



**From the Pulpit: May 21, 2023**  
Seventh Sunday of Eastertide—Children's Day

**The Reverend Christine V. Hides**

Deuteronomy 6:5–9

*Packing for the Journey*

As close as I can estimate from our archives, Kenilworth Union Church will be presenting the 2,700th Bible to a third grader today. Eight or nine is a good age to begin learning scripture by heart. This is the time when our brains are ready to memorize more complex things. To get ready for third grade we share a core group of stories from both the Old Testament and Jesus' life using the Godly Play approach with our younger children.

We use the desert box to tell the ancient stories of Genesis and Exodus in preschool through second grade. The hope is that this tangible storytelling approach will allow these ancient texts to make a home in our souls. The stories told in the sand are about God's people on the move: Abraham and Sarah, their extended family, and livestock who take off from the river valley for a new land. God journeys with them across the desert where Abraham hears God's promise under the stars. Generations later, Abraham and Sarah's descendants are suffering in Egypt under pharaoh's rule. God tells Moses to ask Pharaoh to set the people free. They escape through the Red Sea into the wilderness, where God makes a covenant with Moses and the Israelites on Mt Sinai.

After Moses receives the Ten Commandments, he gives them a message from God. Their journey to a new land is far from over but now they know that God is with them, and they are to be faithful. This covenant defines their relationship with God. It reminds the people

who and whose they are. Count how many times and places Moses says to remember God's commands in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy:

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

“They [our original teachers (90 years ago)] wanted third graders to be prepared for the trip of a lifetime with God. So they made a scripture packing list so that children in this church would know that God was with them wherever they went and so they would be able to remember God is present in every situation.”

I counted at least eight times and places to recite and discuss God's word. In the morning and at night, at home and away, in the town by the gate. People are on the move, not just on long trips, but every day. Think of the places you go to in one day: school and work, soccer and scouts, the store and the coffee shop.

Perhaps you have heard it said that life is a journey. Usually people say things like this to make sense of the ups and downs of life. It feels better to know that we aren't the only ones who have to deal with difficult teachers or bosses. We aren't the only ones who get sick or don't make the team. Nearly everyone celebrates birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries. God is with us in all of these highs and lows. Our job on the journey of life is to respond to God's presence with love and faithfulness.

Or maybe you've heard the song, *Life is a Highway*, whether you remember the song when it first came out or if you know it from the original Disney movie *Cars*. Life is a journey, a trip, or a trek. This is a common metaphor. I believe that the Sunday School teachers who came up with the Kenilworth Union Church Third

Grade Bible lessons 90 years ago also thought of life as a journey. They wanted third graders to be prepared for the trip of a lifetime with God. So they made a scripture packing list so that children in this church would know that God was with them wherever they went and so they would be able to remember God is present in every situation. For generations third graders have learned *The Ten Commandments*, *The 23rd Psalm*, *The Beatitudes*, *The Lord's Prayer* and *Jesus' Greatest Commandment*. The 1950's version of the packing list also included Psalms 19 and 100.

My family loves to hike. A few years ago we went to Arches National Park. We arrived at the Devil's Garden primitive trail early to beat the heat and get a parking spot. Many signs reminded us how important water is in the desert and were sure to fill up our camelbacks and extra bottles. The trail was fine, red sand that reminded me a lot of the desert box in the Sunday school room. There was no shade and the sun was hot. Most people take the loop the other way, so we didn't see many people on the trail at first. There was just rock and sand for as far as I could see.

I thought about the words I use to tell the Bible stories of Abraham and Sarah and Moses: "People don't go into the desert unless they have to." My family was having a very nice time as we hiked.

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But suddenly we turned a corner and there was no trail. Just a tall rock fin. We tried to go around it. We went up a hill. We scrambled up some rocks into a little hidden canyon. We were all turned around, not lost exactly, but not on the right path either. So we went back to the place where we lost the trail, back over the x made with big sticks that was meant to tell us this was not the way. By this point my daughter wasn't feeling well. I took some water and put it on a bandana around her

neck to help her cool off. We sat in the shade of the dead-end rock as the day got hotter. I took inventory of my backpack: a granola bar, a flashlight, a whistle, a cell phone with no signal, and a foil emergency blanket. I said a little prayer, but I don't remember the exact words. I was beginning to worry that we would need to go back the way we came.

We sat for what seemed like a long time, until we saw people walking down the rock wall that looked like a dead end. Because we hadn't seen a tiny little cairn, we spent an hour trying to find the right way. The path was in front of us, a part of the not so dead-end wall. We found our way up the rock and to the amazing arches. On that trip I learned to always be prepared on a hike in the wilderness. I have a better packing list now.

