
Are we there yet? Of course not!
Chapel in the Park United Church
July 21, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Exodus 14:10-14, 21-31 and Luke 4:1-14

I have had a long and somewhat interesting history with the company, “U-Haul”. Because I have used their services on a number of occasions. One thing that fascinates me about U-Haul is how their slogans have changed over the years. Their current slogans are quite friendly.

[image: u can do it]

One of them is, “Moving families to better lives since 1945”. Another one is, “Making moving easier”. Another one is the very encouraging “U can do it”. But I'm old enough to remember one of their older slogans, which was “Adventure in Moving”. Do you remember that one?

[image: adventure in moving]

I remember that slogan because I myself have moved enough times to know that “adventure” is perhaps something we do not really want when we move. When you move your home, I think it's much more common to want a complete lack of adventure. We want things to be predictable, sensible, dependable, reasonable, and a lot of other words that end in “ible”. Wanting an adventure when you move - to me - makes about as much sense as wanting to have an adventure when you visit your dentist. Sometimes, we do not want adventure. We want boring.

The first time I went to U-Haul as an adult, I went to rent a truck so that Marjorie and I could move from Saskatoon to Toronto. I discovered that the cost to rent the truck was \$1600 plus insurance and fuel. And so, being poor students, instead of doing that we bought a car for \$400 and rented a trailer.

[image: ford ltd]

I bought an 11 year old station wagon with a 460 cubic inch engine. That's 7 litres. That car could pass anything except a gas station. But, car keys in hand, the adventure began. After buying the car, a friend who knew more than I did about cars inspected my car and tweaked it up a bit. While cleaning the fuel filter he created a

situation which later led to an engine fire.

[image: ford with trailer]

And when I got the trailer, I was a complete innocent. We actually got as far as Manitoba with about 1 inch of clearance under the trailer hitch. And I won't even tell you about the method we used to load our motorcycle into the trailer! To fit my motorcycle into the trailer I had to remove the mirrors. And the mirrors on the car were not great with the trailer. So I drilled holes in the hood of my car and screwed the motorcycle mirrors into the hood of the car. Obviously, Marjorie and I are willing to learn as we go. I won't tell you about the rest of that trip just now, but suffice it to say that when I move, adventure is just about the last thing that I want to add to the menu. I usually find more than enough adventure without going out of my way to create more of it.

Over coffee time I'd love to hear some of your moving stories. I'm sure that your stories are quite ... moving.

I think we see the same desire for lack of adventure in our reading from Exodus this morning. In the larger story of the Exodus, Moses keeps inviting people - both the Hebrews and the Egyptians - to imagine a new reality. But both the Hebrews and the Egyptians want to keep things as they are. Both groups resist change. Both groups are not looking for new life or new opportunities. The Hebrews complained that God had brought them out of Egypt just to die in a wasteland. The Hebrew people clearly did not share Moses's vision. They preferred the old ways of slavery to the "adventure" of wandering around with inadequate creature comforts.

I want to share another journey story with you. Marjorie and I used to own a Czechoslovakian car - a Skoda.

[image: skoda]

And we decided to take it on a car/camping vacation from Toronto to Newfoundland, via Labrador. About a month before our trip, I took the Skoda into a garage for a check-up. On the way to the garage, all of the brakes failed except the handbrake. I thought I was very lucky, since I was going to the garage anyway. And I enjoyed the challenge of getting there using only the handbrake. The part I needed had to come from the UK, which took almost a month, but the day before we wanted to leave on

our trip the part arrived. And so we were off.

[image: skoda camping]

We travelled from Toronto through Quebec, and took a logging road that took us to Goose Bay in Labrador. We then took a ferry to Lewisporte in Newfoundland, and we spent about a week touring that lovely island. When we got to Gros Morne Park, however, I started to suspect an oil leak. Not wanting Marjorie to worry - and being in denial myself - I didn't want to actually look closely. So we continued our journey.

[image: st anthony]

By the time we got to St. Anthony, on the very tip of the Great Northern Peninsula, the oil leak had increased and I had to look and see what the problem was. It turned out that the oil pressure sensor was leaking oil. And even though Skodas come with a toolbox, I didn't have the right tool to tighten the sensor. So, we stopped at the first garage we came to and I asked the mechanic if I could borrow a wrench.

The mechanic came out to look at the car, and declared that the oil sensor was broken. So tightening it would not make any difference. But - this was Newfoundland. The mechanic was not in a hurry to get back to his work and so we chatted. We chatted about fishing, the weather, life. After about 10 minutes the mechanic offered up the fact that he had once owned a Skoda himself. We chatted. After another 5 minutes the mechanic revealed that he had owned a spare engine for his Skoda. We chatted. After 5 more minutes the mechanic said "I'll just go out back and see if I have that part." And he did have the part! In Toronto, a major metropolitan, international city it took a month to get a part for my Skoda. But at a random gas station in St. Anthony Newfoundland and Labrador, the part was waiting for me!

