

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

6.7.26 - Pentecost 2 & Annual Meeting

During my first weeks and months as your rector, I was asked several times, What is your vision for St Martin's? What are your plans and goals for us?

These questions are very natural. We want to know that someone is in charge, someone is providing leadership, someone knows the way.

And to be sure, although the conventional wisdom for a new rector is to not change anything for at least the first year, of course, my style, my way of being present has meant that things have felt new. There has been a feeling of change in the air, and it's natural to wonder what the plans are, what is the roadmap, where are the bullet-pointed goals and strategies for us as a church?

Maybe Abram would have liked such a roadmap from God. God says to Abram, Go. Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house. Go. Go where, God? God is a bit vague on that part. God promises big blessings for Abram's family and his people if he listens to God and goes.

So Abram listens to God, and sets out, not totally sure where he will end up. He takes some support people with him, his nephew Lot, his wife Sarah, and the people they had acquired -- hmm, very problematic, Abram. Abram is 75 when he starts this trip, not exactly the ideal age to be moving everything and trying to start a new family.

Abraham comes to Canaan, and God says, I'm giving this land to your offspring, eventually, but you're not staying here now, and so Abram keeps going. And at the end of this passage it says that Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Abram journeyed on by stages. This phrase is almost an afterthought, it could go unnoticed, but it is so important. Because Abram didn't just immediately become the great patriarch Abraham when God blessed him. He didn't find his home and make his family right away. His journey happened in stages. Maybe we can relate. Maybe we had certain goals and milestones in our head as a young person, about school and a career and raising a family. And maybe there were some surprises. Things unfolded in a different way than we had thought. Luck and circumstances and the Holy Spirit led us on a more winding path. We experienced our journey in stages.

This is especially relevant as we begin LGBTQ Pride month. We often think a person's coming out story is supposed to look like that Keith Haring figure bursting through an open closet door, in one big public and once-and-for-all action. But coming out is often about little choices and actions, like listing our partner's name on a form, or correcting someone on our pronouns. For those of us who are gay and trans, the internal process of knowing and loving ourselves, and telling others, often unfolds over time, with reflection and different degrees of struggle.

The Spirit works on us collectively too. Over time we come to know as a church, as a country, as a world, that we need to include groups of people we had thought of as outside, that we need to open our embrace wider to care for all of God's children, and our planet. Over time we come to recognize the problematic and terrible things we have done. We learn and we grow, we get better and we also make the same mistakes again.

Our individual journeys and our collective journey happens in stages. It is not a linear journey. It doesn't always proceed in the way of progress but includes setbacks, rethinks, doubling back. It includes, oh, we forgot this group and we gotta go pick them up, it includes, Why do we have to keep fighting this same fight. It includes, I didn't think I would ever see this day, Hallelujah. It is God's journey.

It is God's journey.

It is true for our spiritual journey as well. The spiritual journey for each of us is the process of becoming more and more deeply who we are, stripping off the who-I-think-I-should-be's and the pretending to be something to be successful or just survive, in order to get down to that beloved person that God made us to be. That person that doesn't just pretend or survive but actually can thrive without the weight of all the shoulds.

Our spiritual journey is often uncomfortable. It does not follow our plan. When we go deeper into our relationship with God, deeper into our own truth, we have to leave behind the familiar, our home and our family. We have to face uncertainty, we have to let go of things, of ideas, of parts of ourselves that are weighing us down, parts we find are problematic.

And so it is for this St Martin's community. Over 135 years we have faced many joys and challenges, new generations and energy, changes in our liturgy, and also losses, wars, pandemics. We have gotten better at welcoming others, and we have felt the challenge of being together when we are not all alike.

We have had times of wandering, of feeling stuck and in-between, and times of great hope and excitement and energy.

This is God's journey for us, St Martin's. To grow more and more into a community of love and mutual care and working it all out together. To listen deeply to where God is calling us. To leave our fears and Go, as Abram did.

To be sure, there are some plans, there are some goals, there is even a big capital campaign waiting to be launched, and you will hear about all of that from our ministry leaders after the service. You will hear about all the rich offerings and activities that have happened in this past year. We will all rejoice together at the good place we are in right now, and we will offer our hopes for the next year.

And we know that there will be times ahead that will not be easy or comfortable. We may have doubts -- we are too old to take this step, the economy is too bad, there are not enough people, this issue is too big. When we feel that way, we can remind ourselves that God's journey is like this, and that's why we have community. We can remind ourselves that God is right here traveling with us.

This is God's journey for us, St Martin's. We journey separately and together, in stages. We find blessings along the way. We make altars to remember and celebrate. We are here for each other. St Martin's, in this first full year of our journey together with me as your rector, I celebrate and bless what we are becoming. St Martin's, let us continue on God's journey, together. Amen.