

I

If you really want to get to know somebody, I mean, really come to know who they are and what they're really all about, go on a road trip together.

I met my wife Amy 26 years ago, and some of the most meaningful and memorable conversations I've ever had with her have happened while we were traveling somewhere together. Many years ago, on the spur of the moment, we rented a van with another couple, and in a week's time, we drove from Georgia to Utah and back. Perhaps we stretched the rental car company's definition of "unlimited mileage," but on that long road trip with those friends, we really got to know one another. To this very day, whenever we get together with that couple, inevitably someone will bring up some memory from that long road trip and we will laugh all over again.

II

It's true - if you really want to get to know somebody, I mean, really come to know who they are and what they're really all about, go on a road trip together. That's true about your family and friends. And it's true about Jesus, too.

III

When we come to our story today, Jesus and the disciples are on the road. They've left their hometown fishing villages along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and they've been traveling to visit villages and towns

mainly to the north. Along the way, Jesus has been teaching in parables, short stories that illustrate a larger truth about the nature of the kingdom of God. For example, if you were with us last week, the youth reminded us in beautiful ways that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone planted, and when you let the dirt wash over it, though it is the smallest of seeds, it grows into a mighty bush, so large that the birds of the air come and make their nests in its branches.

And as the disciples have been on this northern road trip with Jesus, as they've been listening to these parables, they've been coming to know more about who he is and what he's about.

But when we come to our story today, the road trip changes directions. Instead of heading north, from village to village, now Jesus is heading south – not home to Capernaum or Nazareth or any of the villages of Galilee, but to Jerusalem.

So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Matthew 16:21-17:9.

21From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind

me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

24Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 27“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

17Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

If you really want to get to know someone, to know who they are and what they're about, go on a road trip.

And I imagine that as Peter walked with Jesus, as Peter observed the impact that Jesus was having on so many people in village after village and town after town, Peter became convinced that this rabbi was no ordinary teacher, no ordinary healer, no ordinary man. Peter was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah – the one foretold and promised in the Hebrew Scriptures who would restore the nation to greatness not experienced since the days of King David.

And just before today's passage, Jesus asked the disciples point blank about who they thought he was, and Peter gave his confession. He said, “You are the Messiah.” And Jesus said, “And you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hades will not prevail against it.”

And so when the road trip began its turn toward Jerusalem, perhaps Peter had in mind a vision for what might yet come to pass. Perhaps he envisioned in Jerusalem adoring crowds and blaring trumpets and a grand

celebration the likes of which had not been seen in Jerusalem in 1,000 years.

But then Jesus began to tell them openly about how in Jerusalem, he would undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and the chief priests and scribes. Jesus began to tell them openly about how when they arrived in Jerusalem, he would be killed, and then be raised again on the third day.

And for Peter, this just didn't fit with his mental picture of Jesus. This did not fit with his understanding of what it meant to be the Messiah. And so he tried to pull Jesus aside to talk some sense into him, to tell him to cool it with all this betrayal and death talk.

But Jesus would have none of it. He said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," he said.

Six days later, Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to a side trip – to hike with him up a mountain, just the four of them. And on the mountaintop, Jesus was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and there appeared with him Moses and Elijah. And then came the cloud – the bright cloud, covering everything and everyone – and out of the cloud came a voice – this is my Son, the beloved, listen to him!

And Peter and James and John were overcome with fear. And they did what most people do when they're overcome with fear – they fell down on the ground and hid their faces.

But then Jesus came and touched them, saying "Get up and do not be afraid."

IV

It's a strange story – one with which interpreters and theologians have wrestled with for generations. But it wasn't Peter's confession or the appearance of Moses and Elijah or the cloud or the voice that captured my attention this week. It was these words - Get up and do not be afraid.

Get up, and do not be afraid.

As I pondered those words, I found myself having a conversation with Jesus, and it went something like this:

V

Do not be afraid, Jesus?! You've just told us that this train is bound for Jerusalem, and at the end of the track there's a cross with your name on it!

Do not be afraid, Jesus?! You've brought us up here onto this mountain with you and we're having visions and hearing voices and your face, oh Jesus, your face – who is going to believe us when we tell them?

Do not be afraid, Jesus?! You keep calling us and sending us and teaching us and challenging all of our notions about who's in and who's out and who's up and who's down. You keep turning upside down all of our understanding about how the world is and how it will be.

And Jesus, I don't know if you've been following the news, but there are unidentified flying objects – UFOs - being shot down over our heads and there are train derailments and chemical spills and gun violence and missile tests and real, honest-to-goodness wars - and those are headlines from just this week alone.

And Jesus, the truth is that there are things that will never make the headlines but terrify us all the same. A diagnosis of a tumor. A child who is struggling mightily to find their way. A trust that has been broken. Coming to the end of the money before you come to the end of the month. And the list goes on and on.

It's enough to leave you on the ground with your nose in the dirt, Jesus.

And here you come to us and have the audacity to touch us gently and say, "Get up, and do not be afraid."

Unless you are who you say you are, it just sounds cruel. Unless you are who you say you are, it sounds like somebody telling us to just buck up.

But maybe, just maybe, you really are who you say you are.

Maybe, just maybe, you really are who the voice from the cloud said you are – God's Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

What was it that the voice told us to do? Listen to him?

Jesus, it's so noisy around here! There are so many distractions, so many

voices that are telling us what we should do and for whom we should vote and what we should buy and whom we should hate.

Maybe we need a season, a period of time, maybe six weeks or so, where we can be intentional about tuning out all those distractions and turning down the noise to better hear you, Jesus.

Maybe we need some new habits – like opening the Bible app on our phones first thing in the morning, rather than e-mail or social media. Maybe we need a little more focused time together every day.

The days are getting longer here in the northern hemisphere, Jesus. What might we call this season where we focus on listening to your voice and tuning out the noise and distractions as the days are getting longer? What might we call this season where we walk together with you toward Jerusalem, as we come to know you, to really know you, to know who you are and what you're about.

Maybe we should call it...Lent.

Get up, and do not be afraid, you said?

Ok, Jesus.

If you are who you say you are...

Then let's go.

Amen.