

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2026
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American Lutheran Church

Exodus 17:1-7
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

Ever since I left my native state of Wisconsin for good, traveling back home has not been without its challenges. When I was living in Northern Virginia alone or in various communities with Pastor Julia after we met at seminary and got married, we drove back to Wisconsin more often than we flew. The whole trip would always come down to how Chicago went and unfortunately there was no reliably quick and clean way through the Windy City. Travel is not without its difficulties.

These days it's no longer practical to drive back to Wisconsin. The trick now is to get from the airport in Minneapolis to my mom's apartment over two hours away. In case you don't know, rental cars aren't cheap and booking a puddle jumper into my mom's current community is no different. But now I've learned one can fly directly from Mesa to my mother's current community at a reasonable cost. Yet even this welcome development doesn't mean I've now been spared the difficulties of travel. By the time I visit this summer, my mother may have had to abandon her license and her car because of bad neuropathy in her feet. If this happens, how are we going to get around to see family and hopefully to witness the Brewers beat the Chicago Cubs in Milwaukee in late June; a game for which tickets have already been purchased. Again, travel is not without its difficulties, and it would be good for us to remember this today and throughout the season of Lent as a whole.

During Lent, we travel from the Mount of Transfiguration to Mount Calvary. Though not without its tensions, there's unity and community between heaven and earth up on the Mount of Transfiguration. For a moment we seem prepared to listen to Jesus first and last just as God the Father commands. But then everything goes to pot before we get to Mount Calvary. Down in the dark valley of the shadow of death, Jesus the Good Shepherd gets struck and the sheep scatter like shards of glass. For his part

Jesus still tries to hold together heaven and earth together through the vertical and horizontal bars of his cross. Even so, all is not well on Mount Calvary.

With the exception of Jesus, by the time we get to Mount Calvary where we human beings are concerned faith has given way to fear and unity and community have been broken apart by division, doubt, and disbelief. It's not all that different from how Nicodemus doesn't know what to make of Jesus in our reading from John. He may not fear Jesus but also clearly does not trust Jesus as happens when faith is present. How does Nicodemus and how do we ourselves journey out of the dark and into the light? How does Nicodemus and how do we ourselves travel get to the unity and community with heaven that comes through faith? As indicated by Nicodemus' befuddlement and Jesus' own words, this is no easy journey to make. But perhaps there are other journeys it's easier for us to make.

Take, for instance, the journey that ensues when Abram in our first reading is called to leave his father's house. Journeys of this sort are quite common in Scripture. A few weeks ago we heard of how James and John left behind their father Zebedee to follow Jesus; setting up Jesus' later assertion that we cannot be his disciples if we left family ties get in the way of faith. And getting back to the book of Genesis, it's not just Abram who leaves a family or place or origin. In just the Bible's first book, Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden and Noah travels off on an ark and Ishmael, Jacob, and Joseph all leave their father's house before Moses does it twice in Bible's second book. The implications for travel are pretty clear here. For who knows how long families and places of origin have sometimes been a mixed blessing. When all goes right, we get both roots and wings. But sometimes we get no wings and become trapped and smothered by someone else's life and never travel off to a life of our own. And even when we do get wings, sometimes the roots we've been given aren't of equal value and merit and we can have trouble separating the wheat from the chaff; continuing the sins of our forebears rather than leaving them behind. Like the journey to faith, the journey through our families and places of origin to later health and maturity is not easy.

As a case in point, my dad and one of my uncles didn't always like each other. They both came from poor and abusive households, and this left them insecure and on the lookout for anything resembling a putdown or an insult. Growing up poor they had been looked down upon before and they feared it would happen again in adulthood if

they weren't ready to ward off every potential slight. Growing up with drunk and abusive fathers, both my dad and uncle had been embarrassed before others one too many times and they weren't going to be embarrassed again. It's a pity my father and my uncle never really got beyond their fears and their insecurities and their suspicions so they could discover all they had in common and be of help to each other as they struggled to break free from what wasn't good about their families of origin. But when you get down to it, failing to make the most of the people we meet in life is yet another indication of how difficult it can be to journey towards that which is good for us.

When we meet those who are other in some way, we too often fixate on differences and fail to look for similarities. When we're given the opportunity to expand the bounds of unity and community and togetherness, we too often focus on the shortcomings of those who remain strangers so that we can feel better about ourselves and avoid our own shortcomings. It's why in our reading from Romans St. Paul tells a church where people of Jewish and non-Jewish origin aren't getting along that they're all in the same boat despite their differences. Like us, every Christian at Rome regardless of family or place of origin is a sinner damned beyond the point of personal repair. Like us, every Christian at Rome, whether of Jewish or non-Jewish origin, is only a descendant of Abraham and a child of God because God has made them so through Jesus and the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. But in the end, we don't know whether St. Paul's appeal to commonality in the presence of difference worked or not and we certainly know it's not easy to hold together diverse communities of people today. Here's yet another journey it's difficult for us to make. The journey away from difference and towards commonality. I'm afraid everywhere we look today we've got critical journeys and travels and pilgrimages that we humans have a habit and history of failing to complete or of even beginning? And so, what then shall we say about these things? How shall we respond to the reality that we have long been travel-challenged and pilgrimage-impaired and journey-averse?

Might now be the time to point out that only Jesus has managed to travel down from heaven to earth and then back to heaven again, having completed every journey that comes with a fully human life? Might it now be time to remember that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in wilderness so was Jesus lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life? I sure think so. What these hopefully familiar words from the

gospel of John tell us is that Jesus has already completed all the journeys and all the travels and all the pilgrimages that are going to matter to our God and Judge in the end. And should we trust this is true through the Holy Spirit's gift of faith, the Good News is that we don't ever have to move another inch in flesh or in spirit. This most assuredly doesn't mean we should stop traveling toward more spirit and less flesh or that we should abandon the quest for personal health and maturity and for greater and more expansive community with others. All these journeys, all these travels, and all these pilgrimages are in our best interest and always will be. But thanks to Jesus we no longer have to get so down on ourselves when we stall or get stuck. Thanks to Jesus and the Holy Spirit's gift of faith in him, when our lives don't move as much as we would like, here's what we can do instead. We can look away from our failings and look to Christ and his cross instead which have been lifted up in our wilderness of travel for our healing, salvation, and encouragement both now and later. Amen!