Life is a journey, and so in third grade we pack our hearts full of scripture that we can use every day of our lives. When you memorize these words, you will always have them. To get ready for today, parents begin reciting these words with their children in September. Kids say them when they wake up and families say them when they eat dinner. These words are practiced in the car and while waiting for siblings to be done with their games. The third graders practice on vacation and at home. And now, after months of hard work, these words will always be with you.

You've packed your heart and soul with God's word. We want our spiritual backpacks to hold the essentials for wherever life takes us. Let's go through the third grade Bible packing list, using the actual pack I carried with me on the hike through Arches:

- The backpack is your heart or your soul, it is where you carry these stories and lessons throughout life.
- Gloves are for the Ten Commandments, the first scripture learned in the fall. Perhaps because Deuteronomy says, "bind these commandments on your hands", we've found that the easiest way to remember them is with your fingers. For example, when you make the number four, the thumb is resting, reminding us to keep the sabbath. The 10 commandments protect us and others. Pardon my pun but they remind us how God wants us to *handle* ourselves.
- The 23rd psalm is a warm jacket that, like God, protects you and brings comfort. Psalm 23 can be recited when you feel afraid because it reminds you that God is the good shepherd who is always with you, who will show you the way, and seek you out if you get lost.
- It took me a little time to figure out what packing list item the Beatitudes might be. People asked Jesus what the kingdom of God is like because it is not a place they, or we, have been to. The kingdom of God is different from where we live now. The Beatitudes remind us that in God's kingdom money and power are not the most important things. It is the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, and the peacemakers who are blessed. Jesus told us God's kingdom is near. We can almost imagine it, far off in the distance. Ms. Greta and I decided the Beatitudes are binoculars helping us see what is here, but not quite here yet.

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- Water and snacks are important for every hike, just like the Lord's prayer is important for every day. We need food and water to sustain us, and so we pray, "give us this day, our daily bread." Prayer is an essential part of daily life. Jesus teaches us this prayer which we can use anytime, anywhere.
- The Greatest Commandment is our compass. Compasses show us which way is north so we can

find our way. Wherever we get confused, when we don't know what is the right thing to do, the Greatest commandment points us in the right direction: Love God, love neighbor. If you follow this commandment, you will find your way back to the path God wants you to take.

So, this is my day pack for short hikes which is big enough to hold the essentials but not everything. There's still room in our heads and our hearts, which means we can spend a whole lifetime learning scripture verses and the stories of Jesus' life so that they will always be with us.

In ninth grade you get a bigger backpack, literally and metaphorically. In August I will be traveling with our ninth grade confirmation youth to Olympic National park for a five day backpacking trip. We will use 60-liter packs like this one to carry everything we need for five days and nights on a hike: a stove and fuel, food, sleeping bag, toilet paper, clothes, water, pocket Bible, and tent. Ninth graders need scripture verses in their pack, but also tools to interpret the Bible for themselves, and time to reflect on how God is a part of their own lives and experiences. Even after confirmation, you can continue to put words, ideas, and questions in your faith backpack—it stretches!

Let this Children's Day and the presentation of Bibles remind us always to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and might as we keep God's commandments our whole life long.

## —The Prayers of the People— Squire Prince

Dear God, loving father, and comforting mother, we come to say thank you God, for this amazing day, thank you God for work and play, thank you God for the sun and birds, we thank you for trees and for water, we thank you for all things. Lord we bring both those things, that we are rejoicing over, and those things that hover over our hearts in sadness.

How wonderful is it Lord, that you care about every aspect of our life, and you long to bring joy and happiness to our hearts, and bring peace and comfort to our minds. May we always turn to you in all things, that we may sit at your feet and receive the wisdom of your guidance, the strength of your love, and the joy of your presence.

Lord we pray for what may be going on in our own personal lives. Those moments good and bad, those moments that bring joy and those that bring discomfort, we pray for your presence. We pray for our families and friends. For our schoolteachers and instructors. Help us to end this school year with strength and endurance. Help us to get through tests and finals so that we can enjoy the coming grace of summer. Continue to provide us your guidance that we may be teachers and learners together.

As we come to the end of the program year, we recall how you have been present in our midst: in the memory work and in the cookies; in the chapel songs and the youth group; in making the model village and in the wondering; in the getting ready and the checking-in; in the prayers and the benediction.

May your grace and mercy be known to each parent and child, each teacher and nursery worker, each grandparent and youth leader, each friend and encourager. We pray for our community, that we would love each other with a holy love, that puts the cares of our neighbors before ourselves, and seeks to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with you.

For our world that is crying out for relief, Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Help us to be a beacon of hope and love in what can sometimes be a cold and scary world. Help us to share your light with those who may need a bit of help, and when we are empty, help us to turn to you, the fount of joy, love, peace, and all things good.

For in your presence is the fullness of joy, with a peace that surpasses all understanding, and a love that gives up one's life for a brother. In enacting this love, we pray the prayer that Jesus modeled for us by saying: Our Father...Amen.

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