

“ON THE ROAD AGAIN”

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Having posted pictures on Facebook of the splendors of our western Michigan vacation, I've loved seeing yours and hearing stories of your summer sojourns. It's that time of year, right? We pack up suitcases, schlep them on the plane or into the car trunk. Our families re-acquaint in ways different from the school year.

Parents become less disciplinarians—make your bed, don't be late to school, and get your homework done first. We suddenly transform into fellow adventurers and explorers with our young. Travelling closely, we notice how we've changed. And often, by sharing a journey, transformation gets provoked by what we share. That's not so different than what we hear going on in our summer lectionary text. Jesus' followers are on the road with him in Luke. In fact, it's amazing the degree to which the whole Bible is an extended story of folks sharing amazing journeys.

It begins in Genesis, with everything seemingly settled, Adam and Eve living the good life in a garden. But how long does that last? Two chapters later, they must leave that tranquility, venture out into harsher environments, and our real journey as humankind begins. The point is clear. Human history, as the Bible has it, isn't destined to be a tame, domestic, stay-at-home affair with windows sealed. Before we know it Noah leaves everything behind to become a sailor of all things.

Our lesson from Hebrews describes the story of the only people who would have Yahweh as their God, Israel, beginning with the journey of a mobile elder couple, Abraham and Sarah. Abraham, we heard, ventures forth “not knowing where he was going.” (11.8) It doesn't say whether Sarah got him to stop and ask directions.

Their journey isn't only geographic, to a different location on a map. It is also spiritual to an exciting world of new possibility, where miracles changed everything. You see, Abraham was promised he'd be father to a great nation. Never mind that Sarah was barren, and they were more eligible for Medicare than parenthood. Verse 12 of Hebrews 11 describes Abraham as “as good as dead.” The delicate KJV wording uses language such as, “his vital force had abated,” saying he was targeted for the yellow pill ads with the twin claw foot bathtubs facing the sunset.

Yet by God's power Abraham and Sarah are given a child and a future they imagined long-before gone. That is how the family of Israel is born. Through a weird turn of events, that family becomes enslaved in Egypt. God hears their cry, sending them Moses to usher them out of slavery, a new journey called exodus.

The third great journey of the Hebrew Bible is one long, slogging trek out of exile. First Assyria then Babylonia make war on Israel. Those former slaves are now liberated to enter a Promised Land, and enslaved again as Jerusalem is flattened and everybody they looked to for leadership gets deported to Babylonia. Just like

Egypt, in Babylonia, some said, "Slavery isn't so bad. I can live with this. Why not just fit in and settle down, quietly merging into the world of our captors?"

But just as Egyptian slavery wasn't good enough for God's family, neither was Babylonian exile. God returned his chosen to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. That's how God is: beckoning, rallying us, and pushing us out into new journeys.

It's mostly a straight line from that moment to Jesus in a perpetual road trip called the Gospel of Luke. Remember, the other word for Jesus' disciples is *followers*. Followers don't admire Jesus from afar or stop at fondness of the idea of Jesus or sit idly at his feet and take notes on all the essential points he makes. No, followers must keep up with Jesus, move among peoples and places where he moves. And if we ever wonder where Jesus is as we seek him, my advice is look ahead toward where we might travel next as God's people, not to the storied past

More than any other, this image of journey characterizes our relations with Jesus. Having said that, I hasten to confess for us all the constant urge to hunker down in one place and live settled lives. Sink down roots. Bolt the furniture to the floor.

The second sermon I preached as a local church pastor was in October, 1979. The title, "Our Drive to Arrive," touched on our temptation to stop and to stay put. "What amazes me is our consistent urge to be finished creatures, our longing to reside and cruise along in our accomplishment. This spiritual feature is especially striking because it's so universal among us and so deeply rooted in our behavior."

Standing in that IL pulpit at age 25 saying those words feels like another lifetime. But it wasn't another lifetime. It has just been a long, long journey following Jesus from my ordination in Branford, CT to that interim position in Champaign, IL to Westville, IL to Columbus, OH to Greeley, CO to Ridgefield, CT to Dennis, MA to Darien, CT. Imagine how far we have come together over these last five years!

So consider Jesus' words: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but as for me, I don't seem to lay my head down the same place two nights in a row." He was constantly on the move. And if we'd follow and not merely admire and consider him, we'd better expect the same. What does it mean to be a disciple? At a minimum, it means being on the road with Jesus, like today's gospel lesson.

I hope you hear that as good news. I certainly do. If being a Christian is ranging as far and wide as Jesus ranged, we can get off this spiritual micro-mincing kick of dismantling each other's beliefs. "Wait, do you believe that and say it like this?" Give me a break. If being a Christian is moving beyond usual paths as Jesus did to learn that God moves in wondrously mysterious ways among those unlike ourselves, then we can give up petty moralisms on social issues to measure others.

Some months ago a personage of a Presidential candidate who has been in the news a lot this past week said if he were elected, he would only let Christians to

emigrate from the Near East to the United States. A reporter asked him a question both simple and utterly baffling, "How would you know if they are Christians?" Of the ten largest Muslim countries, only Pakistan cites religion on their passport. How would you like that job, posted at the border, figuring out who is a Christian?

Let me say it again, being Christian is more openness to a lifelong journey, not so much whether we have reached a destination where that journey can be over. I know, we like the idea of settling in and hunkering down here as a constant in a world full of change. That can tempt us to try to keep everything here the same, to represent the faith as firm and unshakeable in the face of so much uncertainty. But the writer of Hebrews and the position of Jesus in our Gospel lesson remind us that being his followers is a good deal more exciting and challenging than that.

We are all about the adventure, the journey, the shared pilgrimage of being led outside of ourselves into a new place, looking to an end point with God that takes us where we are meant to be. We come here to summon the intestinal fortitude to catch a glimpse of a vision, to catch our breath, and then venture forth afresh.

If we try to hunker down and settle in too much, God often provides us the impetus to get us moving again. Our prompting from God could be in the world, people at the margins targeted for attack by the police or the police unjustly targeted. We hope you will be here September 18 for our Racial Reconciliation Sunday with worship under a sacred canopy on the lawn and panel discussion to follow. Our congregational journey to racial reconciliation is both time-honored and new.

Or the prompting from God to keep moving could be internal to our spiritual home in the form of unsound structural trusses and the remaking of our worship space. Last May, dismayed to learn of this, I wondered how our members would react. Would there be division and dissension, hard feelings and people bailing out? No, our members almost laughed at the problem. "We can do this. The problem is just physical. We can correct it easily enough, even if it makes our pockets lighter. We're poised for ministry, ready to surge ahead. It's temporary a setback."

Do you know how we got to that place? Through the journey of the last five years rebuilding trust, renewing our faith in God's grace and the church's goodness, reconstructing the foundations for ministry, rallying forward together in a new era. It is as though, having focused so much on putting back together the foundations for ministry, God has now lifted our gaze upward, not just to structural members awaiting our attention, but to other new horizons where God wants FCC to travel. We can handle fixing our meetinghouse frame but where's God now pointing us?

Through ups and downs, hills and valleys, gifts and demands, God uses all of it to remind us faith is a lifelong journey, trusting Jesus ahead of us. That sounds so different from "taking Jesus into my heart as my personal Lord and Savior." Jesus takes us into *his* heart, leading us to new places. I much prefer the sound of that. Are you ready for the new stage in the journey? I for one can't wait! Amen