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Proper 21 A

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Journeyed by Stages

They journeyed by stages. OMG...doesn't that sound like our lives right now? *They journeyed by stages.*

Over the past couple of months since joining you as your interim rector, I have been watching as you have taken on one event after another with such excitement and such care that I have been blown away: Summerfest, July 4th, Be Safe, Homecoming, Ministry Sunday, Blessing of the Animals, and the upcoming Not-so-Spooky Haunted House and Holiday Boutique. Our Sunday school and youth groups are bustling, our choir has a new vesting room, we have mission trips being lined up, confirmation class and Bible 101 are starting up...we are seemingly forging ahead in our Christian call to be here.

But, in the background is this conversation about the search. Why don't we have a new rector yet? When do you think the search committee will have the profile finished? What is taking so long—not that you're not wonderful, Meg, and of course we are enjoying having you here—for now—but are we ever going to get a new rector??? Tell me what God has in store. And who is in charge of all of this anyway? You? The Diocese? The Search Committee? The candidates? Us?

All the while we are thinking, “Lord, why have you brought us to a place where we thirst? Where we want more than we can have right now? Where we sit and contemplate what it will be like when we have a new rector, when we can quench our hunger and thirst, when we can be normal.

All I can say to you is that there are stages to this journey. There was the saying good-bye stage. The bridge priest stage in which you had gatherings for discernment. The interim stage where we will have conversations around the vitality signs of a parish, even as the search committee is writing and editing and getting one another and the diocese on board with their parish profile.

The next stage will come sometime as the new year begins, and the parish profile goes out into the world. A few weeks will be set aside for receiving resumes of potential candidates. Meanwhile, the candidates to be interviewed will need be vetted to some degree. The Search Committee will probably do a series of zoom interviews in order to narrow down the list of candidates. Then, Search committee personnel will go to hear candidates preach and do follow-up interviews, mostly as these candidates are dealing with Lenten activities and preparing for Holy Week and Easter. Then a select one or two will be brought in to see if they even like St. John’s and feel like this is a place where they might enter into ministry. [Sometimes we forget that discernment goes two ways.] After the interview with the search committee and vestry, a call may be issued, which

may be declined or accepted. If declined, it is back to the drawing board. If accepted, a full vetting by the diocese with an Oxford background check will be done. Nothing can happen until that report comes back favorably for the candidate. The Regional Canon along with the vestry will then begin a negotiation of a letter of agreement. These things also take time. Once all are in agreement, a time may be set to move and welcome the new person. The whole search process is done--by stages, and each stage carries its own challenges. So, while we may understand from an intellectual perspective that abiding in each stage and following the protocol is our best chance of getting the rector St. John's and its people need, that doesn't mean that we are necessarily overjoyed that it takes time to make each stage of this journey.

When Moses entered the wilderness with the Hebrews, they had been excited. They thought for sure as they came out on the other side of the water and celebrated, that their journey was nearly over, that life was about to be sweeter than it had ever been, that all they had to do was trek that last 500 miles between Egypt and Canaan where they could set up their new lives; all they had to do was make **five miles a day for the next 100 days** and they would be able to celebrate once more. Five miles a day.

But then, after that first blush of happiness, the second stage of their journey set in, the stage that made them question the authority of their leader Moses. Had

he lost his mind bringing them into the desert? Did he not know that water was scarce? Did he not count the cost before bringing them to this desolate place? Who put him in charge anyway? Who made him boss?

I am an oldest child. That probably tells you more about me than you need to know. But what that meant growing up is that when my sister came along, I was often put in charge of making sure she was safe, that she could reach the things she needed, that she was entertained, that she was guided to where she needed to be. Still ringing in my ears was her cry of “Who made you boss of me?” She resented that I could tell her when to cross the street, how many sweets we were allowed to have, when to do her homework, the rules by which we were to live. “Who made you the boss of me?”

That’s what the Hebrew people were demanding of Moses. Who made you the boss of me? And yet, as you recall, when he climbed up the mountain to report to God, instead of moving ahead on their journey, they chose to intrench themselves, build a golden calf, and revert back to a previous stage of being from before their journey. And when Moses came back down and began to move them by stages to their goal of the Promised Land, they complained bitterly against him.

Rephidim was a little over a month along their journey, nearly to Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai as it is sometimes called. The wilderness of the area seems

so brown and barren. But when there, if you look carefully, you begin to see that even in the desert there are places where green springs forth. And hidden under the sands are wells that pilgrims use to refresh themselves and their animals. But it is a hot place. And it saps the very moisture out of your skin. When you are there you begin to understand why there are iconic photographs of Bedouin sitting under the edge of the rock in the middle of the day without moving. That bit of shade could mean the difference between life and death.

And the Hebrew people cried out for water, and Moses turned to God—his only resource—and asked for help for these people who were ready to stone him for this stage of their journey, for bringing them to a place where water was scarce and life hinged on being able to quench one's thirst. Who made you the boss of us was really a cry for survival in an inhospitable place that offers only the shade of the rock against the full force of the sun.

And God once more hears their cries, and gives their leader a way to move forward: he is to take his staff, the same one used to part the waters, and this time to strike the rock so that water will come out of it and quench the thirst of the people and the animals and allow them to live.

I say unto us who are gathered in this place on this day, that God has heard your cries for a new rector; God has given this place a wonderful Search

Committee that has many different voices to represent the people of this church; the staff of Moses has already stricken the rock to allow the people to quench their thirst, to drink of the living water as seen in the many ministries and the many relationships apparent in this place. You are not abandoned. God knows your need.

We are a people on a journey. You have people who love you and love the Lord, who are taking you step by step, stage by stage along this path. God is with us. God hears our cries. God will provide us with thirst quenching waters. But meanwhile we must forge ahead on this stage of our journey. We must remember that God calls each of us. That the ministry so evident in this place is proof positive that God is leading us day by day. Amen.