[image: labrador road]

It's a great, true story. But that's not quite the end of the story. That car part was expensive - not in a monetary sense. But that car part came at the cost of our being vulnerable. Our being open to great possibilities. Our openness to spending time chatting with a mechanic after he had told me he had no way to help us. Our openness to taking a long trip through remote regions of Canada in a questionable vehicle. Our willingness to drive for 2 days on virtually abandoned logging roads like the one shown here. This road

- by the way - is called the “Trans Labrador Highway”. And it’s a lot more rock than gravel. And when Marjorie and I finally had to replace the Skoda, we bought a brand-new Toyota Corolla - at the time the very symbol of reliability and dependability. We decided that - for cars at least - we preferred reliability to vulnerability. We preferred reliability to the great gifts that can only come from being vulnerable.

That story reminds me of a scene in the 1990 movie, “Total Recall”. Total Recall is a movie depicting a time in the near future when humans have the technology to implant memories into people’s minds. And of course, if you receive new memories, you don’t remember that they were implanted. The memories you buy are the same as real memories. To quote from a sales person in the movie, “your brain will not know the difference - and that’s guaranteed.”

One of the markets for this technology is vacation memories. You can buy memories of a vacation without all the hassle of taking a trip. Think about it. Think of every vacation you’ve ever been on. After the vacation is over, you only have your memories. So what if you could just buy the memories in the first place? It’s a really cool idea for people who don’t have the time or the money to take an actual trip. And imagine how well that technology would have sold during the pandemic!

Anyway, in the movie, the sales person has great products. He points out that the memories they sell are of vacations that are absolutely perfect. The sales person put it this way: “A real holiday is a pain. You get lost luggage, lousy weather, crooked taxi drivers.” When you travel with us - your memories will be of a perfect vacation! But of course - the memories are perfect because they are not real. A journey can only be perfect if it is not real. If a journey is real, then we have to be vulnerable. We have to be open to the possibilities of lost luggage, lousy weather, crooked taxi drivers, and finding Skoda parts in the remote hamlet of St. Anthony.

In the movie, the hero struggles with his identity, and how his memories and his actions relate to his identity. The biblical story of Jesus wandering in the wilderness amidst temptation is also about identity. Jesus went into the wilderness to spend time alone with himself and to discover who he was more clearly. And in the story, the Devil appears and actually helps Jesus work that out. We often say that Jesus was tempted by

the Devil. But another way to read the story is that the Devil offered images of who Jesus could choose to become. And Jesus did not like any of the images that the Devil offered.

For example, when the Devil challenged Jesus to turn stones into bread, I think the real challenge was to Jesus's identity. The Devil challenged Jesus to become a baker. But more than that, a "magic baker" who could make bread from stones and therefore could feed the entire world. Given the number of people currently malnourished, that idea has some merit. Feeding the world is not a bad mission. The temptation for Jesus to become a miracle worker who fed the world must have been at least somewhat attractive to Jesus. But Jesus is not a baker. There is nothing wrong with baking bread. There is nothing wrong with feeding the hungry. But Jesus had a different identity.

In the story, the Devil actually helps Jesus understand his own identity and ministry more clearly.

[image: sign not in use]

I hope that by now some of you are wondering where this reflection is going. I mean, what is the connection between journey and identity? Perhaps you've decided that since it's summer my mind has drifted off into thinking about holiday travels. And you are at least partly right. But journeys are also a great chance to think about our identity and who we are. Even summer holidays. Deciding where you want to go on holidays and how you plan to get there says a lot about who you are - and who you are not.

[image: journey]

And that brings me - perhaps clumsily - to the point of this reflection. Because whether or not you are travelling this summer (or indeed this fall when some of you go on your cruise) the reality is that life itself is a journey. And how we engage with that journey says a lot about who we are. And that is true for us as individual people as well as for us as a congregation.

So - what journey are we on as a congregation? Well, I assume that we are interested in growing the church, and that means reaching out to others where they are at. It means caring about ourselves and our wider community. It means reaching out. OK. But what does that actually look like here at Chapel in the Park United Church?

I really want to hear from all of you. I would love to know what visions you have for where our current journey might take us. Where do you want to go? You don't have to tell me now. Enjoy your summer. But in September we need to start discussing what journey we are on together.

My own sense of this is that we are very well-positioned. Thorncliffe Park is the type of community that needs a church like us. But we have to put some effort into figuring out what the community needs that intersects with our own passions.

[do the finger thing]

I feel that we are truly blessed here. For one thing, we have TNO and other agencies. TNO covers many of the basic needs for new immigrants and refugees. Thank God for that! Because I do not see that we have the people power or the resources to tackle big practical problems, like helping people find housing, helping people find good employment, or running a food bank. I feel that there are already very good supports for practical needs in our community through TNO and other organizations.

Which leave space for us - the church - to fill other needs. Needs that do not require lots of money or other resources. Perhaps spiritual needs. Perhaps emotional needs. Perhaps simply helping people feel connected. Perhaps simply helping people experience a sense of belonging, caring, love.

We can start by being honest about the needs in our own lives. Because our deep needs will likely overlap the deep needs of many other people. Are you looking for peace? Are you struggling with loneliness? What are your own deepest needs? Whatever your needs, you are not alone. And as we journey together, we can build - together - a place of belonging and love. We can build a place called "home".

I want to close with a quote from an unknown source: "The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making those paths, changes both the maker and the destination."

So are we there yet? Of course not! It's not about the destination. It's about the journey. I am delighted to be on this journey with you all. Let's enjoy our continuing journey together.

Amen.