
Are we there yet? Of course not!
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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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, reasonable, and a lot of other words that end in “ible”. Wanting an adventure when you move is about as common 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 fuel. And so, being a poor student, instead of doing that I 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! You can't tell from this picture, but I have a short story that I know Larry will love. To fit the motorcycle onto the trailer I had to remove the mirrors. And the mirrors on the cars were not great with the trailer. So I drilled holes in the hood of the car and installed the motorcycle mirrors to the hood of the car which gave me better visibility. 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.

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. That suggests that Moses's vision was not shared by the Hebrew people. They preferred the old ways of slavery to the adventure of wandering around with inadequate provisions.

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, the master brake cylinder failed. 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 had to come from the UK, which took almost a month, but the day before we wanted to leave on our trip the part came. 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 wouldn't help. 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 it! In Toronto, a major metropolitan, international city it took a month to find a part for a Skoda. 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 person after he had told me he had no way to help us. Our openness to taking a long trip through remote regions in a questionable vehicle. Our willingness to drive for 2 days on virtually abandoned logging roads like the one shown here. 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.

[image: total recall movie]

I am reminded 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 bother of taking a trip. Think about it. Think of every vacation you’ve ever been on. After a vacation is over, you only have your memories. It’s a really cool solution for people who don’t have the time or the money to take a real trip. And imagine how well that technology would have sold during the pandemic!

In the movie, the sales person has great products. He points out that the memories they sell are of vacations that are absolutely perfect. Their memories are not second-rate, they are better than real life. The sales person put it this way: “Besides, a real holiday is a pain. You get lost luggage, lousy weather, crooked taxi drivers. When you travel with Recall - everything is perfect!” 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 one has to be vulnerable. And open to the possibility of lost luggage, lousy weather, crooked taxi drivers, and finding Skoda parts in 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. When the Devil challenged Jesus to turn stones into bread, I think the real challenge was to Jesus’ identity. Jesus could have become a baker to make food for the many people who are hungry every day.

The temptation to become a baker must have been very seductive. But Jesus is not a baker. Jesus does not see that as his identity. There is nothing wrong with baking bread. There is nothing wrong with feeding the hungry. But Jesus had a different identity.

[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 naturally drifted off into thinking about holiday travels. And you are probably 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. I want to continue the reflection that Terry Dempsey started last Sunday. Because I think Terry was talking about a different sort of journey. And I think it's similar to the journey that Jesus was on in his own trip into the wilderness.

The journey I'm thinking of is made real for us in 2 ways. First of all, we are hopefully, finally, cautiously emerging from the wilderness called "the pandemic". And secondly, our profile committee is working with the whole congregation through a conversation about who we are here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church. I think it's fantastic that these threads are happening at the same time.

As we emerge from the pandemic - or at least start to imagine that - this is a great time to decide who we are and who we want to be. When Jesus wandered in the wilderness he did not wander alone. He wandered with temptations. And as we imagine who we are coming out of the pandemic, we will find temptations too.

One temptation is to imagine that - obviously - we just want to go back to the "good old days". To imagine we just want to run the tapes back about 2 years. To go back to "normal". That is a very natural reaction. But if we follow that temptation we will not engage deeply in working out who we are and who we want to be. Moreover, is it even possible to rewind the tapes 2 years? Are we the same people we were 2 years ago? Is

Brantford the same city it was 2 years ago? I don't know about you, but I have certainly grown and changed in the past 2 years. I know that many of you have grown too. And part of our identity is helping people in Brantford. Are their needs the same as they were 2 years ago? Really? I've been in Brantford 18 months, and I've seen significant changes myself. As one example, homelessness is huge here, even compared with last year.

Another temptation is to talk about "who we wish we were" instead of who we really are. Sometimes we reflect on who we are but we perhaps prefer to see ourselves not quite accurately. Or perhaps even more tempting - to talk about "who we think we ought to tell people we are", instead of simply "who we are". We are good people. We don't need to be afraid of talking about who we really are. There is no doubt that this church has good people who have a variety of useful gifts. There is no doubt that we care about our community, and we care about each other. We should feel free to talk about that.

I'm really excited to hear stories from all of you. Particularly stories of what you want to DO at this church. Hopefully we will be open more in the fall. We have Calder Hall - think of all the things we can do there. We have a great kitchen. We have wonderful resources here. What do you want to DO in this church as we open up?

As the pandemic comes to have less control over our actions, we have to work out - again - how we want to be with each other, and in our community. When our building re-opens again, we will have the use of our different spaces, our kitchen, our stage, our sanctuary. How will we leverage our resources for the good of ourselves and all of Brantford?

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 them, changes both the maker and the destination."

Are we there yet? Of course not! It's not about the destination. It's about the journey. Let's enjoy our continuing journey together.

Amen.