

Moving On

^{NRS} **Genesis 12:1** Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

^{NRS} **Luke 4:21** Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"²³ He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'"²⁴ And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land;²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

^{NRS} **Philippians 3:12** Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

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It struck me this past week that the Bible is full of journeys. People were always moving on, it seems. Abraham was told by God to pack up and leave the land of his father and head west. God doesn't even tell him where he's going. Abraham was just told to get moving and that God would show him where he's going later. A couple of generations after that, Jacob took the whole family down to Egypt to find food and see his long lost son, Joseph. Generations later, the Hebrews left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years on the way back to Canaan. After several hundred years, the people of God were carried off into Babylonian captivity - and then decades later they were sent back by Cyrus the Great. In New Testament times, the Apostle Paul traveled all over the northern part of the Mediterranean Sea, spreading the good news - and getting into trouble with the local authorities.

Not all of the journeys were long. Jesus wandered around Galilee, a region about thirty by forty miles. Not all journeys were physical. Some journeys were on the pathway of faith. Jacob journeyed from being a conniving trickster to being someone who sought reconciliation with his brother Esau, whom he had cheated. Each of the disciples, not only walked the dusty trails of Galilee with Jesus and were covered in the dust of the trail, but they also were covered in the dust of his teaching. As they journeyed around Galilee, they were also on a journey of faith. That faith journey was sometimes straight ahead, but there were often moments when they were confused, or doubted, or were depressed. Like the father of the boy who had seizures, the disciples must have often said, "I believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24) The crucifixion threw them into a tailspin. Their hopes and dreams were dashed and destroyed. Resurrection came as a surprise to them. The journey of faith and trust is not always a straight path, nor a smooth path.

Today's text from Luke shows that the journey of ministry wasn't always straight and smooth for Jesus. Jesus reminded the people of Nazareth that they had no special position. He recalled that Elijah relieved the suffering of a gentile widow at a time when there were suffering widows in Israel. Elisha cured the skin disease of Naaman, a gentile and an enemy, even though there were Israelites who suffered from skin problems, as well. God is perfectly free to work in unexpected ways, and that upset the folks in Nazareth. It upset Jonah years earlier, to think that God might be gracious to the terrible and undeserving

people of Nineveh. We all are liable to be offended by God's grace to those of whom we don't approve. And so, we should note that as this story in Luke ends, Jesus doesn't leave because he's rejected, rather he's rejected because he has gone elsewhere and will continue to go elsewhere.

The journey of ministry isn't always easy for Jesus. The same thing was true for his disciples. When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples in Matthew's gospel, he warned them that it wouldn't always be smooth sailing. ^{NRS} **Matthew 10:14** "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town." Jesus says, "Not everybody is going to be glad to see you. Some places will give you the cold shoulder."

Years later, the Apostle Paul would encounter resistance and anger as he traveled and preached. Did you ever consider how discouraging it must have been for the apostle Paul? He established some churches in the city of Corinth. And they kept messing up. He wrote to them over and over again, admonishing them, correcting them, and encouraging them. Paul told the Christians in Philippi that his own journey of faith wasn't always smooth. It had some rough spots. He's been telling the folks in Philippi that he just doesn't care about all of his past accomplishments and acquisitions. He was a good Jew, from a good family, with a good education. He had been observant. He had kept the Law. He had been devout, respected, and a leader. And it didn't amount to a hill of beans. Actually, he says it more emphatically than that. Paul says his goal is to know Christ, to be immersed in Christ, to have the sort of righteousness that comes from having complete and total trust in Christ. That's his goal. That's where the pathway leads. But he's not there, yet. Not completely. Faith is a journey. A journey toward deeper and deeper trust in God. And Paul says, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Notice how Paul says that he makes progress toward his goal of being totally wrapped up in Christ. He says, "I forget the past. I put it behind me. I don't rest on what I've done or accomplished. The past is over. All that matters is what lies ahead." We need to take that to heart. We can hear this at a personal level. Are you feeling stuck, like you're going nowhere? Do you feel like you're in a rut? Every day is the "same ole, same ole?" Are you a bit discontent about who you are? Maybe who you are isn't who you really want to be. It can seem like life has hemmed you in with barriers and resistance. But, so many of those barriers are our own habits and our own perceptions. You don't have to stay where you are. But you have to be willing to try something new. As long as you keep on doing and thinking what you've always done and thought, things will not change. You will not change. Hear Paul's words again. "I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be. ¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead."

Missouri, where I lived for seventeen years, is known as the "show me" state. Sometime in the past, one of the representatives from Missouri remarked, "I'm from Missouri. You'll have to show me!" and the phrase stuck. I suspect that these days, most of us are pretty cynical about a great number of things. How often have you said, "I'll believe it when I see it?" We're pretty skeptical about a lot of things. We say, "If it sounds too good to be true, then it isn't!" Often this is sound advice and good wisdom. But Ralph Hodgson, an English poet, turned the concept around and said, "Some things must be believed to be seen." And, he was right. Abraham had to believe first – before he saw the land of Canaan. Some things must be believed to be seen. On one level, if you don't believe that things can change, they won't. If you don't believe that you can quit smoking, then you are right. You can't.

But there's another level to this statement. You can't have a vision of what change will bring, unless you believe that change will happen. And Proverbs 29:18 says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Think in terms of the future of this congregation. If I draw word pictures of a congregation of 200 people, with children running up and down the halls, classrooms with folks involved in Bible study,

mission trips, lots of folks being fed and clothed - and you don't believe it can happen, then you won't be able to picture it. "I'm sorry Mike, but I just can't see it," you will say. And one reason we have a hard time having a vision for the **future** is because we have such a huge vision of the **past**. We say, "I remember when. . ." a lot more than "I look forward to. . ." We think fondly of all that we used to do, instead of dreaming eagerly about what we're going to do. We need to move from "I usta" to "I'm fixin' to." The vision in our minds needs to be, not the vision of the past, but the vision of the future. Paul said, "I forget the past and I look forward to what lies ahead!"

Someone driving by on Randolph sees a colorful electronic sign that tells about what we're fixin' to do. We're fixin' to worship God and you're invited to dress comfortably. We're fixin' to show a movie. We're fixin' to do a study on *The Shack*. We're fixin' to have Lenten worship and lunch on Tuesdays. We're fixin' to have ecumenical worship with our Baptist brothers and sisters next Sunday.

Then somebody walks in and a lot of the message is "We usta." We usta have this Bible on the pulpit. We usta have these old men for ministers. We usta be the Presbyterian church that had this seal and worshiped in this sanctuary whose picture is on the wall. This is who we usta be. There's a lot of usta decorating our church facility, but not a lot of fixin' to. Is our vision mostly about the past - or about the future? When others come to visit us will they hear us dream of the past or dream of the future? Will the unspoken messages be of the past that is dying away or the future vision that we believe? We can't get to the future by living in the past. In fact, there will be no future if we live in the past. Without a vision, the people perish. Like the apostle Paul, we must forget the past and devote our energies to the future. We must be moving on. We can't be camped by the path of faith somewhere in the past. No, we must be on the journey, straining toward the future. Amen