



At home on the journey

The Bible tells many stories of people on journeys. Some of the most famous Old Testament travelers were Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Ruth, Naomi and Elijah. In the New Testament, Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus made several journeys. The adult Jesus was always on the move and he often told stories about people who traveled, such as the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. There were the disciples on the road to Emmaus - and, of course, Paul, who made one mission trip after another. The Bible is a veritable travelogue.

Arguably, the biblical character best known for traveling was Moses. His first trip was a cruise down the Nile in a wicker basket. The journey from his mother's arms to the pharaoh's palace was not far, yet it placed him in an entirely new world. Years later, after killing an Egyptian in defense of a Hebrew slave, he traveled again to escape arrest. Eventually he settled into a new life in Midian, got married and worked as a shepherd. But, in time, Moses would return to Egypt. No longer a fugitive from justice, he now journeyed as an agent of justice. In response to God's call, Moses returned to free his people from slavery. This trip precipitated the epic journey we call the Exodus - 40 years of wandering the desert, leading his people home to their promised land.

By Mary Vaccaro

The season of Lent

Lent, which means “Spring” signifying new life, is a season of preparation for Easter. The liturgies and devotions of Lent help the faithful — especially those to be initiated into the church at Easter — model their lives after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, which is Feb. 17 this year. Lent ends at sunset on Holy Thursday, April 1.

The Disciplines of Lent

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the three pillars of Lent. The spiritual significance of these practices is vast and deep. For those aware of their sinfulness, these disciplines are acts of penance. Others find prayer, fasting and almsgiving a

way to express solidarity with the poor and utter dependence on God. Ultimately, these disciplines help us lift our hearts in praise and thanksgiving to God.

Ash Wednesday and Lent

In the Old Testament, people covered themselves with ashes to express mourning or contrition. In the early church, those who had committed serious public sin were excluded from the Eucharist, marked with ashes by the bishop and then welcomed back into the fold on Holy Thursday. Today, ashes represent sorrow for sins and a desire to repent. Ashes are imposed on people’s foreheads at Mass or during Liturgy of the Word with Distribution of Ashes. Ashes are smudged on the forehead in the shape of the cross with the words:

“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel,” or “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

A reminder about church teaching on fasting and abstinence

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are obligatory days of universal fast and abstinence. Fasting is expected for all who have completed their 18th year and have not yet reached their 60th year. Fasting allows a person to eat one full meal. Two smaller meals may be taken, not to equal one full meal. Fridays in Lent are obligatory days of complete abstinence (from meat) for all who have completed their 14th year.

Courtesy of USCCB and Father Chris Rouech, interim director, Office for Worship for Diocese of Grand Rapids.

I doubt Moses enjoyed all these travels. As the baby in a basket, he cried for his mother. While fleeing to Midian, he probably wished himself back in the comfort of pharaoh’s palace. When God appeared in the burning bush, calling him to go back and free his people, he tried every way possible to talk his way out of the job. During 40 arduous years of wandering in the desert, as he endured all the gripes from his stubborn flock, he must have pined for the simple, peaceful life with his family and the uncomplaining sheep back in Midian. Worse yet, Moses did not live to set foot in the Promised Land! After all that traveling, he never reached his final destination.

All told, Moses had a pretty difficult life — he never had a place he could truly call home. As a baby, his only hope for survival was to be sent away from his parents’ home. He lived for a time in the luxury of a palace, yet he must have known that he did not truly belong as an Egyptian royal. Why else would he have recognized the suffering of his people, and acted to defend a slave? Perhaps he thought, for a time, that he had found a permanent home in Midian. It must have been so hard for him to leave it. Did he ever feel at home as the leader of his people on the Exodus journey? They were so faithless and fickle, constantly complaining and rarely remembering to be grateful for all that Moses had done for them. At the end of his life, how did Moses feel about never reaching the Promised Land? Did he feel duped by God, unappreciated and unrewarded?

I don’t think so — and here is why: The Bible tells us that Moses and God knew each other “face to face” (Dt 34:10). Somehow, despite, or more likely because, of all his sufferings, Moses loved and trusted in God. He also knew that God loved and trusted in him, relying on him to obey his calling to work for justice.

But how did Moses learn to develop this prayerful closeness with God? Perhaps from the people who served as models of faith and love in his life. Moses had the model of a mother who loved him and trusted God enough to give him up. She knew that, above all, her son was in God’s hands, and that God would find a way to keep him safe from harm. God found

that way in the compassionate heart of pharaoh’s daughter, a woman who must also have served as a model for Moses. Perhaps her example of rescuing him from the river and taking him in taught Moses the value of protecting and advocating for the vulnerable. Maybe this was the spark that eventually inspired him to defend the slave who was being beaten. Moses found yet another model and mentor in his father-in-law. This man welcomed the destitute, fugitive Moses into his home and family. Perhaps his act of hospitality helped Moses to recognize God’s generous and provident hand. Moses did have a difficult life, but for every challenge he faced, God provided wonderful people to support and help him along his way. No wonder he grew to love and trust God, no matter what trials he faced.

Moses had a life of continuous pilgrimage. He was blessed with some wonderful places of respite and several kind people who loved and cared for him. Yet every time it seemed he might settle in somewhere, he was suddenly uprooted and forced to leave. Even as he neared the Promised Land, when it was literally within his sight, he died before ever setting foot there. Perhaps, ironically, this life of continual homelessness is what inspired Moses to make his home in God. He didn’t need to enter the Promised Land, because he had spent a lifetime living there already. Moses lived every day of his life, face to face, at home with God.

Every year, during the season of Lent, we are invited to make a pilgrimage of our own. We are asked to fast, to give up the things we think of as “home” but are really only temporary dwellings. We are asked to give alms, to reach out and help others in the same way that people helped Moses, serving as models of faith, hospitality and love. And we are asked to pray, to spend time “face to face” with God, living more and more into a relationship of trust, love and obedience to our life’s calling. This relationship of love, trust and obedience is what enabled Moses to keep true to his course — it is what enabled Jesus to stretch out his arms on the cross. And, of course, this relationship of love, trust and obedience will enable us to find our own promised land, at home forever with our God.