

“On the Way to Godwhere”
Matthew 28:16-20
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There is a song which always made me and my friends laugh every time we heard it back in the early 60's when I was in junior high. Though politically incorrect and later a Vietnam protest song¹, it went like this: “Please, General Custer, I don't wanna go!” We all laughed because, we all knew that no one with any sense would ever join Custer at The Little Big Horn if they knew what was coming. Verne Larry who wrote this song had the good sense to know this was one journey he didn't want to make.

Though, truth to tell, there are lots of people in the scriptures who basically said, “Please, God, I don't wanna to go.” Jonah rebuffed God's command to journey to Nineveh to call the Ninevites to repentance. Nearly all the prophets besides Jonah initially resisted God; and Ananias, a leader of the Jerusalem Christian community questioned God's command to him to journey to Damascus to welcome Paul, the former murderer of Christians into the faith community with open arms. So I questioned God asking me to journey away from my home, my church, indeed my nice, safe, little life here in Omaha to do ministry elsewhere. Some of you may have heard my heels scraping against the linoleum as I heard God say to me, as to Jonah and Ananias, “Go!” But they went and I go too, though not kicking and

screaming as I might have several months ago. This is as much a going toward as it is a leaving.

And yet, in spite of all the anxiety and uncertainty of contemplating this journey, one fact keeps nagging at me: namely, that the Christian life looks a whole lot more like a pilgrimage than a homesteading. John Bunyan didn't write a book called *Settler's Progress* but *Pilgrim's Progress*. The folk we honor Thanksgiving Day aren't called *Squatters* but *Pilgrims*.

And this sense that God's people have always been called to be on the move is practically a mandate of the scriptures! In their old age Abraham and Sarah find God compelling them to leave the land of their ancestors in Ur of the Chaldeans to find a new homeland in Canaan. Jacob leads his family to food in Egypt only to have Moses 450 years later lead God's people out of slavery in Egypt through the Wilderness to the Promised Land. Even then things were unsettled. Later God sends the Jews into Babylonian exile because of their unjust treatment of the poor only to lead them, decades later back to Palestine. But Israel never really found "home" in their homeland, occupied as it was by the Persians then the Greeks and finally the Romans. The Second Testament adds its own twist to the journey. Luke dedicates the majority of his gospel to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Mark refuses to end his gospel in Jerusalem by sending the disciples to meet the Risen Lord in Galilee. John's Gospel names Jesus "The Way," and Acts

refers to Jesus' followers as "People of the Way!" Acts might as well have called us "People ON the way." And, of course, there are Paul's 3 Missionary Journeys. It's as if the journey *is* the destination. Sort of like John Lennon's words, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

This is why so many of us have a problem with that bumper sticker that says, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." Oh, but if the Christian life were so simple. And yet, this is what all of us want from our faith: a settled serenity, not some pilgrimage that pushes us out of our spiritual easy chair into the fight for God's kingdom where, as Jesus says, "*The fields are white unto harvest*" but *where the laborers are few.*" Journeys have hazards and often mean getting our hands dirty, like a Good Samaritan helping clean up some poor, bloody, victim beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. You see, we're pilgrims on the way to Godwhere, wherever on earth this may be.

In this the folks who say, "God isn't finished with me yet" may have the best handle on the Christian life as a journey than anybody. They know God is always about new beginnings, 2nd chances, roads not taken. They intuit life is incomplete. As poet Robert Frost writes:

Whose woods these are, I think I know
His house is in the village though,
He will not see me stopping here,

To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer,
To stop without a farmhouse near,
Between the woods and frozen lake,
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake,
To ask if there is some mistake,
The only other sound's the sweep,
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Maybe we didn't know we too have promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep. Maybe we didn't quite realize that faith isn't a noun, it's a verb!²

Just look at the lexicon of today's scripture: "Go!" "Disciple!" (even "disciple" is a verb here) "Baptize!" "Teach!" Or consider the 2 great commandments, both starting with the word, "Love." These are all **ACTION** words. They are the words that ensure we're on our way to Godwhere, God's invisible, yet ever present kingdom.

Maybe this is why we want a faith that looks more like a fortress, even with all the cost of the upkeep, to a path we pave with our feet. We forget our church buildings are metaphors of our ultimate life with God, and never meant to be our final destination. Journeys ARE uncertain to be sure, often fraught with darkness: like the first night of the first day the 3 of us:

Joe, Culpepper, Guy Wyche and I, cycled out of Denver last year. A day we thought would be 82 miles turned out to be 96, the last 7 in the pitch black.

