

## *A Joyful Journey*

Psalm 133

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September 8, 2019 Rally Day

Road trip! That is our theme for today. Today is Rally Day. We are at the beginning of a road trip. It is a new year of ministries at Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian, and in recognition of that we have a psalm before us that made the play list when Israel would take their road trips, way back in the day. Three times a year Israel would load up the wagons and the donkeys and the camels and they would all set their GPS for Jerusalem, the city set on a hill. Young and old, weak and strong, boys and girls, full grown adults and wise elders would all take a road trip to Jerusalem. As they traveled, they sang their top 15 songs. Those top fifteen begin with Psalm 120 and end with Psalm 134. We know they are songs of the road trip because each of those psalms bears the inscription, "A song of ascents". They would ascend to Jerusalem and they would sing as they rolled along on their merry way. Just so we know these road trips were good for the people, that the road trips were a treasured part of their existence, that the road trips were a highlight of the year, these happy travelers would sing, "Behold how pleasant and how good it is when the people of God live together in unity."

Before I travel too far down the road with this image of road trip, I want to circle back and make sure we are all on the same page. In Texas, where we had to drive 750 to the west to get to the next state, well, in Texas people know what a road trip. Or in central California where I grew up, it was not unusual to drive 250 miles south to Los Angeles or 200 miles North to San Francisco. In California people understand what you mean when you use the phrase "Road Trip". In fact, I thought everyone everywhere was clear on what was meant when they heard "Road Trip."

And then we came to Rhode Island. Friends, there is a whole world out there you might not have experienced. There are people who drive further than Ashaway. As shocking as it sounds folks have been known to cross the bounds of the Pawcatuck River and make their way to distant towns like Mystic and New London. Rumor has it a few brave souls have even ventured beyond Charlestown...I know, some of you are struggling to grasp such endeavors, but it is true. There is such a thing as a road trip.

Many of you have tried to help us understand that when you travel to Providence you pack a lunch, if not an overnight bag. When the scattered people of Israel made their way three times a year to Jerusalem, the distance might not seem that great, maybe 70 miles for some. While it was only 70 miles, remember, they were on foot. It took a good long while when they made their road trip. But it was a wonderful part of their annual routine. Smiling at one another, greeting old friends, traveling side by side with loved ones, the unity and the warmth and camaraderie, well, it was like the Walton's met Little House on the Prairie and believing with all their hearts their Father Knows Best the children of God would sing a song about how happy they all were to be together. "Behold how pleasant and how good it is when the people of God live together in unity." It is a joyful experience to travel together when you are all one big happy family.

I love the image of being one big happy family as we travel the joyful journey God has in store for us. I am excited about taking a road trip with you all this year. And yet at the same time, if you have ever taken a road trip, you understand what I mean when I say Rocky Road is not just an ice cream flavor. When you take a road trip it is not unusual to have detours and delays and difficulties and discussions that might get a little heated.

My parents took us on a road trip from the Golden State of California to go back to see their roots and their families in Ohio and Pennsylvania. This was sometime around the summer of 1965. I was maybe four years old. As every family in America seemed to have at that stage of life, my parents had a station wagon. And since we were traveling in the summer, I am glad to say that station wagon had air conditioning...sort of, as much air conditioning as could be generated when all the windows were down and my dad was blasting down the road at 75 miles per hour. As I said, I was around four years old, which is important only in that my little sister was about to be born, or she was already born, which means either six or seven of us were traveling happily down the highway as the wheels on the wagon went round and round. Since we were all happily confined to that car, in God's providence he saw fit to allow us the great privilege of having chicken pox...all as one big happy family. When one of us would finally get through scratching and moaning and wailing, that dreaded disease would hop to another, and I don't think it matters a whole lot

whether my sister was born yet or not...four kids or five, that was quite literally a pox upon the Eberly house, or more specifically, a pox on our old Ford Fairlane 500.

I teased you all a bit earlier about not knowing what a road trip is, but my guess is you do know what a road trip is. And even as much as I love the church, and you love the church, you know that we're not always one big happy family. We get flat tires. We run out of gas. We get stuck in a hot back seat and we might even get in a spat with our brother or sister sitting next to us. And even though we sort of know the journey ahead of us, it always changes. Detours come. Roads are closed. Sometimes there are painful accidents. We might not plan on it, but we been known to make a quick trip to the hospital along the way. Our journey might take us through the deep waters of life, or fiery trials, or raging storms. I wish it wasn't true, but every year our journey takes us to various cemeteries where we dig some dirt and bury loved ones. When you get back on the road after a loss, those times of sadness can fill the miles of the road trip with silence.

If as a church we have times when we are not one big happy family, it is only because Israel was not always one big happy family.

