

A Project or an Adventure?

Beginning this morning, and continuing on into Lent, we'll be reading from the section of Luke that scholars call the "Travel Narrative." This section of Luke's gospel begins here in chapter 9 with Luke's announcement that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem", and it continues on all the way through his arrival in Jerusalem in chapter 19. These chapters contain some of Jesus' most memorable teaching, including the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. In fact, there's so much in these chapters that it leads us to an interesting dilemma as we start out. Just what kind of a journey is this?

What I mean by this is that in Jesus' time, even on foot, it only took about three days or so to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem by the most direct route. But if these chapters are a literal report of Jesus' final journey, then that's an awful lot to happen in just three days—in fact this journey accounts for more than a third of the entire book. So maybe Luke wants to think of it as a different sort of journey-- to use a term which unfortunately is overused these days—a spiritual journey.

Luke begins with a simple statement. He writes, "When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." It's simple but it requires a little bit of unpacking. First, Luke says that the "days drew near for Jesus to be taken up." The Greek word he uses has two senses to it. Sometimes

being “taken up” it was used just as a sort of euphemism for someone dying, like we might say that someone “passed away.” And as Jesus begins this journey, death certainly was on the horizon. Jesus has already told the disciples twice in this chapter that he “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed ...”

But the word Luke uses does also mean literally “taken up,” and in that verse I just quoted Jesus doesn’t end with Jesus being killed, but by saying that he will be raised on the third day. So as Jesus begins this journey toward Jerusalem, he’s aware of the suffering that’s coming, but he’s also able to look beyond it. As the letter to the Hebrews puts it, “for the sake of the joy that set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

The second key phrase says that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” The expression “set his face” means a lot more than just starting to walk in that direction. The New International Version translates the Luke’s Greek as he “resolutely set out.” Even knowing what lay beyond the cross, Jesus knew that the road to being “taken up” to the right hand of the Father passed through a place of unspeakable suffering. And so there was determination on his face and in his stride and set out on that path.

Now, I don’t know about you, but once I’ve made up my mind and found my courage to do something difficult, I just want to get it over with. Jesus could

have been in Jerusalem in three days. But instead Luke takes us on a ten chapter ramble through the countryside before Jesus finally gets there.

But we need to remember that Luke didn't give us a literal travelogue--he's trying to show us something about the Christian life. And one way we can put it is in terms of the difference between a project and an adventure.

A lot of people like projects – and I'm one of them. Many of you have commented that I've noticeably lost weight recently. In fact since this time a year ago I've lost about 50 pounds. It began—this time—with a declaration from my doctor at my annual physical that I am now officially a Type 2 diabetic. I'd been skirting the borderline for years, but I finally crossed it. My doctor increased my medications, started having me poke my finger once a day to check my blood sugar, and sent me for diabetes education. And because I was significantly overweight, I wrapped it all into a project that included a goal of losing those 50 extra pounds. I know from experience that when I make it into a project, I can do it. I know that because I've lost at least 30 pounds several times over the past 30 years. I can do projects—I like projects.

My problem, though, is that maintaining a healthy lifestyle isn't a one-year project—it's a way of life. It's about setting one's face in a particular direction and traveling toward that goal through all the changes and transitions that life brings, all the Thanksgivings and Christmases, all the stresses, all the days when I'm tired or bored, all the times when I'm too busy or when it's too hot or too

cold to go outside and walk. But, many of the most important things in life can't be reduced to projects.

Recently in a conversation with a friend, he brought up a question that's been plaguing me for years—Why is it that so many of us seem to make so little progress in the Christian life? Why is it that when we look back we don't seem to have grown much in faith or knowledge or love compared to where we were five or ten or twenty years ago? Part of it, I think, is because the Christian life isn't a project.

