On the Road Again

NUMBERS 33:1-5, 48-49 (NRSVUE) ***These are the stages by which the Israelites went out of the land of Egypt in military formation under the leadership of Moses and Aaron.*** [2]***Moses wrote down their starting points, stage by stage, by command of the Lord, and these are their stages according to their starting places.*** [3]***They set out from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the day after the Passover the Israelites went out boldly in the sight of all the Egyptians,*** [4]***while the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn, whom the Lord had struck down among them. The Lord executed judgments even against their gods.*** [5]***So the Israelites set out from Rameses and camped at Succoth.***

Forty years, and 39 camps later…

[48]***They set out from the mountains of Abarim and camped in the plains of Moab by the Jordan opposite Jericho;*** [49]***they camped by the Jordan from Beth-jeshimoth as far as Abel-shittim in the plains of Moab.***

A little 4th of July nostalgia: I'm not a "Yankee Doodle Dandy;" I wasn't born on the 4th of July. I was born 81 days after Pearl Harbor. For most of us who grew up in that era, life wasn't all that complicated, after the war. Americans were hard-working and freedom loving—with a can-do spirit.

We had opened up the frontier and built mighty industrial empires; a middle class was emerging, and there was a car in every garage and a chicken in every pot, and everybody was allowed to get their piece of the American Dream.

We were on the right side of history, having defeated Hitler and liberated Europe; and we were standing lookout against a godless totalitarian communism—to make the world safe for democracy.

We loved western movies and baseball, hot dogs and apple pie, fast cars and fourth of July parades.

At least, that's the story we told ourselves. But it wasn't the story all Americans experienced. Public rest rooms, drinking fountains, schools, diner counters, and front seats of buses were still segregated. The story we told ourselves left out all the ways women were expected to stay in their place, and overlooked some of the ugly realities of our foreign policy during the Cold War.

As my generation was coming of age—during the 60s—young people were challenging a lot of America's most cherished myths about itself. The result was a growing bitter divide in the country—a political and culture war that in a lot of ways we're still fighting today.

But one thing has remained constant; in fact, until the Covid virus drove us indoors, it was growing—something Americans have long shared: our love affair with the open road.

Even before there were roads, American pioneers were blazing trails into uncharted territory. Wagon trains widened those trails. The Pony Express, Wells Fargo stagecoaches, and eventually a transcontinental railroad connected the East

and West Coasts [Sadly, and a valid topic for discussion, all this at the expense of several indigenous cultures that essentially were destroyed in the process.]

With the emergence of the automobile there was an immediate need to improve roads and highways, and in 1926 Route 66 became the first paved highway linking Chicago and Los Angeles, and Thirty years later President Eisenhower signed legislation that created the Interstate Highway System [which, today, 66 years later, is always under construction.]

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Life is a journey, not a destination," and American's history in large measure can be summed up with that same metaphor. One way to understand a culture's history is to look at its music and its literature.

Road Songs, like:

- Woody Guthrie: "Ain't Got No Home"; "Riding in my Car"
- Willie Nelson: "On the road Again"
- "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother", which includes the lyrics, "It's a long, long road, with many a winding turn that leads us to who knows where…"
- Bruce Springsteen made a ton of money with his "Road Songs."

And a part of America's history and character is captured also in some of the Literature:

- Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*)
- The TV series, "Rt 66"
- Easy Rider (?)

The Scripture Bill read earlier is the beginning and the end of a summary of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Numbers is set in a journey through the wilderness (In fact, the Hebrew word we translate "Numbers" means, 'the Wilderness'). When you read Numbers, think journey. Again, journey is a constant theme throughout the Judeo/Christian Scriptures:

- Abraham—journeying from Ur of Chaldea to what is now Israel—a land God promised to give to him and his descendants.
- Jacob—journeying down to Egypt because of famine in the Promised Land.
- Moses—leading Israel out of Egyptian bondage back to the Promised Land
- Nehemiah—leading Israel out of Babylonian exile back to the Promised Land
- Last week we looked at Luke's Travel Narrative: Jesus journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem and to the fulfilment of his identity and purpose.
- Paul—taking the gospel into the Greco-Roman World: Turkey, Greece, Italy

"Journey" is clearly a biblical metaphor for human life and community; and for Americans, it's the open road. It offers "escape"; it offers "discovery"—you never know what's around the next bend in the road. In all the American songs and stories about the open road, there's that sense of discovery, and the open road

represents chasing a dream; always looking for something meaningful. In his book, *Born to Run*, Bruce Springsteen says that, for him, the road was a way of searching for his own soul.

There are several kinds of kinds of journey:

- Kerouac: the journey is its own purpose
- But for most journeys there is a destination
  - Exodus of Israel: from Egyptian bondage to the "Promised Land"
  - American Colonies: from King George's oppression to freedom
  - American frontier: more than freedom: independence—autonomy—'nobody's gonna' tell me what to do!'

Today's reading from Numbers is a summary of one of those journeys: Israel's exodus from Egyptian bondage to the Jordan River across from Jericho—a journey of 40 years, with 40 campgrounds along the way. The story of that journey begins in the 13th chapter of Exodus and ends with today's reading from Numbers.

So, most journeys include a destination; although, our children might question that, based on their most frequent traveling question: "Are we there, yet?"

Emerson was right: "Life is a journey, not a destination." That's not an easy sale in a destination-oriented culture. In our spiritual journey it feels like we've arrived when we have one of those mountaintop experiences—we experience the presence of God—get a glimpse of "the kingdom;" but it's just one of those campsites along the way. The journey isn't over. We're not there yet.

The same is true in one's journey toward psychological well-being, or one's journey toward stable and loving relationships or toward financial stability. There are high points, low points, and rest stops along the way. But we're not there yet.

The open road metaphor represents that desire to be free, but there also is a restlessness. Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled*, begins with these words, "Life is difficult." Most of us try to avoid our problems. However, our spiritual growth depends on confronting them and working through the suffering they cause.

The journey is toward peace of mind, stable, loving relationships, a sense of meaning and purpose, and a connection with something beyond us. But the road gets tedious, because there is in us humans a deep need for roots—a need for a home.

And when we look at the journey stories in the Bible, one thing is consistent: God goes ahead, leading the way. In the story summarized in today's Scripture, God went ahead of the Israelites in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

"Are we there yet?" No. There is a destination. We're not there yet; but God is leading, and if we take the time and exercise the spiritual disciplines, we can discern where God is leading.