- Adam and Eve still had the Garden of Eden in their rearview mirror when they pulled up to a rest stop and as they let the boys out said, "Cain, keep an eye on your little brother Abel." Oh! Turns out Cain was not very good at being his brother's keeper.
- Abraham heard God call him to leave his country and go to a new land and a new home. Abraham and Sarah had been traveling as a pair for quite a while, him being almost 75 years old by that time. God said go, and then looked at that little Smart Car Abraham was driving, perfect for just the two of them, and he said, "You're gonna have to get something just a little bit bigger...your descendants will be so many it will be like the stars in the sky." Abraham obediently bought a minivan, and then he and Sarah waited expectantly for God to add to their family. Unfortunately, Sarah got impatient with waiting for a baby and invited her maid Hagar to help out in the process and Hagar had a son and then maybe looked crosswise at

Sarah and...that old minivan got downright sweltering with all the heat coming from the jabbering and the jealousy.

- By the time we get to Jacob the family of Israel couldn't fit in a minivan. Not only did Jacob have twelve sons he had two wives, and each wife brought along their maidservant, so we have twelve kids from four different mothers and if that wasn't enough of a recipe for traveling nightmare Jacob played favorites. Jacob let Joseph have the front seat and when they stopped to spend the night on their journey the other brothers schemed to get rid of Joseph, throwing him in a hole and selling him off to some folks who carried him down to Egypt.
- And don't even get started on the forty years when they wandered in the wilderness...they grumbled, they complained, they bickered, they fought, they rebelled, they made golden calves, and their behavior was so bad God nearly gave up on them.

Are we are really supposed to believe that as the people of God traveled on their road trip that they would all get together at night around the campfire and overcome with this great sense of peace and harmony and mutual affection they would sing their own version of Kum Ba Yah...behold how pleasant and how good it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.

I am absolutely convinced that the people of Israel knew how preposterous it was to sing about unity, in light of their family history. And yet because God was with them every step of that long journey, their constant companion on their epic road trip, it wasn't the separations and squabbles that stood out. For every sibling rivalry that boiled over and caused estrangement between brothers like Jacob and Esau there was a coming together that was sweet and poignant. For all the bitter tears that flowed from Joseph as his brothers sold him into the slavery of Egypt there were healing tears of joy when they were finally reunited in one of the most beautiful stories of reconciliation we can imagine. Yes there was grumbling and complaining those forty years in the wilderness, but then came the day when God spoke above the rabble and said I myself will go before you and will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Even be the crushing defeat of the exile, that terrible experience of being uprooted from your home and all that is dear to your heart, led to

something joyful. God brought the people home, and they experienced the wonderful blessing of knowing that though they once sowed in tears, they had returned with songs of joy, bringing in the sheaves. Even though life can be difficult and there will undoubtedly be conflicts and more than a little chaos on our journey, because the God we worship is one, and there is no other, our God blesses us along the way with the gift of unity. The Lord our God is one, and God will not give up on us until the children of God are one.

It is because I am firmly convinced that God will not give up on us until we reach that place where all God's children dwell together in unity that I am inviting you to join with the rest of the folks at Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian as we begin yet another year of ministry, yet another road trip. It might be asking too much to expect that we would always be a big happy family. But it is not asking too much to believe God will make our journey one that is filled with joy. What we are embarking on is a journey of faith. We are on a journey of discipleship. On this journey we will be blessed as we stop at all the old familiar places. We will make our way through the Season of Advent, anticipating the coming of our blessed Lord. With candles lit on Christmas Eve we will sing about that Silent Night that was such a Holy Night. On that night we will rejoice in the heavenly peace that comes from knowing our God has come to us as the baby Jesus. We will wave at Wise Men who journey to find the king. We will meet a baptizing prophet, an eccentric wild man who enjoyed his sweet and savory meal of locusts and wild honey. The Baptist will take a step back because someone comes on the scene and John says, "I am not worthy to untie the sandals of his feet." At that moment we will listen in holy wonder as God, speaking from heaven, says those beautiful words to Jesus at his baptism, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." We will celebrate the ministry of Jesus who healed and brought wholeness, of Jesus who brought love and forgiveness, of Jesus who brought mercy and grace, and of Jesus who brought the promise of new life.

That Jesus, the one we call Lord and Savior, he took a road trip of his own. As disciples, we will follow him on his road trip. We will follow him when he sets his face toward Jerusalem, the city that he wept over, the city where he would suffer and die. We will follow Jesus as he enters

Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna. We will follow Jesus as he prays a mournful prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. We will follow Jesus as he is betrayed, rejected, arrested, tried, condemned, and sentenced to die. We will follow Jesus as he carries that old rugged cross up the hill called Calvary. Oh, when we sing about the unity that God gives, we realize it is a costly and precious gift that is ours only because Jesus gave his life for us. But we do sing with great joy, because on the third day Jesus rose from the dead, and he reigns forever with God the Father in Heaven. Because of that we will get loud and we will get proud on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes and fills us up to overflowing. Because of who God is and because of what God does in the lives of his children, we will be one big happy family. We are one big happy family. We are one big happy family because Jesus Christ has loved us with an everlasting love and because of that love we belong to him and we belong to each other. We are the Body of Christ, and we are united through his eternal love.

