

October 8, 2017

National Presbyterian Church

On the Road with Jesus V: Travelling Companions

Luke 5:27-32, 6:12-16, 8:1-3

Acts 1:6-15a; 13:1-5; Romans 16:1-16

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Last Sunday night another tragedy struck our nation with the loss of almost 60 lives – people shot to death at a concert in Las Vegas

I'd like us this morning, not only to pray for the families of those who grieve, but to reflect on tragedies like this and to do so in the context of the sermon series that we're pursuing through the fall. So, let us pray.

This fall in our sermons we're thinking of the Christian life in terms of a journey: a spiritual journey in which *God is at work leading and guiding and changing our lives, moving us forward step by step on his chosen path for each of us*. This path is the best path for our lives. Jesus promised that he had come to give us life in all its abundance. But along the way, Jesus also reminds us, the path is rarely as easy or as straight forward as we'd like! (John 10:10).

So, for example, in our sermons so far:

(1) We've talked about our need to have a mentor or guide on this journey: someone who's ahead of us and been there before us; someone who can show us the way so we don't get lost, or make elemental mistakes as novices – And Jesus promises to be that mentor or guide that we need.

(2) And we've also talked about the difficulty getting going or started. At times getting going is difficult because we look to the past, and cling to it; and at times, getting going is difficult, because we look to the future, and allow fears about the future to control us.

And some of us are stuck at this point – looking back or forwards! We've just never made any progress; we're in the same place we were with Jesus when we were children – and it's time to get going and move on!

(3) So there can be difficulties *setting out* – and then there can also be difficulties in the journey *along the way and in the middle*. AND this is what we talked about last week.

Some of these troubles and difficulties in the middle have to do with the lives of people and institutions that are Christian: *inconsistencies between belief and behavior* – so we feel “let down” or embarrassed or disappointed; or even deceived or betrayed by those who we were banking on to be our human mentors or guides.

And, then, too, there are troubles and difficulties that are *intellectual or theological in nature*. There are questions that arise about God and life that are hard to answer and that just don't go away

And then there are troubles and difficulties with *hard events and circumstances*: Sometimes it's just a matter of inconvenience: the wrong things happen at the wrong times, and we're thrown out of kilter! But then it can get worse, much worse: the inconveniences turn into tragedies that are serious and sometimes deadly, such as wars, and famines, and hurricanes, as well as shootings. And so unbelievable pain and suffering emerge all over the place.

And as believers, especially in an increasingly unbelieving society, sometimes the onslaught of all these troubles and difficulties feels overwhelming: so our energy fails us, our initial zeal is lost, and we may be tempted to turn back or go slow, or allow our journey with God to come to a grinding halt. And some of you are there, or almost there!

And what I said about this last week was this:

That Jesus knows this, he knows all about these hard events in the middle of the journey, and time and again, he tells his followers not to be surprised by them, but rather, like the Boy Scouts, to BE PREPARED!

And this is part of the message, e.g., in Jesus' story that we call the *Parable of the Sower* (Matthew 13). In the story, Jesus gives a heads-up, in fact an assurance, that life on the pathway with him will be

- complicated, not straightforward or easy
- like farming, there'll be rocks and weeds and distractions along the way.

In other words, Jesus teaches that evil is real, and life's a battle, and trouble is inevitable, *even when we do everything right*. But, the implication from Jesus is, "Even so, don't quit! Stay the course!"

And this was a message that Jesus our Guide and Shepherd not only taught but experienced himself. In fact, one of the most powerful incentives for Christians to keep on going despite setbacks is *not just the teaching of Jesus but the example of Jesus!* – that is, his own suffering and death for you and me.

He wasn't a masochist -- He didn't "want to face death on a cross," but he stayed the course, he finished his journey to the cross because he loved us. He knew that his death for us was essential for us, if we were to be reconciled to God -- this was the Father's path for his life so that God says to us in Hebrews 12

Keep Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who, for the joy that was set before, him endured the cross, despising (ignoring) the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Or let me put it like this:

- Even though Jesus was Good!
- Even though Jesus was Perfect!
- Even though he was and is the Divine Son of God!

Yet, he *wasn't* exempt from suffering and evil. He did not use his power to exempt himself! But kept on the path to the end. Therefore, so – should we! "Stay on the Course!" "Keep on the Path!" no matter what it is or where it lies.

Of course, sometimes when it comes to troubles and difficulties one of the questions we ask, especially in reference to God is "why"?

- Why has this happened?
- Why does God permit sorrow and tragedy and evil in the first place?

And over many years as a pastor I've repeatedly struggled with this question. For me, the best books out there on the subject, by far, are by Tim Keller (The Reason for God, and pretty much anything he writes). But my personal "cliff notes answer" to the question "why"? Goes something like this:

(1) First of all: I think that the possibility of evil is almost inherent in God's first decision: the decision to create, to create something rather than nothing. In a sense God cannot stop himself from creating, like the love of potential parents, the internal love of God within the Godhead, the Trinity is passionate to overflow into new life. But only God is perfect and by definition everything created – everything other than God – is in some way less than God; less than perfect. It may be "good"; it may be "wonderful"; it may be "perfect for God's purposes"; it may be "very good" (as Genesis 1:31 says) but it's not as good as God! And because "it's not as good as God," the possibility of evil and tragedy are lurking just around the corner (like the serpent in the Garden of Eden) and become real possibilities when God makes a second critical decision.

