace just down the street from where we were staying in Kathmandu, we could count on Diane to keep us safe.

If I were to write a book about leadership, I would use these guides as examples. The traits they brought to my pilgrimages are traits which are also needed by therapists as they guide and accompany clients on their journey to self-actualization, and by pastors as they guide and accompany a church on its journey to become the church that God calls it to be. This theme is especially meaningful to me because yesterday was the fiftieth anniversary of my ordination to the Christian ministry.

Moses was a guide. He was called by God, called out of the fire, the burning bush. He helped his people see that a better life is possible, a life free from bondage, a life in a land of their own. A leader, a guide, needs to be a visionary, especially when his people have not traveled this path before.

Moses didn't just point the way to the Promised Land; he led the way. He accompanied his people on their journey. Moses didn't just talk the talk, he walked the walk. He experienced the same hunger and thirst that his people did. (This, by the way, is not true of all of our leaders and prospective leaders in Washington.) Moses was an integral part of his people's growth, their transformation. Before their pilgrimage through the wilderness, the people were known as the Israelites or the twelve tribes of Israel. When they emerge from the wilderness, they begin to be

referred to as the *nation* of Israel. This implies that they became a nation during their forty years in the wilderness, *because of* their forty years in the wilderness.

The wilderness experience does that to people, or it can. It can break us. It can also be the fire that tempers the steel of our will, our faith, our soul. Whether the experience destroys us or makes us stronger partially depends upon our guide and the resources we discover on the journey. I am planning to say more about the wilderness experience in my sermons during Lent.

The Israelites do not travel through the wilderness alone. In addition to Moses, they also travel with God. We need to remember that when we are going through the difficult times of our lives, we do not travel alone. We journey with God, or God journeys with us.

During their sojourn in the wilderness, the Israelites become hungry. The supply of food they brought with them when they embarked is quickly exhausted. This can also happen to us. We cannot embark upon a journey into a new dimension of life with the resources we already have at our disposal. We need to discover new and different resources. We need to find new ways to nourish not only our bodies but also our souls.

As we heard this morning, the Israelites whine and complain. When they quarrel with their guide, when they complain about the lack of food, Moses intercedes with God. God then provides the people with quail and manna.

Based on their past experiences of the ways that God had provided for them, you would think that the Israelites would be patient and trusting when they camp at a place where there is no water. You would think they would take to heart the words of our hymn, “Be not dismayed, what‘ere betide; God will take care of you.” They don’t. They quarrel with Moses; they demand that he provide them with water.

Moses, who is afraid the people will turn their anger against him and stone him, realizes that on a deeper level they are again testing God. Moses doesn’t want to try God’s patience. He wonders how long God is going to put up with these childish temper tantrums every time the road becomes rough. Moses takes the problem to God. Once again, God is willing to be tested. He welcomes the opportunity to make a point in response to the people’s complaint. The point is made in the way that God directs Moses to provide the people with water.

First, Moses is to use the same staff with which he struck the River Nile. This staff symbolizes the connection between liberation from Egypt and sustenance on the journey to the

Promised Land. The same staff that ushered in the plagues now opens the rock and enables the people to survive. In effect, God is saying, “I did not liberate you to abandon you. You will not die in the desert unless you abandon me.”

Second, the rock that supplies the needed water is the place where the Lord is standing. Not just any rock will do. The people survive by remaining in touch with the presence of God. The question: “Is the Lord among us or not?” indicates that they have lost contact with the divine presence. God uses their thirst to remind them of the presence of the One who is the source of their life.

Third, to drive this point home dramatically, God chooses a rock to bring forth water. One would usually expect water to come from a spring or a well. This water comes from a highly unusual source. It is more than just water to quench physical bodily thirst; it is a sign of the life that God offers to the people.

These themes are also expressed in today’s gospel lesson. While travelling through Samaria, when Jesus becomes thirsty, he asks a Samaritan woman for a drink. Samaritans and Jews of his day would not share a drinking cup for fear of contamination. In response to her question, Jesus tells her that if she knew to whom she was speaking, she would ask *him* for a drink of *living water*.

The woman at first is trapped in a literalistic understanding of Jesus’ teaching. When he tells her that those who drink of the water that he gives them will never thirst, the woman thinks it is a way to avoid having to come to the well every day. It is only later, after Jesus shows that he knows her in her depths, that she understands his teaching on a deeper level.

Jesus, like Moses, is a guide. However, there is a significant difference between the two. Moses is a provider of bread and water. He miraculously draws water from the rock. Jesus is not only a guide, leading us to the experience of the kingdom of heaven, he *is* the bread and the water. He *is* the eternal spring welling up to eternal life. The miracle that he offers to the woman is also offered to us. It is the miraculous opportunity to find him in the midst of our worship. It is the miraculous opportunity to find him in the midst of our ordinary everyday life.

There are times when we may find ourselves in the wilderness, when we feel that we are undergoing a wilderness experience. During this time, like the Israelites, we may whine and complain. Perhaps the best we can do is to put one foot in front of the other. Even that may not

work. There are times when we find ourselves hitting the wall. We may also discover that we have been traveling down a dead-end street for quite some time.

When we find ourselves going through a difficult period in our lives, we may find ourselves hungry and thirsty--not for bread and water, but for relief. Relief from anxiety. Relief from depression. Relief from the stress we feel or the weight of the burdens we carry. We may hunger and thirst for something as simple as a good night's sleep, for peace of mind, for the love which has dimmed or become lost.

When we find ourselves on such a journey, Moses would tell us that though we may *feel* abandoned by God, we have *not* been abandoned by God. We are travelling with God, or God is travelling with us. In fact, God may have led us into the wilderness to help bring about an important change in our lives. Moses would tell us to trust. The Lord will provide, sometimes in miraculous ways. The water of life will flow again, will bring new life to the desert experiences of our lives. As absurd as it sounds, with God's help we can even draw water from a rock.

When we find ourselves on such a journey, Jesus would tell us to open our eyes to the resources that are already present to us, the resources that are present in our religious faith, the resources that are present in people who care. Though we may think we need a miracle to save us, we may not need a miracle. We can get water from a rock, but we can also get it from a well. We can get it from our church. He would also remind us that what we discover on our wilderness journey is not meant for us alone. We are meant to share it with others, just as the woman shared her water with Jesus and as she shared her epiphany with the people of her town.

Jesus is a guide to the water that can quench our deeper thirst: the living water, the spring of water that wells up within us to eternal life. This water is closer to us than we are to ourselves. This is because Jesus is more than a guide to the living water; as the eternal Christ who dwells within us, he *is* the living water!

We have many guides in our lives. I have had many, not only the four people who accompanied me on my pilgrimages across the Tibetan plateau. Each guide has something different to share, some important traits or qualities that we need to realize and develop within ourselves. When we do this, we can become a guide for others as we journey through this mysterious and often difficult pilgrimage of life.

Moses tells the Israelites to trust. Then he draws water from the rock. Jesus tells the woman at the well to trust, that he will give to her living water, the water of eternal life. The woman responds, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never thirst.”

As we journey from Christmas to Easter and through the varied seasons of our lives, let us trust just as the woman trusted. Let us open our hearts to the One who is the living water as we share now in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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