The Happy Wanderer

A sermon by Jackie Clement
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So you assign a title to a sermon, like say "The Happy Wanderer" and then three months later it turns out to be sort of a bad title because as it turns out you probably won't wander much of anywhere on your sabbatical. But we all know there are more kinds of journeys than the physical ones. We've been on a journey of sorts these past four months, an exploration of happiness – what it is, how we can find more of it, what some of the roadblocks are. Did you ever think we would get to the end of that little jaunt?

Well, here we are, done with that particular journey, though I hope you kept a travel journal that you can refer back to now and again. Time to start planning out next trip! Where, oh where shall we go? It's tough to pick just one destination, isn't it? You've probably heard many ideas and plans from me about my sabbatical—trips to the eastern European roots of Unitarianism, trips to my own Puerto Rican roots, trips to Russia and the Loire valley. These were all considered and, in the end, none of them offered what I really wanted out of my sabbatical.

Like Dorothy and her ruby slippers, it turns out that what I want is right at home—my art supplies and the computer on which I will write my book. There will be trips to Boston for a meeting of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee and Philadelphia for the ministers of color gathering and some theater time in New York, but most of my journey will, I hope, be an internal one. That's really what sabbatical is all about anyway.

Sabbatical is an ancient concept. The Torah declares the seventh day to be a day of rest and, as we heard in the first reading, the seventh year to be a Sabbath year of "solemn rest for the land." This made good agrarian sense, not over taxing the land that provided their food. But it also made good religious sense as the community had to be intentional and mindful of their blessings. And after seven cycles of seven year sabbaticals came the jubilee year when all slaves and prisoners were freed, debts forgiven and God's grace was most bountiful. It all sounds most joyous and abundant and restorative, doesn't it? Sabbath, sabbatical, jubilee!

But there is another passage in Torah that I think speaks much more closely to how we think of sabbatical today. It is called *lech l'cha* in Hebrew and is offered in Genesis chapters 12-17. It is the story of Abraham, father of the religions of the book. In the first verse of chapter 12 God commands Abram to go from his father's house to a distant land.

לֶךְ־לְךָ֞ מֵאַרְצְךָ֣ וּמִמּֽוֹלַדְתְּךָ֗ וּמִבֵּ֙ית אָבִ֔יךָ אֶל־הָאָ֖רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֥ר אַרְאֶֽךָּ׃ וַיֹּ֣אמֶר יְהוָ֔ה אֶל־אַבְרָ֖ם The Lord said unto Abram, "Go," and in his 75th year, Abram and his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot journey to Canaan and then to Egypt and back to Canaan to the city of Sodom where the whole unfortunate pillar of salt thing happens. Finally God makes a covenant with Abram and he becomes Abraham ,father of nations, and Sarai becomes Sarah and Isaac is born to them. The whole journey takes at least 23 years and on the way Abram acts in cowardly ways and brave ways, with integrity and with deception. Sarai is generous and jealous

by turns. Abram is filled with doubt and faithless. And in the end becomes Abraham, the model of faithfulness worthy father to great nations. All this begins with the words *lech l'cha*. *Lech* means simply "go" but *l'cha* gives and very interesting twist to the command for it means "to yourself" or "for yourself." So God is telling Abram, "Go to yourself," or "Go for yourself." Either way it presages a journey during which Abram becomes Abraham. Even starting out at the age of 75 Abram undertakes a journey to become his true self.

That's really more how we understand sabbatical today in the religious tradition, as a journey of discovery that brings us closer to wholeness of self. The original concept of rest and renewal is certainly still a part of that, but it is in a larger context of working in new ways and experiencing new things that coupled with the time for deep discernment brings us to new understandings. This is what I'm hoping from my sabbatical—to get some work done on projects that don't fit into the usual workaday schedule, but more to come to new understandings, to discern where it is I am meant to grow and change, to determine what my next spiritual destination is.

So the first thing I want to say is "thank you." Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to engage in ministry differently, to reflect, rejuvenate, to recommit myself to my ministry and to reconnect with you!