If I were to try to count up the number of projects I've undertaken to try to grow as a Christian, they would far outnumber my list of diet and exercise projects. I would quickly run out of fingers and toes to count the books, the devotional plans, retreats and continuing education programs. I'm not saying these things have no value! But the benefits never seem to really last. It may be human nature, or a reflection of our times—but we seem to want things to happen in three days that the Lord knows will take three years or thirty years or sixty years. But our attention spans aren't that long.

All of this has its parallels in the ministry and mission of the church. I have a striking memory of a comment made by a participant in a management training course I attended when I was serving with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. He confessed that his favorite day of the month was his paperwork day. Some of the others in the group were aghast that anyone would say that, but I knew precisely what he meant. On paperwork day, he went into his office,

and knew exactly what he had to accomplish and how to do it. And at the end of the day, his inbox was empty and his outbox was full, and he knew that he had actually completed something.

But that's not how the most important work of the church goes. There are lots of days when we can't see what we've actually accomplished. Serving Jesus takes us on a path that winds through the joys and struggles of individual lives, it happens in the context of everything else that is going on around us in the world, and we don't—and actually can't-- do the most important work of all. The Holy Spirit is the one who changes lives on God's own timetable. The work we do may not bear visible fruit for years if it all.

But despite the fact that Jesus leads us this kind of journey, churches still seem to gravitate toward projects—whether it's a building project or Lenten class or a Vacation Bible School. In fact, we can devote tremendous amounts of energy and love and material resources to them. And I'm in no way disparaging the value that can come from them. At the same time, though, projects have their limits.

In my newsletter article this month I made some comments about where we are two years after our GPS Team finished its multi-year journey. By the way when we began we envisioned something that looked a project, but it became something else. That long and winding journey helped us find a way to talk about where we're believe God is leading us, or better yet, who we believe the Holy Spirit is calling us to be. The purpose statement we adopted says:

As followers of Jesus Christ,
we will, by our intentional actions ,
seek a closer relationship with God,
listen for the Spirit's call to mission in our community,
and prayerfully lead others to know the joy of God's love
and to realize God's purpose for life's journey.

Immediately after we adopted it, the session and some of our committees began talking about some steps—projects even—that we could undertake to live into that purpose. We've found that it isn't easy. But that's because the transformation of the church isn't a project—it's a different kind of journey.

I've been holding out on giving this journey a name, but I think that "adventure" might be the right word for it. And maybe a prototype for thinking about it is to be found in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In that very long story, Frodo the hobbit and his companions set out on a journey with a definite goal. He knows it will be dangerous, but Frodo sets his face toward Mt. Doom to deliver the ring and destroy it. The journey is long and hard and indirect—in other words full of adventures—and as in the case of most adventurous journeys, there are some long interludes where nothing much seems to happen. There are times when the members of the fellowship of the ring are separated from each other and even travel in the wrong direction. But they never lose sight of where the journey is supposed to lead.

The Christian life and our calling as a church are like that—not a project, but an adventure. We don't have time to go further in Luke this morning, but the rest of chapter 9 makes it clear that this is not a journey for the faint-hearted

or half-hearted. But it is God's call to each one of us. And it's only as we are embark on that adventure—through all its twists and turns, through the crises and the triumphs and all the ordinary days in between--keeping our eyes on Jesus who leads us as we take up our crosses and follow him—that we will experience the life and transformation we long for—and that we will make the difference together that we want to make.

In a few moments we will install David, Susie and Tom to begin new terms on the session. My charge to them, and to the session, and to myself is this: How can we set our faces to follow where Jesus leads?

But this doesn't fall on the shoulders of just a few. How will each of us—not just those called to lead in this particular way-- embody what we God has called First Presbyterian Church to be and do. How will you intentionally seek a deeper relationship with God this year? How will you *intentionally* listen to—and follow—Jesus' call to do his work in this community? How you will *intentionally* and *prayerfully* help the people in your circle of relationships discover the joy of God's love and the abundant life that comes as we live according to God's purposes? It's not a project, but an adventure. Amen.

*Rev. David Spaulding
First Presbyterian Church, Dixon
January 14, 2018*

