

Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Luke 10:25-37

The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart. This final line of our reading from Deuteronomy reminded me of the familiar and touching poem called "Footprints in the Sand". If you are not familiar with the poem it is about a dream where a person recounts her life in conversation with God while looking at footprints in the sand. While she encounters pictures of the past there are often two sets of footprints visible. She knows that one set belongs to her and the other to the Lord. The images of her life are laid out before her and included in these are those times of crisis and sadness. It is during these times of her life where she notices that only one set of footprints are present and she questions God. "Why is it Lord, that you abandon me in these difficult times, situations where I needed you most you were not there for me?" The Lord replied, "Those times my child, where you see one set of footprints, are the occasions when I carried you."

As I prepared for today's message, my final opportunity to proclaim the gospel from this pulpit, I recalled this poem. Well...I should tell you that it was not exactly this account that I just summarized, but a slightly lesser known version of it. That version adds another picture in the sand. There are the two sets of footprints, the one set, but at other times along the beach there are sections where no footprints are visible. In fact there is a mess of shells broken and scattered, sand is pushed left and right, and deep ruts are gouged in the beach. There was a picture of disarray and struggle. The author inquires of the Lord, "What happened here?" The Lord answered, "That is where I dragged you kicking and screaming!"

Brothers and sisters in Christ often when we look back at all of the things that have happened to us, the blessings and the curses, the happy and the sad times we find that each of us is on a journey that includes walking with Jesus, being carried by Jesus, and Jesus dragging us kicking and screaming. The part of my journey that began last year, at just about this time, may have included some kicking and screaming. There were an awful lot of unknowns. But the welcome and hospitality that you gave to my family propelled the acceptance with the pastoral staff. The journey that you and I experienced together included many happy times and along the way we encountered our share of tragedy and sadness. We are people that cling to those happy memories and the joyful times because surely that was where God was and that was where we felt God's presence. As journeys tend to unfold for us, for you and for me, there comes the unexpected, the mysterious, and the loneliness. Sometimes, when the time is right, we too will ask the question, "Where are you, God?" The man attacked and left for dead may have asked that question, "Where are you God?"

We near the answer to this question when we will look at 3 key points that reflect a journey. The first is that journeys include walking. There are few times when running is needed. By going slow we are able to be aware, to connect with our surroundings and with people. Though this might sound easy it is not because we

are trained that "hyper-activity" makes us look good to other people, but a closeness with God is missed when we are busy, rushing about. A man once told me about his experience with his father. He said, "My dad was a working man. Blue collar, through and through, coming home with grease under his nails and clothes that mom would not allow inside the house. He was a man without many words but the actions he did and the food he put on the table expressed to me how much he loved me." He went on to say, "From as early an age as I can remember he would hug me before bed. It was a big bear hug type of hug that would last for about a minute. I had no problem with that at a young age," he said. "But as I got older, those extended hugs became more uncomfortable. I wanted to rush those times. You know how men hug, it is kind of like"... (quick and pat pat). My dad would not let go, however, he would say to me, 'I am not done yet.' This is what I mean by "walking." Keep yourself from running through those moments of awareness.

The second key to being on a journey is the fact that there will be pits and valleys along the way. If anyone tells you that you will always walk in the sunlight, up on the ridge, above the mess and muck of the world, that person is not being truthful about his or her own journey. The pits and the valleys are those times in our lives where we cannot help but ask "Where are you God?" Yet these are the times when the Lord is closest to us, carrying us like in the poem. During the time with you at Trinity I met a man at Harrisburg hospital. This was last August, very early in the internship year, and though we are given training in hospital visitation, I didn't have any experience in sharing communion with anyone outside of the meal we share at worship. In one sense, I held the bread and wine to the necessity of ordination. Meaning that to serve communion one needed to be a pastor and I am not one. But I also knew that this fear of not being effective needed to be overcome; it is God's work with our hands. This man was the first person to receive communion from me. His name was Wilmer. You might remember his name. We prayed most of the year for him as he never left Golden Living Center until he moved to Manor Care. As his body continued to fail, our friendship grew, and in his final week he asked me an emotional question, "Who will tell my story, Tom?" These are the valleys in life where God is closest to us; some people call them the "thin places". Places where we are not worried about status and ego, where we are accessible for the word to be very near to you. "Wilmer," I said. "You and I are friends and I will always remember you; we shared communion. I will tell your story." God brought our journeys together that day in August and the rest of the year. We both needed to be with someone in the valley.

This brings me to the third point of being on a journey which is, "You are not to be alone." You can begin to see how these keys overlap one another. In order to not be alone on the journey you belong to a community of faith. The church is the last bastion of community where people come and are welcome from all races and socio-economic abilities. Being a part of this community makes you an equal. You are not alone here because you have friends for the journey, but (ironically) you also have people who rub you the wrong way. Some of you rub me the wrong way, and I am sure I rub some of you the wrong way. But, we always remember that this is one of the greatest points about belonging to a church community. Did you know that the sharing of the peace is there for those who rub each other the wrong

way? Sometimes, maybe even more often than not, the person that rubs you the wrong way will be the strongest bond you find when you are in the valleys of your journey. But that bridge is not crossed unless one or both share the piece of Christ with each other.

Now, you have the three keys to being on a journey. It takes walking, there will be pits and valleys, and you are not to be alone. In order to tie a bind around this sermon I am compelled to bring one more necessary point. This really encompasses each of the three mentioned. This is the important necessity that we have a guide, a teacher to explain these things to us. We often call these people pastors, but I don't want to say that these guides do not appear anywhere else. You have been blessed with a number of worthy guides. I won't name them all but I am sure that you can. A guide will always point you to Christ. We can try to justify ourselves, we can call Jesus teacher (like the one testing Jesus in the gospel), we can go to church on Saturdays, Sundays, or Thursdays (like the Levite who passes on the opposite side of the road), or we can even be a pastor (like the priest who was too busy to help), but if we don't show mercy then our journey will be incomplete. Jesus asks "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell?" This is a divine call, ironic how we assume to be the ones walking on the road when we just might be the one lying in the ditch on the side crying out for mercy. Thank God it is Jesus who teaches us by example to "go and do likewise." You are closest to God when mercy and compassion is shown and there is God showing mercy and compassion to you. The word is very near to you; it is in your heart and in your mouth.

Amen.