

INEVITABLE

SHERARD EDINGTON

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

A few moments ago, we recognized this year's graduating seniors—two high school graduates and one college graduate.

We do this each year as a congregation as an expression of our support for our students. We want to celebrate their accomplishments, to mark this important milestone in their lives, and to wish them well on the next stage of their journey.

Each year when we do this, the students are certainly appreciative of this recognition, but also, I would guess, a bit baffled as to why we bother to do this. What's the big deal? It's just graduation.

For those of us who are non-graduates, we view graduation as a singular moment in time, a specific date when diplomas are received, bad speeches are delivered, and square caps are tossed into the air.

But for the graduates, however, graduation is only one moment in a long journey. This journey began for them on the first day of kindergarten. And it continued year after year—first grade, second grade, twelfth grade. Graduation isn't the end, it is simply a marker in a longer journey through life.

Last year, my daughter Courtney graduated from high school. I was a bit disappointed that she did not demonstrate the proper excitement at the prospect of graduation. I expected her to run through the house shouting, "I'm graduating, I'm graduating, wheeee." But she didn't. And when I looked back on my own graduation experience I don't recall running around yelling "wheeee."

Graduation is wonderful—it is a time to celebrate. But it is also accompanied by a certain inevitability. For most students, graduation is not a matter of 'if' but of 'when'. Graduation is go to happen. It is inevitable.

By calling this journey inevitable, it sounds like the students have no choice in their lives. Of course they have a choice. They can change direction at any time. Parents and teachers may not like it, but students do have free will. No one's future is set in stone. My wife and I just learned that the son of a friend who just last week graduated from college is headed to Alaska to work on a salmon boat. He will be on a small fishing vessel at sea for two and a half months. I understand that his mother is not too thrilled.

Our reading today is from the book of Acts and it is a story of inevitability. The book of Acts begins with Jesus' Ascension into heaven and then goes on to tell the

story of the emerging church. The entirety of this book is a monument to inevitability. To an outsider, there is a certain randomness to many of the events in the book of Acts—the stoning of Stephen, Paul’s being jailed and shipwrecked, way that some churches succeed and others fail. But the story is held together by faith—the understanding that God has a plan for God’s people.

We see this in today’s reading which deals with the almost mundane business of replfilling a vacancy among the apostles. One of the twelve, Judas as we know, betrayed Jesus. He then took his own life. This depleted the apostolic ranks from twelve to eleven.

For Peter, this creates an imbalance. Peter recalled Jesus’ words to the disciples, *I confer on you, just as my Father conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you... will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel* (Luke 22:28-30). Peter viewed the twelve disciples as a reflection of Israel’s twelve tribes. The disciples are the new hope for God’s people. Judas’ death leaves a void begging to be filled. For Peter, the disciples could not fulfill their calling if there were only eleven of them.

Peter gathers the community of believers. The purpose of the meeting is the first recorded order of apostolic business. They need to find a successor to Judas. Peter tells the crowd, *Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled*. Judas, who *was numbered among us* is gone and needs to be replaced. Peter’s criteria for a replacement is to select a man who has been part of the group from the beginning—someone who knew Jesus personally.

Two names are placed in nomination—Joseph and Matthias. Instead of voting, the group prays saying, *Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen*. And again, instead of voting, they cast lots and the lots falls to Matthias and he becomes the newest apostle. Casting lots is not like flipping a coin. The practice had a deep tradition as a means of determining God’s will. Casting lots was an expression of faith—a recognition that God’s hand is present in our lives.

This raises the question, “What is faith?” Some would say that faith is simply having a belief in God. But is more than that. Faith is believing that God is actively involved in our lives, that we are not bouncing randomly through the universe. Faith is the belief that God is calling us. We are as free to follow God’s call as we are to joining a fishing crew in Alaska.

Our Call to Worship today is taken from Psalm 1 which makes this point explicitly. Happy are those whose delight is in the Law of the Lord. They do not follow the advice of the wicked. They do not walk the path of sinners. They are like trees planted next to water. They will grow and flourish. They will yield fruit in the right season. *In all that they do, they prosper*. In other words, there is an inevitability to the lives of those who follow the Lord. Like a tree planted in a good spot, they will grow and produce fruit.

The wicked, on the other hand, lack this rootedness. As the psalm says, the wicked are blown about by the wind. There is no inevitability to their lives because they have nothing to guide them and anchor them.

I have remarked on this before, but where I have clearly observed the presence of faith is at the death of a loved one. The occasion of a death is certainly a time for grieving. But for those people who have a grounded faith their grief is contained within an understanding of God's presence and God's plan. For those who do not have faith, there is evident chaos and confusion. Their grief has nothing to contain it, nothing to give meaning. My heart goes out to these people because their pain is so raw.

In the earliest days, the followers of Jesus were not known as the church but as the Way, or People of the Way. You will recall Jesus' words, *I am the way, the truth, and the life*. The word way means path or road. Those who follow Christ are travelers on a certain path.

In his book **Alice in Wonderland**, Lewis Carroll offers this exchange between Alice and the Cheshire Cat. Alice says to the cat, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat. "I don't much care where—" said Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat. "—so long as I get SOMEWHERE," Alice added as an explanation. "Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough." This dialogue has been paraphrased into a quote you may recognize: "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there."

As people of faith, we may not know our exact destination, but we do know which road to take.

Faith in God is the understanding that God journeys this road with us. We are not wandering aimlessly. Because God travels with us, there is an inevitability that we will reach our destination. The nature of the destination may be a mystery, but we will get there.

As a congregation, we are traveling this path together. In recognizing our graduates today, we are saying more than congratulations; we are letting them know that they are not traveling alone.

The church is the people of God walking a path together, bound together in our faith, knowing that our Lord is with us. Amen.