Road trip! There is a journey before us. It is a joyful journey. I hope you will join us on this joyful journey. I love Rally Day and the beginning of our annual road trip as a church. Believe it or not my love of road trips began with that fateful trip from California to Ohio when all the Eberly kids passed around that dreaded chicken pox disease. Although it seems hard to imagine, five, maybe four kids passing around chicken pox was not even the biggest news of that epic road trip.

You see, something occurred on that cross-country road trip that ended up supplying our family with one of the best travel stories ever. The story is directly related with the fact that to avoid the heat of the day...remember we had no air conditioning, my dad would drive all night while we slept, and then in the day mom would take us to a park while dad caught up on his sleep. It all worked perfectly well until on the way back to California, after a wonderful time with relatives in Pennsylvania and Ohio, my dad stopped for gas about 3 am in the middle of Nebraska. Everyone was asleep, so he quietly filled up the tank, and then went to use the restroom. He got back in the car and the family was on the way again. Seamless.

About an hour later, my dad noticed lights in his rearview mirror. He pulled over to let the state trooper pass, but instead the trooper pulled up behind him and walked up to his window. At this point my dad got suspicious, and protective. He wasn't sure what was going on, so he cracked his window just a bit. The trooper said, "Good evening sir. Do you have all your passengers with you?" My dad looked at him and said, "Of course I have all my passengers with me." The trooper began to explain that a woman had been left at a gas station about 60 miles back up the highway, when just at that moment my big brother Danny whispered, "Dad, where's mom?"

It turned out when my dad went to use the restroom, my mom woke up, had to use the restroom herself, and slipped into the women's restroom. Dad didn't notice and pulled away. My mom came out, saw the car gone, and figured my dad would realize his mistake in a moment and return. She waited behind a bush in her baby doll pajamas, until it became clear my dad was not coming back. As my dad tells the story, when he realized his mistake, he didn't know whether to head back immediately or to just keep on going. He knew my mom would be mad. To her credit, he says all she did was sit quietly, very quietly, for a long time. For a very long time. She sat quietly, and I can guarantee you at that moment she was not singing, "Behold how good and pleasant it is...when we all dwell in unity."

My dad loved to tell that story. There was never any doubt that he would turn back and drive the sixty miles to pick up my mom. And there was never any doubt that she would climb back into the car...perhaps with an icy glare...but that would soon melt. And the Eberly family would travel on...together. Oh, we went to Ohio and Pennsylvania and San Francisco and Los Angeles and the Pacific Ocean and the mountains of Yosemite. And every Sunday morning we would take a road trip, one of just a few miles. We would take a road trip to our little Presbyterian church. I didn't fully appreciate it as a child, but my parents were teaching me that the most important road trip in life, the most beautiful road trip in life, the road trip that will capture your imagination and spark the deepest passions and the most profound hope, is a road trip that takes you on the journey of faith.

I am so glad my parents took us on the road trip of faith. Who knows what was running through my dad's mind when he drove that long and lonely 60 miles to pick up my mother, who he had left behind in her baby doll pajamas? I do know one thing for sure. All the Eberly kids are thankful he went back that night and picked up my mom. In 1998 my dad was diagnosed with a progressive disease that slowly robbed him of all his abilities. But he was not alone. My mom was there. That portion of the journey of faith was not easy. But they kept their eyes on Jesus. And they kept meeting together with their brothers and sisters in faith.

When it was all said and done and my dad had died peacefully at home, we gathered for his memorial service, at that little Presbyterian church in our little hometown. When we gathered that day the most wonderful feeling swelled up within me. Looking at my mom, and the men and women and boys and girls who had been a family of faith to our family, and the Deacons who had visited my dad faithfully during his illness, and the folks who had taught my brothers and sisters and me in the Sunday school classes so many years before, and the choir members who filled the sanctuary with songs of praise...well, looking at all these people gathered in the name of Jesus...the most wonderful feeling swelled up within me. My dad had finished his road trip. And looking at all these dear, wonderful, beautiful, special people who had shared the journey, I said to myself, "Behold how pleasant and how good it is when the people of God live together in unity."

Road trip! It is Rally Day and we are embarking yet again on a road trip. I am so glad you are here today. I am so glad we are here today, together. The journey of faith stretches out before us. Let's travel together, as brothers and sisters in faith. The journey is before us, and because Jesus is with us, it is a joyful journey. Joining with the people of God who throughout the ages have made this journey of faith, this joyful journey of faith, let us lift our hearts as we say, "Behold how pleasant and how good it is when the people of God live together in unity."