We thought, before darkness set in, we could stop in Last Chance, Colorado, better named No Chance, Colorado. It's a real town, a ghost town. But Joe had run out of water, meaning we needed to press on to the next town since there was no service, and no water, in Last Chance.

Three miles east of Last Chance, complete darkness set in. About that time I discovered my headlight was unusable. It kept falling off my handlebar every time I cycled across the rumble strips. All I had to lead me was Joe's red rear flasher. I just kept moving forward, using Joe's flasher and the sound of the rumble strips to keep me on the road and from falling off the shoulder. The headlights of an occasional bypassing vehicle helped, but never for long. Handicapping my vision was hay fever filling my right eye. Ragweed isn't Colorado's state flower, but it may as well be.

The last 7 miles slowly passed. Occasionally I caught a glimpse of a green mile reflector. We saw a lit sign far ahead, which I originally thought read "Viagra" but turned out to say "Viacom" a cell phone company in Colorado. I actually began to hallucinate that trees were on both sides of the road, only to discover the next day not a tree existed for 40 miles in any direction. I credit my survival that night to Joe's red, rear flasher. I credit surviving that surreal ride in the night to our little community of 3 cyclists.

So, God gives us each other in the church, not to circle the wagons out of terror over the state of the world. God gives us the church to dare the journey together: to leave the safety of the known for the uncertainty of God's unknown.

And yet we go on the journey; and why? Because we remember as Psalm 139 says, "*The darkness is not darkness to Thee, O God. The night is as bright as the day.*" And "while we may not know what is beyond the grave we know *who* is beyond the grave."³ This is why we don't have to be afraid of any journey God has before us: We know God is in the journey just as we know the journey is the destination.

And even when our journey takes sudden turns south, we are confident God is there for us. Biblical history shows that when Israel and the church get too used to living and reveling in the Promised Land, they lose faith. It's in Egypt and in exile that God's people's faith is renewed! I know this just from my own experience the past 2 weeks since my stroke.

You see, the biggest mistake we Christians and churches make is thinking we are settlers rather than pioneers, homesteaders rather than pilgrims. Of course, we need our buildings as a place that feels like home.

But this is merely a resting place, a place of transit, where [we in our humanity] and God pause before taking to the road again. Go, my people, you are ready to set sail, your country is not here. You are a wayfaring people, strangers, never rooted in one place, pilgrims moving toward an abiding city farther on. Go forth, my

people, go and pray farther off, love will be your song and life your celebration. Go! You are awaited, my people, and I declare to you, Word of God, I am going with you.⁴

This is where our journey into mission and ministry only begin. This wonderful sanctuary was never meant to be more than a metaphor of the perfect fulfillment of the new heaven and new earth God promises us in *Revelation*. Until then we remain People on the Way and “People of the Way,” praying *Kyrie Eleison*, Lord have Mercy on the road that we must travel. Until then we have “Promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep.”

A great Scottish prayer may say it best of all:

Our brother Jesus, you set our feet upon the way and sometimes
 where you lead we do not like or understand.
 Bless us with courage where the way is fraught with dread or danger;
 bless us with graceful meetings where the way is lonely;
 bless us with good companions where the way demands a common
 cause;
 bless us with night vision where we travel in the dark, keen hearing
 where we have not sight, to hear the reassuring sounds of fellow
 travelers;
 bless us with humor—we cannot travel lightly weighed down with
 gravity;
 bless us with humility to learn from those around us;
 bless us with decisiveness where we must move with speed;
 bless us with lazy moments, to stretch and rest and savor;
 bless us with love, given and received;
 and bless us with your presence, even when we know it in your
 absence.
 Lead us into exile, until we find that on the road is where you are,
 and where you are is going home.
 Bless us, lead us, love us, bring us home
 bearing the gospel of life.⁵

¹Verne Larry, composer, 1960

²This section borrows from the chapter “Faith Is a Verb,” from Clark Williamson’s book *God Is Never Absent*, St.L: Bethany Press, 1977, p. 11ff

³Author unknown, “The God of New Beginnings, *Strength for the Journey*, NY: Harpers, 2004, p. 68

⁴Poem # 7 of the Texts, *Worship Book of the World Alliance of Reformed Church*, Seoul, Korea, 1989 from *Homiletics*, May 2002, p. 35.

⁵Kathy Galloway, *Prayers Encircling the World*, Louisville: John, Knox Press, 1998, p. 136