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Plymouth UCC

On the Journey: Confirmation & Affirmation Sunday  
Psalm 23

Journey as a metaphor for the spiritual life may seem old and tired for some of you.

In fact, it is old:

as old as Abraham packing up his camels and leaving Haran for an unknown land;  
as old as Moses and the Israelites crossing out of  
Egypt's oppression into wilderness wandering;  
as old as Mary seeking out her cousin Elizabeth  
to share the fears and wonders of pregnancy and the coming Messiah.

The journey image gives our faith a path – so to speak –  
to help us understand that our faith can and must change,  
*grow* with our continual knowledge and experiences of God.

Our faith will be different at each turning of the path,  
and hopefully what we have learned earlier on the journey  
will help us through each new passage.

It also reminds us that *faith is not a sitting still endeavor*.  
We must step out. We must move and learn.

This year my co-teacher Naomi Hoyer and I insisted the Confirmation Class *move* a bit.

We talked with them about  
what they've believed in the past,  
what they believe now,  
and how all of that may change  
as they continue to grow in the body of Christ.  
And even how their faith has changed over the past year.

Consider that, if you will. What did your faith look like when you were young? Do you remember your confirmation classes? Has your faith remained the same? Do you expect it to do so even now – not change?

The practice we used in class to illustrate *where we stood* on our faith journeys was to enter the sanctuary when no one else was around and use it as our own symbol for a journey.

There are pews and pulpit, doors and windows –  
what can they all mean if we think about them in this way?

We asked each person to wander in the space a bit,  
then decide where they might currently stand on their faith journey as a part of this community.

Do you stand halfway out the door,  
ready to let go the Church entirely?  
Or are you out the door  
ready to act out your faith in the world?

Three times we did this:

our first class last October; then in January with their mentors;  
and now a final time as they make their covenants of Confirmation and Affirmation.

*I'd like to share with you briefly where each of them states they stand on their journeys.*

... ..  
 One sits in the choir loft and says:

*I began my faith journey at the pews because I didn't know a lot about my faith. From the pews, I moved to the middle of the aisle because I was and still am on a faith journey. From the middle aisle, I moved toward the front because I knew more about my faith and beliefs. I also moved to the choir because I experience my faith through music.*

Another sits about halfway back along the window side, stating:

*I began my faith journey this year very sure of both my beliefs and myself. If you had asked me where I stood symbolically as to where my faith was, I would have sat in the front row. But now, after all these days spent questioning and discussing our faith, and after a very hard year, I am not so sure. I would now put myself in the middle pew—in between beliefs. However, I will continue my journey and hopefully find myself back at the front some day.*

One youth strides to the lectern and proclaims:

*At this point in my life, I feel like I'd be standing here at the lectern because I'm willing to talk to people about spirituality, but I also like to listen. I feel that I still have a lot to learn, but I know most of how I feel. I think that talking and listening are some of the best ways to go about spirituality, whether you're teaching or learning.*

Two others end up in the center aisle, the first one saying:

*I feel like I stand in the aisle closer to the front than the back. This is because I have learned so much this year about who I am and what I believe, but I still have more to learn. Someday I hope to be standing in the front where the choir is singing loudly for all to hear about my concrete beliefs. Someday, but not yet.*

And the second, a little farther back in the aisle:

*At the beginning of our classes, when asked where I was on my faith journey, I put myself right in this aisle, showing that I was still walking down the path of my journey. Today, I still stand on that same path, but over the course of the year, I have taken several steps toward understanding what I believe.*

Another youth feels called to the piano as he shares:

*My journey began as being taught that God is here with us at all times and that God decides what happens. As I grew older I began to realize that if this was so, God had a weird sense of humor. Now I believe that everyone makes their own choices and that nothing is predestined. I also now feel that the bible is to be taken not literally but metaphorically as something that says how to treat others. For these reasons I feel that I am near the piano because I enjoy the community of the church and the environment but I still am not sure I want to be at the pulpit sharing my beliefs for all to hear before I even have told them to myself.*

