

June 14, 2020
Lectionary 11, Year A
Matthew 9:35-10:23

The 2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship

New Ventures, New Paths, New Perils

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Evangelical Lutheran Worship p. 317)

Do those words sound familiar to you? They might because as far back as 1978 when the Lutheran Book of Worship, or, the green book, was published, those words have been one of the prayers that has been a part of the Evening Prayer service. The church that I grew up in only prayed the evening prayer service during Wednesdays during Lent, but, apparently, five Wednesdays a year in my childhood and youth and young adulthood was enough. That prayer was there, waiting for me when I needed it.

When I was in my last year in seminary, I was on a list at the bishop's office to do supply preaching at churches all around South Carolina. One week, during Lent, I received a call from a church I had never heard of in a town I had never heard of, asking me to come and preach.

I looked up the church on a map, figured out where I was supposed to go and then looked at the readings. This is what I saw, "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show.'"

And all of a sudden that Wednesdays in Lent prayer that had embedded myself in my mind, came flowing out of me. Because I was called to go to a church I had never heard of, among people I had never met, in a town I barely knew how to find. Because Abram and Sarai, were called to go on a journey, to find their way to a new homeland, and in the process, with mistakes and wanderings along the way, to become Abraham and Sarah, the mother and father of a faith, of a nation:

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Does that prayer sound familiar to you? It might, because we have been praying it. We have been praying it since this lockdown began. When everything shut down, when our church doors closed, when I finally realized that things were not going to stay the same, that plans we had made, that plans that I had made were not going to go forward the way I had imagined that they would, when I realized that I had not had 2020 vision, that prayer jumped into my head and then into our liturgy. We have been praying it during our Sunday worship. We have been praying during our Wednesday prayer groups.

Is it strange that the prayer that has felt to me like the prayer that needs most to be prayed, the prayer that has sustained me during this time of isolation, this time of shut down, this time of stay at home orders is a prayer

that seems to be written about, seems to be written for a journey? A prayer that refers to *ventures* and *paths* and *going out* and *being led*.

I guess I have felt that in some ways this ongoing time of pandemic is a journey.

We have to figure out new ways of being together, new ways of interacting with each other, new ways of reaching across a divide, a divide created by disease, a divide created by stay at home orders and social distancing rules, a divide created by plexiglass and masks, across all of those divides we have had to figure out ways to honor ourselves and each other as physical beings, whose bodies have been vulnerable to and threatened by disease. We have also had to figure out how to honor each other and ourselves as social creatures, who need contact and interaction in order to remain physically, mentally, spiritually, healthy.

If we were gathered in the same physical space, I would ask you to raise your hands, to find out how many of you had never used zoom before this Coronavirus lockdown began. And I would be raising my hand. Zoom was new to me before the lockdown. It has been a new venture for me, at times a new peril, for sure a new way, a new way of learning to be together.

Even this time of staying at home, this time of being limited in how we can interact with one another has been a journey. During this time, we have come to understand ourselves, our families, our neighbors, our communities, in a different way. We have been tested and refined by this experience, of which we still cannot see the ending, as we have journeyed paths untrodden, as we have confronted perils unknown.

These words, this prayer:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

seem especially timely now, when our nation, when our world has been shaken by racial violence that it is a privilege to be shocked by. People of color have not had the privilege of being shocked by the public lynching of George Floyd. They have named it with grief and anger as one more atrocity in a long history of atrocities, of violence committed against them, often with the force of law behind the violence.

They have not had the privilege of being shocked. They have not had the privilege of imagining this kind of violence is unusual or an aberration. They have been saying the names of the lost ones, the dead ones, the murdered ones, the lynched ones for far too long, in fact, for centuries.

They have whispered them in their slave quarters. They have spoken them as they have gathered at unmarked graves. They have named them around their tables. They have taught them to their children, as a warning, as a memorial. They have sung them in their churches. They have shouted them to the skies. They have carried them, their names and their pictures at protests.

And now they want us to see, to see what it's been like, to see what their nightmares are, to see what they worry about for their children. They're telling us that we have to give up the privilege of not knowing, of not seeing.

And perhaps now, perhaps now, when we're realizing on so many levels that things cannot say the same, more people, not just people who have

been victims of violence, but all people will realize that something has to change, that we cannot just move on, with a casual, “Isn’t that terrible.” We cannot keep walking the same roads.

Perhaps all of us will realize that it’s time for a new road, a new journey, a venture of which we cannot see the ending, a path as yet untrodden, and, yes perils unknown, as privileges gained on the backs, on the necks of others are laid down so that justice can be picked up, and equality can be picked up, so that true peace can be picked up. God, give us courage.

So why are we talking about this prayer today? Because, today, in our gospel reading, Jesus’ disciples are sent on a journey. And it’s almost funny the way that it happens.

Jesus sees people in trouble. People who are broken, people who have no direction, people who have no hope, and Jesus is moved by compassion for them.

