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A Holy Ride

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, Exodus 12:1-14

September 10, 2023

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

With apologies to Johnny Cash, 'Hello, I'm Paul McLain.' It's good to be back from a three-month sabbatical. I am grateful to Scott and Katherine for taking on an additional load this summer and to all of you for the gift of a summer of unscheduled time.

In planning the sabbatical, my thoughts went to those items I wished to cross off my and Ruthie's bucket list, including retreat time on the Isle of Iona in Scotland. It was powerful to attend an international worship service at the Iona Abbey one Sunday, and then spend some time in reflection at MacLean's Cross, placed there by my ancestors over 500 years ago.

I found a bench that became my retreat spot that week. It was near the ruins of an ancient nunnery, where I felt the gentle breeze from the sea. The words that called to me from the Holy Spirit were, 'Receive the day with gratitude.' The image that kept coming back to me for God was that of 'The Great Appreciator.' My bench was a place for remembering and giving thanks to the Holy Trinity for all who had gone before on that mystical island, in my family over the centuries, and all along my spiritual journey.

I celebrated the end of a very long day by taking off my boots and leaving them in the middle of our room. Unfortunately, Ruthie tripped over them and injured her knee. The next day, when we needed to get to a nearby village with the only doctor in the area, we learned that there were no taxis and that public transportation was very limited.

Our innkeeper put us in touch with Hadrian, a volunteer who gives rides to people who need them through a community services agency. Hadrian is a tall, gregarious guy from Oxfordshire in south England. The community services van he normally used had been vandalized over the weekend. So, he used his personal car to give rides that day. Hadrian told us he has five kids, and had just helped his daughter with a move and replaced her broken cell phone to the tune of 500 quid. He said his teenage children call him 'The Bank.'

During our ride, Hadrian kept an eye out for a woman named Cloudy. Cloudy had experienced lots of hard knocks in her life. But Hadrian told us, ‘She’s always filled with optimism.’ You could tell that Hadrian knows Cloudy’s daily pattern. He spotted her in a shop and invited her to join us for the ride. Cloudy said hello to us and flashed her beautiful smile. Hadrian asked about her afternoon plans. She said she planned to paint that day – she had some things she wanted to work out through her art.

When we arrived at the next village, Hadrian tenderly helped me get Ruthie into the doctor’s office and later gave Ruthie a big, comforting hug. He got us all to where we needed to be. and then got us all safely back.

There was something holy about the relationship between Hadrian and Cloudy. I felt I had been in the presence of two members of the Holy Trinity that day. I saw Jesus in the self-giving love of Hadrian. I saw the Holy Spirit in the radiant hope of Cloudy. Hadrian looked out for Cloudy. And Cloudy animated Hadrian’s life. The thin places between the Holy Trinity and all humanity, and the lines that separate past, present, and future that I felt and wrestled with during prayer time on my bench suddenly all became a porous place with no boundaries in what came to be for me - a holy ride.

Our Old Testament lesson from Exodus is all about crossing those thin places and lines. At first glance, it reads like a faded yellow recipe card that you might find tucked away in your grandmother’s kitchen. It is the detailed instructions about how to prepare and cook the lamb for Passover. This meal is not a one-time event though. It is to be celebrated as a yearly festival and observed as a perpetual ordinance. Even the instructions themselves celebrate circular time. The lamb is to be prepared the first month of the year, marking a new beginning and fresh start each meal. In the original recipe, it is to be eaten on the run, hurriedly, ready to depart. The language conveys the urgency, fear, and hope of the first Passover, the first exodus from slavery. But it also conveys a meal in motion. It reminds us that in ritual, God invites us to remember the past in a way that propels us into the new life of the present and future.

We understand this as anamnesis. It’s a Greek word that means ‘remember,’ but to remember in such a way that a past event becomes a present reality as well as a future hope. Anamnesis is at the very heart of the Eucharist, the communion, we will celebrate in a few moments. In (one of) our Eucharistic prayer(s), we lift up these words toward Jesus, ‘We remember his death. We proclaim his resurrection. We await his coming in glory.’

As we offer these words in prayer, past, present, and future converge into one. Remembrance has its deepest meaning when it informs how we see God at work in the here and now, and how we join God in ultimately bringing heaven to earth.

During the second phase of the sabbatical in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I checked off another bucket list item by having coffee with Phil LeCuyer. Phil is a tutor, which is what we call a professor, at Saint John's College, home of the Great Books program. He is an interesting person. Years ago, he began a journey toward the Episcopal priesthood, and instead, the path led him to become a devout Jew. Phil wears a yarmulke everywhere he goes. He was one of the most influential teachers and mentors in my life.

My bucket list item was to thank him in person for what he did for me twenty years ago. Phil accepted my thanks graciously and we reminisced a little about old times. Then, he steered the conversation toward what we are both thinking and doing, and most importantly, being today. Phil, now age 79, just co-founded a publishing company. The week after we met, he was to co-lead a seminar on the latest developments in genetics. He shared with me links to you-tube videos he had recently done or found interesting. Phil opened up about his daughter's recent death and we reflected on our shared grief over the loss of family members. We arranged to meet again when he's in Memphis for a conference this coming April. I'll need some recommendations from you on where I can treat him to some kosher barbeque.

I went to that coffee with Phil seeing it as a one-time event with an agenda – to cross off a bucket list item by saying thank you to a mentor. Instead, Phil presented me with a far more lavish gift – that of renewing and re-entering a living, breathing, forward-looking relationship of mutual learning and loving. He let me know that we're not through with each other yet, far from it. As I reflected on my coffee with Phil, I felt I had encountered the other member of the Trinity – Phil reminded me of God the Father with his persistent longing, his creative and life-giving wisdom.

The first Passover described in our Exodus reading is seen as the defining *event* of salvation for the Hebrew people. Yet, this passage also invites us to see salvation as a living, breathing, forward-looking *process* that continues year after year.

One of the questions that kept coming to me during the sabbatical was: 'Saved for what?' That's still an open question for me and perhaps it is for all of us. But that ride with Cloudy and Hadrian and my coffee with Phil propelled me closer to an answer, or at least, gave me a new beginning toward slowing down and taking the time just to live that question.

Later in the week, we met Hadrian again. He had repaired the van that was vandalized and was out making his rounds. He checked in on how Ruthie was doing, joked with us, and graciously let us take his photo.

We also ran into Cloudy later that week. She flashed us her beautiful smile, told me that she too was at Sunday worship in the Abbey, and was on her way that afternoon to be part of a prayer circle. Cloudy's eyes lit up as she flashed her smile again, and said, 'I am so looking forward to it.' I imagine Hadrian helped her get there.

The Holy Ride continues. *Amen.*