And finally, one stands directly below the cross and says:

*When I started out on this journey, I was very questionable of religion. But as I went through my journey and experienced harder times, I found out that I needed someone to help me. So, I ask God for help. Now, I notice that I don't have to question every little nook and cranny in the Bible and search for who God really is. I can simply look upon God as a great being who helps me through tuff times. I'm next to the cross because I feel very close to God right now. It's as simple as that.*

... ..  
 It takes a lot of courage to stand before your faith community – especially as high school freshman! – and share the hopes and challenges of where you currently stand.

Could you name where you stand?

Could you share it with your chosen church  
 whether you were proudly proclaiming Christ  
 or struggling with what it all means?  
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You've heard some of those who are currently wrestling with God  
 and some of those seemingly at rest with the Divine.

Working together, the Confirmation Class talked about what scripture might capture all of that  
 to help focus our worship today. They chose Psalm 23,  
 which emphasizes these very different aspects of our journeys with God.

Laying down in green pastures, walking beside still waters – is this where your faith stands right now?  
 Would you be lounging in the chancel, or on a couch in the Senior High room?

Restoring my soul, on right paths simply for the sake of God's love – is this what you experience in  
 moments of prayerful meditation, or during the special music, or walking in the Rocky Mountains?  
 – it's renewal!

Perhaps you are in one of those dark valleys right now – wondering when the light may  
 shine again; hiding with the shy kids under the Communion Table, or sitting in the back  
 pew for a quick escape.

Or maybe you're being forced to confront your fears, set at a table amidst your  
 enemies. These are not the joyful moments in our journeys of faith, but they are a  
 part of it.

The healing oil anointing your head – is that what you need right now?  
 Still your cup overflows.

Wherever we are on this journey, the Shepherd walks with us,  
 even if we can't see her, can't feel her presence....

surely goodness and mercy follow us wherever we wander.

And the final prayer of the Psalm is: even in all our wanderings, may we still dwell with God,  
 wherever we are, our whole lives long.

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This is what our young people go through as they walk the path toward Confirmation and Affirmation:  
 fear, confusion and frustration *and* joy and renewal and hope and awe – *just as we all do.*

But again, if this is a journey –  
 if our faith is to grow in knowledge and love of God,  
 it cannot end at Confirmation!

You and I, having possibly “been there, done that,” cannot simply sit in our pews on Sunday and  
 celebrate what the next generations are learning.

We also hear and read and sing the stories of our faith.

We ponder and question and talk with others about what it all means.

Sometimes we argue and hurt and forgive

and in this way learn even more about God's own love for us.

And all of these things we model to our children.

Not just to those of our given families,

but to each child in the pews around us,  
 each one flying through the fellowship hall or  
 learning in our Sunday School classrooms.

We model the joys and costs of discipleship to each and every one of them,  
 even as we trod our own hills and valleys on this path.

*Did you know your journey was that significant to those around you?*

~ ~ ~  
Where would you place yourself today?  
~ ~ ~

Today you step out  
like Abraham:  
old and clueless as to  
where  
this newly-speaking, nameless  
God  
wills you to go.  
Yet you pack your bags  
and set out on the road.

Today you break free  
like Israelite slaves:  
kicking and splashing through freedom's  
shallows  
only to be smacked  
down  
by desert heat and empty wilderness.  
And here you wander  
wondering why you've run.

Today you travel on trembling toes  
like Mary:  
blossoming yet  
unsure  
seeking wise companionship and  
assurance  
that *Emmanuel* is truly with you.  
Still the journey will be hard  
as labor births new hope.

Today you name yourself  
a journeyer:  
a pilgrim on the path to the  
Holy One.  
You do not know the still  
waters  
nor the valleys of  
shadow  
yet you set your feet on the Christian road  
trodden by so many before you,  
behind you,  
beside you.  
You do not know where it will lead you  
yet  
we pray together  
that it leads you  
home.