According to dictionary.com, compassion means: a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering. It comes from the Latin, “com” which means “with” and “passio”, which means suffering.

So, to have compassion for someone means to suffer with them. It means to feel their pain as your own and it means that helping to alleviate their suffering will help alleviate your own. It’s a costly kind of love, a costly way of sharing humanity with another.

It tells us that this Jesus, this God, who took on flesh to be one of us did so in the costliest way possible, not just as a token imitation of humanity, but with shared suffering. Jesus literally entered into our sorrows and took them on as his own.

Then, Jesus, invited his disciples into his own heart, into his own compassion for the lost and hopeless people who were suffering and abused. And he invited his disciples to pray with him for people who could go out and bring compassion and healing to the lost and suffering ones.

Now, when the gospels talk about, “disciples”, they’re not necessarily referring only to the twelve disciples. Unless it’s preceded by the number twelve “disciples” is a reference to all of the people who followed Jesus during the early days of his ministry while he traveled through Galilee and gained followers who just couldn’t wait to see what he would do next, with his powerful words and with his miraculous abilities.

So, it’s likely that it was more than just the 12 disciples that were praying with Jesus that God would send laborers into the harvest. But certainly the 12 disciples would have been among those who were praying.

I wonder if they expected that they would be the ones who were chosen, the ones who were sent. I wonder if Simon, aka Peter, and Andrew and James and John and Philip and Bartholomew and Thomas and Matthew and the other James and Thaddaeus and the other Simon and Judas Iscariot prayed with Jesus and then wondered when they would meet the ones who God had sent to answer their prayer; when they would meet the ones God had chosen to share Jesus’ heart of compassion with the people; when they would meet the people God had called to walk among the suffering ones, to suffer with them, to love them, to guide them, to heal them.

I wonder how surprised they were to hear their own names called, to learn that through their own prayer, they had gone from being disciples, ones who were taught, to apostles, ones who were sent.

I wonder how surprised they were to learn that they were the ones who were to go.

And, I wonder how surprised they were to learn that their mission that their task, was nothing less than to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven had come near and then through their actions, to show that it was true, by changing people's lives and transforming their communities.

Their job description was, "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." They were to go around touching the untouchable, breaking their own community's purity laws, confronting evil in whatever form it took, and breaking down walls between people.

And their pay was going to be...being driven out of towns and villages, being flogged by their own people, and being dragged before governors and kings, with nothing to say in their own defense but the words given them by the Holy Spirit.

It's possible that this gospel reading today should come with the heading, "God answers prayer. Be careful what you pray for."

But, see, they were following Jesus, and because of that, Jesus had rubbed off on them. And Jesus gave them compassion for the people.

I laugh, thinking maybe that they didn't want to do what Jesus was calling them to do, because it would be too hard.

But maybe they did want to do it. Maybe they were excited to be chosen. Maybe, because they had knelt at Jesus' feet and listened to his words, and experienced his love, and had seen how his touch could heal how his words could transform, maybe they were so filled with his vision of a new kingdom, that they were ready to see that kingdom made manifest by their own Spirit empowered words and actions.

Maybe I should imagine them praying not with fear, but with enthusiasm:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Today is Graduation Sunday. Today we celebrate the accomplishments of five graduates from our congregation, as well as the graduations of some of our congregation member's grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and today we pray for graduates everywhere.

And so, today's gospel reading, is particularly timely, as it talks about people ending one part of their life and beginning another; taking the gifts that they have been given and things that they have learned and moving out in to the world with Jesus' compassion to effect change. Change that would transform them and transform every community that they would touch.

Certainly, this has been a different kind of year. Unexpected. Unprecedented.

The last months of our graduates' school careers, their last months of high school, college, or graduate school have been disrupted by disease. Learning has been done at home, isolated from teachers, classrooms, classmates, friends.

So many of those "last things" of one's last months at a school have been missed or done differently, done on-line, done in a socially distanced way. So many graduation traditions and rituals have not been able to be done this year.

And so, the class of 2020 has had to create its own rituals, its own customs, its own way of celebrating, its own way of marking endings and beginnings.

And they have experienced a new way of experiencing their families' and their community's support at this time of transition.

And they have done it.

And so, perhaps because of all that they have lost, all that could not go "according to plan", the class of 2020 is better equipped, in their resilience, in their creativity, in their compassion for others who might be suffering loss, in their compassion for those who might not be feeling celebrated, in their compassion for those who know that things just can't be the way that they've always been, to meet the challenges of our time.

Perhaps the class of 2020 is equipped in exactly the right way to go out into a world that is itself a venture of which we cannot see the ending, a path as yet untrodden, full of perils unknown.

And so, today we pray, for ourselves, as we seek to follow Jesus and to be transformed by his compassion, and for our communities, and for our nation, and for our world and certainly, for our graduates and all of this year's graduates:

(Maybe, you've heard it enough times that you can pray it with me)

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.