



March 21, 2010
Will We Get There?

Sermon by Wade Lifton
Numbers 21:4-9

On New Year's Day I got up early in the morning and went to the airport and got on a plane to Ghana to spend six weeks wrapping up and celebrating the project that I've been working on for 6 ½ years and to say goodbye to friends who I'm not sure when I'll be seeing next. The other day when I was looking at my journal, I realized that I'd been in Ghana for 40 days and 40 nights. In the Bible the number 40 is generally means a really long time, whether it's 40 days and 40 nights or 40 years wandering in the wilderness. This trip didn't feel like it was a particularly long time, but looking back on the whole project feels like a long time and like time spent in the wilderness.

While I was in Ghana, the youth group and I were reading a book called 'Me To We' by Craig and Mark Kielberger. It's their ideas and philosophy and stories about creating a better world. They are hopeful, powerful stories told by the authors or in the words of people they've met. And as I read story after story started to notice formula. Generally, the story was about someone in an impoverished place, maybe a place of war, and traumatic events happen to this person. Often family members were killed and the person barely escaped with their life. They wonder about the purpose of their life now and eventually find that their struggle provides an opportunity for them to support other people in similar situations or to be proactive and work to stop these events happening. Or it might be a story about a Western, privileged person also wondering about their purpose and their passion for a better world. They have a dream for some way of making a difference, which after starting small and working hard ends up being more successful than they possibly imagined and hundreds or thousands of people are helped. These are powerful, hopeful stories. They are important stories. Because the book is written for youth, the writing is accessible and kept to the point so most of the stories are told in about six paragraphs. And as I read story after story I noticed that as I would read about a person's struggle I was already anticipating the hopeful and redemptive ending, because I knew it was coming.

Something is lost when we don't allow ourselves to enter into the part of the story where we don't know what will happen, to be in the uncertainty and wondering if it will be okay and if we will get there.

Something is lost when I talk about the water project only telling the highlights. 6 ½ years ago I lived in this village and was inspired by their generosity. Wanting to return that generosity I started researching about water solutions, connected with a fantastic rainwater harvesting organization, returned to Ghana several times doing research and working with the people of the village to make a plan, and now after three phases of construction there are 15 rainwater harvesting tanks and everybody in the two villages and the students at the school all have access to clean drinking water. I love telling that part of the story and it makes me feel good. And it's not the whole story.

- The whole story includes the times when the research was hitting dead ends and I didn't think I was going to be able to help my friends.

- It includes worrying about raising enough money, imagining letting the people in the village down, imagining looking like a failure in front of all the people who I've talked to about the project.
- The whole story includes the large amounts of project work that are very tedious and not life-giving or hopeful or powerful.
- It includes the constant fear of screwing up the lives of the people in Adexor and Adexor-Kpodzi. I've heard about and now I've seen examples of people with the best intentions and trying their hardest to ask all the right questions and work with the people, but somehow there are unexpected side effects to the technology being introduced or the way it gets shared. It would absolutely devastate me if the work I was doing caused a serious breakdown of relationships in these villages that I care so deeply about. So over the last 6 ½ years I have carried that fear with me.

And when I look back, I would say that about 20% of the journey has felt powerful and hopeful, and about 80% of the work felt tedious or fearful and really, really hard.

Now as the project comes to a close, the good news is that I can stand here and say it was completely, 100% worth it. This is one of those stories with a hopeful redemptive ending.

And telling the ending without telling the hard stuff diminishes a powerful story. Imagine a favourite food that you might treat yourself to at a nice restaurant because it takes extra time and effort and skill to prepare this food. Maybe filet mignon, if you're into that. And just imagine how good filet mignon tastes, how satisfying it is. And now Swanson's has just put out a filet mignon Hungry Man microwave dinner. But immediately we know that a shortcut, filet mignon heated in a microwave and wrapped in plastic means that the flavor and the nutrition and quality is seriously compromised without the full work that it takes to properly prepare filet mignon. Something is lost when we try to skip over the hard work, in food and in life.

I have a new appreciation for the story of the Exodus, of a people wondering in the desert, on their way to this promised land that they've been told about. I have a new appreciation for the storytellers who didn't chop this story down to six paragraphs - they took four books of the Bible to tell the full breadth of the story. What we heard today is one of many parts when the people complain about how hard the journey is, and wonder if it's really worth it.

Now I need to make a side note, to be clear that I don't believe in a God who hears people complaining and responds by saying, "Oh, you want something to complain about? I'll give you something to complain about. How about some poisonous serpents? What do you think of that? That's right, now you're coming back all sorry." That is not a God that I believe in. That is not my understanding or experience of the sacred. But this is a story that comes from people who had a worldview that God is an all-powerful being who punishes and rewards people based on their behavior and faithfulness. Knowing that, and knowing that that is not what I believe, I can enter deeper into this story listening for what wisdom it does hold for me and what pieces I do relate to.

- I relate to these people feeling impatient and complaining. Is this really what we signed up for? This is supposed to be a journey to freedom, and when I imagine a journey to freedom it doesn't look like this.
- I relate to the constant process of remembering and forgetting and remembering again. Knowing that I am not alone, that I have everything I need, just keep putting one foot in front of the other, keep breathing. Then forgetting all that and second-guessing myself and wondering if I should have started this thing in the first place. Then having some experience, a moment of remembering the spiritual truths that I know.
- I relate to Moses who later in the story questions what he got himself into. In the four books that tell the story, the thing we read the most of is lists of laws and rules. Who knew leading people to freedom and involves so much administration? Who knew that helping people improve their lives involves so many charitable tax laws, tax receipts, returning misaddressed cheques to donors, sticking countless stamps and labels on envelopes.
- I relate to thinking that helping people should somehow be easier than this.
- And I relate to Moses not understanding this people that he's working with. There is not time right now for me to start telling stories about all the moment in a cross-cultural setting where I thought we agreed to one thing, and something else ends up happening.

There is wisdom for me in this Scripture story that praying to God doesn't make the serpents go away, but it does mean that there is healing. The thing that is causing the people pain is also what that heals them. And as much as we'd like to, we can't separate those two pieces from each other.

And without hearing the whole story, without the highs and the lows and the complaining and the manna from heaven and the serpents and the water from a rock, without all of that, the story of arriving in the promised land loses so much of its power. The hopeful redemptive ending loses some of its flavor and nutrition. Without the hard stuff, the promised land becomes a TV dinner product.

This is important for us to remember as people who are sitting in a church on Sunday morning, in a time when the culture of our world is changing faster than we can keep up with. This is important for us to remember as the people of Mount Seymour United, on a journey of transformation and renewal and uncertainty. It's important on this day as we look back over the past year that we remember the highlights of worshiping and working together, and also the really hard times, the moments of conflict and complaining and forgetting. In this wilderness journey, we don't have a map, we're not sure where we're going, and we don't know how far we've got to go. Will it be okay? Will we get there?

In the reflection I shared before I left for Ghana, I read a quote from CS Lewis's book the Silver Chair, which I'll read again. Aslan is on a mountain speaking to a girl who he is sending on a quest. "Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly; I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you

have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearances.”

Each of us in this room is doing good work in our lives – whether it’s in your paid work or volunteer work or your parenting or the way you work at being and living in the world. We are doing good work, and we know, in the fullness of the story, that good work is powerful and tedious and hopeful and hard, and in the moments when the air is clear and our mind is clear, and our hearts are open and our souls are present, we practice knowing by heart that it is absolutely worth it.