The second thing I want to say is that this is your sabbatical, too. I hope that this will be a time for you, as a congregation, to not only reflect on all that you have accomplished in these past few years but to rejoice in it! The windows, doors and insulation project along with the geothermal wells and energy efficient refrigerator made our building not only more comfortable but also drastically reduced out carbon footprint. The narthex expansion gave us new classrooms for the children, new office space for Samantha, and a beautiful, welcoming entryway for everyone who comes through our doors. Although we said goodbye to a few beloved staff members, we got to hire Charlie and Walter. We've lost too many beloved friends, though they will remain with us in memory. And we've also welcomed many new friends. Here in our worship space, we can now seat 40 more people, and if you sit in the back you can actually see what is happening. And may I just say, "Hallelujah for the dishwasher!" These are the changes you can see, but there are so many more that are not observable – all the knowledge gained through the many, many classes taught and taken, all the transformation through your own internal hard work, all the acts of love shared.

You have done a lot! Now it is time to set back and revel in that. Now it is time to enjoy the fruits of your labor, to fully appreciate what you have accomplished and to let that rejuvenate your spirit. As you reflect on all that you have accomplished as a congregation, use that insight to reflect on where you want to go next. Let this sabbatical time be less a time of doing and more a time of deep discernment on what the path looks like from here, where you want to go next. From that understanding will come the recommitment to the journey. When we see a fresh vista that inspires us to move forward, the journey become more than placing one foot in front of the other. The trip becomes a joy.

> In the book *Awakening to the Sacred*, Lama Surya Das writes about the "joy path." Here is a passage from that book:

> *It's important for all of us to find ourselves and follow our "joy path." When we are joyful, when we are happy, we spontaneously share love. So think about what makes your heart sing. What do you do to make yourself happy? What feeds your spirit and vivifies the love in your heart? Remember that the spiritual life is vibrant, not dull; ecstatic, not static.*

I hope these questions can help you, as individuals in your own lives and as a congregation in the church's life, to engage in this time of discernment, not questions of "what should we do next?" or "what is most cost effective?" but "what makes your spirit sing?" and "what quickens the love in your heart?" To find our future, our purpose as a community of faith, requires engaging in questions without yes or no answers. It means engaging in these questions of heart and passion, spirit and soul. What is it that animates us today? What is speaking in your life today?

We stand in a long tradition—as Unitarian Universalists, as members of this church founded more than 150 years ago—but our job is to live Unitarian Universalism *today*, to take all of our history and all of our values and transform them through our unique and particular passions for the world as it exists today. For the world as we wish it to be tomorrow. Just what that will look like is something we get to decide. It's a heavy responsibility, but it shouldn't be a joyless one. It ought to evoke, in these coming months and always, what makes us most excited to get out of bed in the morning, what engages our imaginations and dreamings.

So let this be a period of discernment about how we can, together, carry forward the legacy we have been handed. Let it be time for discerning our purpose. Did you know that this church has a formal written statement of purpose? If you joined recently you do because one of the requirements of membership is to agree to our purpose. It reads:

> *The purpose of this church is to foster liberal religious living through worship, study, service and fellowship. Seeking truth in freedom, we strive to apply it in love for the enrichment of our lives, the furtherance of a helpful fellowship in worship and work, and the establishment of a just social order.*

Those words are part of the church Constitution, which was first adopted in 1903. The Constitution has been revised 6 times since then, but I don't know if the statement of purpose was among any of those revisions. There's nothing in it that I can imagine our 1903 forbearers objecting to, but is it still relevant to us today? Does it miss something of your passion? If you got to change it what would you want it to say that reflects your life today, our shared life today? Do these words reflect well the grandness of our purpose?

In the reading from David Brooks, he characterized what people wrote of as "the small, happy life." The two examples I selected were people who aspired to generosity and kindness, making meaning in each day and tending a garden. I'll concede the "happy" part. These people do sound happy. But I'm not granting him the "small" part. These do not sound like small lives, small purposes or people who fail to distinguish what is truly grand about life. They are, in short, the kind of people who make up the members and friends of this church—some doing the work of the world in a more public way, some doing the work of the world in a quieter way, all doing the

work of the world with purpose. And doing it within the context of this organization, as well as in their—your—own lives.

So is the purpose of the church as written in the constitution coincident with the purpose you understand for this church? Is it coincident with our hopes and vision? I'm hoping the answer is "yes," but this is what sabbatical is really all about—understanding more deeply ourselves and our purpose, taking time to step back from doing to reflect on why we do what we do and making sure that it is, indeed, what we want to be doing, the work of our hearts.

So join me in this time of sabbatical. Make sure this your sabbatical time every bit as much as it is mine. *Lech l'cha*. Let us go to ourselves. Let us head out to reflection, rejuvenation, recommitment. And at the end of our five month journey, let us reconnect. I'll want to hear all about your journeys, singular and collective, so take notes.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.