(2) God's second decision, like the first decision, flows from love! God decides to give his created universe "liberty and freedom." And this includes human beings like you and me. If God didn't love us, he'd have made us like puppets on a string, with no freedom or power of choice; he'd have been a dictator who controlled us. But because God loves us, he gives us free will to choose – *even to choose what is selfish, and foolish and evil.*

And though we know it's wrong and harmful and hurts God and others, what the scriptures tells us, and what we all know from personal experience, is this: that every single one of us has made those selfish, foolish and evil choices repeatedly.

And while -- most of the time – the outcomes of our choices don't seem to be particularly evil (so what's the harm of eating an apple?), yet, from time to time, the whole can of worms explodes, as it did last week in Las Vegas, and sheer hell breaks loose, and the face of evil is laid bare. It's always there. But sometimes it's covered, or we miss it!

- Every single day, in fact, on average, here in the U.S. 92 people die from guns and bullets (2013). Of these 92 (on average) 35 are homicides and 57 are suicides.
- Every single day in the U.S, on average about the same number (about 100) – die on our roads!
- And the same number again from opioid addiction
- And across the world today and every single day, 65 million people have no homes because they've fled as refugees and 94 million lack clean water

Which leaves you wondering why God would make the world at all!

And I might wonder that too – unless I also believed, as I do, that

(1) God will clear up the mess in the end, and

(2) Here in the murky middle, God will use his power to redeem evil and create enormous and stunning good, seemingly out of nothing and nowhere.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in his Letter to the Christians in Rome

(8:28) With God: all things work together for good with those who love God and are called according to his purposes.

And the Message of the Book of Revelation (beyond all the wild and wooly and fearful symbolism) is no different from The Lord of the Rings or The Hunger Games (and a host of other books and movies) that in the end, when the final whistle blows:

- God will not only win! And end evil forever,
- But will sort out all the injustices and unfairnesses of life as well

As Paul writes again in Romans 8:18:

I consider the sufferings of this present age are not worthy of being compared to the glory to come (in heaven).

And for me, this makes sense: it satisfies my mind with the question “why”?

BUT having said that, what also has to be said is this: *That in most moments of crisis a rational answer to the question “why” is not usually what people really hunger and cry for!*

Rather, the one question that usually rises to the surface and that almost always outweighs the others, is more like this:

- Am I alone in this valley or is there someone with me?
- Am I alone in this pit, or is there someone to comfort and help me?
- Am I alone in my pain – or are there some 1st responders coming my way?

And if I should die and not make it

- Am I alone in my death – or is there someone with me now and on the other side too?

In other words: the question that matters most in the moment of crisis brings us back to the image of a journey as if we were on an adventure to a foreign land. It's all a bit risky, of course – being far away from home. But that's part of the thrill isn't it? Until it all begins to unravel and go wrong: and what you need to know then, and quickly, is that you have some really good traveling companions on the path with you, who won't ever leave you or let you down.

In Las Vegas this week

- The care of those protecting loved ones during the shooting was powerful
 - and so too the response of the medical teams in the city
- I cannot forget a news interview on Tuesday evening with a surgeon who'd been on the go for hours and hours and the love and humility that was apparent in his descriptions of what he'd seen and done. It was love – demonstrated in skill and technology (to be sure), but also in kindness and touch and words and human presence.

We human beings can weather pretty much any storm – if we know we're not alone. And God knows this -- on both a divine and a human level.

On a Divine level – when we scream to God: “Where are you now?” (notice – it's not just, “Why?” but personal!), God says:

“I'm here – as I've always been. I would never ask you to experience what I myself have not experienced. I'm here. Hold onto the cross. It's the most profound assurance you can have of my presence. If I was willing to descend to such depths to be with you for your sins THEN – then I will never not be with you when the crisis strikes NOW.

On a Divine Level -- God knows that in crisis we need his presence

But he also knows this on a Human Level – that we need one another

And so he calls us to use our free will, our God-given, created free will, to make sure that we HAVE traveling companions for ourselves, and that we BECOME traveling companions for others, wherever the path goes and whether we understand or like it or not.

It almost sounds perfunctory in the Gospel story we read earlier: that Jesus choose 12 disciples to be with him (Luke 6:12-16).

When day came, Jesus called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, 15and Matthew, and Thomas, another James, another Simon, and two Judas, one of whom betrayed him

Seems simple enough but two things really matter.

(1) It matters that we know their names. It matters because it reminds us that their individual lives and choices are important to God; and

(2) It also matters that we're told there were "twelve," the same number as the twelve tribes in Israel. It's as if Jesus was saying, I love you each one by name, but as you follow me on the pathway of discipleship, follow me as a flock, a people, a team, a nation. In fact, follow me as and with "traveling companions" – and not alone. Never forget that

- Someone else needs you on the journey
- And at some point (in fact at every point)– you need them

On March 31, 1968, here in Washington at the National Cathedral, in his last Sunday morning sermon, before he was shot to death, Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

"Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood; and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish together as fools. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.

And this is the teaching of our Guide and Shepherd, Jesus Christ, for the journey!

Of course there are multiple serious questions that need to be addressed and answered in the face of tragedy and evil. Why does it happen at all? Why has THIS happened? And how do we prevent it from happening again? And countless other questions too.

But there's one which may seem trivial but it's not. It's about people, and relationships, and love and traveling companions

- Who are my traveling companions on the spiritual journey?
- Who are there for me?
- And who am I there for them?
- Is God one of them? Really?
 - There for us? True!
 - But are we there for Him? And Who else?
- On a human level? Who do I need on my journey with Christ?
- And who needs me? There's someone there who needs you too

It's unacceptable to Jesus for us to go it alone

Not his will! Bad choice! Don't hold back.

Make sure you have traveling companions and are a traveling companion for the journey today!

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