

January 4, 2015

The National Presbyterian Church

***A Vision for God's Future: Following the Star: Moving On***

Philippians 3:4-15

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In the next few weeks together in our Sunday morning sermons we're going to be thinking about the biblical basis for the major themes that are a part of the new strategic plan that our elders have adopted for our congregation. This past October, our elders adopted a new strategic plan (<http://nationalpres.org/strategic-plan>). The major themes of the plan involve commitments

- to grow spiritually together.
- to worship faithfully together.
- to proclaim the gospel and embody the gospel together.
- to demonstrate to a world which does not believe in or trust in God (and at times is weary of all our words) to demonstrate the love of God to the world together.
- to sustain the local church (which has always been a key part of God's working in the world, our local church, this congregation). We have committed ourselves to sustaining our work together here at our own congregation.

So we're going to be looking at these great themes alongside the strong and profound Biblical base that accompanies each one. Today, though, I want to begin by setting the scene for this whole series of sermons by thinking of an image – an image which will provide the context for thinking about the plan.

- The image is the image of a journey, and of course (given our proximity to Christmas and “Epiphany Sunday”) the image flows from the Magi, the Wise Men, following the star on a journey towards Bethlehem. I want us to think of the importance of this image of travel or of a journey within our lives, and indeed within the lives of everybody in this world: a journey, both literal and spiritual.
- And then, having thought together about the power of that image and the prevalence of that image within our society, I want us to think of the strategic plan as quite simply a map – a map, imperfect as it may be, that sets our direction, that helps us get on course, that helps us move on our way and which will guide us in some sense with the help of Jesus Christ to the place where God wants us to be in the days that lie ahead.

So let's think together first of all not about the map but about the journey, about the traveling together.

Many of you may have been traveling in the last couple of weeks, over the holidays. For some of you traveling is fun and you're sad that your traveling days – at least these days – are over and that you are home again. I talked to one family in the congregation a few weeks ago who said that one of their great joys was getting in the car with their children and heading on their way; closing the door and just heading on their way, because they had a family time together that nothing would interrupt. For other people getting in the car with a family with nothing to interrupt you would *not* be a great joy! But for this family (and I have memories both wonderful and not so wonderful of this) it's wonderful: everything else shut out and we're on our way, together; on the journey together.

But for others, the traveling is not so much fun. There are many people who think of traveling as something to be endured; as the obstacle between here and there (we “just want to get there”! We are here and there's our destination, we'll grin and bear it as we travel in order to get there. And part of the “grinning and bearing it” arises because so often, other people want to travel at exactly the same time that we want to travel! So they are in the air, they are passing through security, or they're on the road, at precisely the time when we want to be there too, by ourselves.

The American Automobile Association estimates that in this two-week period between Christmas and New Year that 98.6 million people in the United States are traveling. (<http://newsroom.aaa.com/>). That's almost 30% of the population traveling in one way or another. I think 50% of that number is actually on the road, on I-95, between here and Richmond, Virginia, or so it seems. In fact, last week one of my daughters took four hours to get from here to Richmond (that's traveling at about 25 miles an hour).

For me I don't mind the journey. I don't mind the travel most of the time, or the various obstacles that we face. For me the difficulty is actually getting out of the house. It's getting on the way; it's the leaving which is the problem. I actually never “leave” for a trip. I only “re-leave” for a trip. And some of you know exactly what I'm thinking about here. “Re-leaving” is when you leave the first time, you get two or three blocks from the house and then you realize you've forgotten something, like your passport, your tickets, the air conditioning, the lights: there are a dozen things that could be forgotten – but you only remember them, your brain only kicks into gear, *after* you get in the car the first time and you head on your way. And so you have to head all the way back home again and then you “re-leave.”

Which is when, for me, the journey actually begins. That's when all kinds of experiences begin to happen. In fact, almost by definition, “the journey” is the place where you are when you have left your place of safety and comfort, and to a certain extent predictability, behind; and you're now in this unknown world, with forces around you which are somewhat beyond your control; and you just have to grin and bear it. What's going to happen out there is going to happen! Which may for some people be a curse, but for other people may be an adventure.

Which is why so many stories and so many movies have as part of their plot, or part of their theme, or part of their context, the background of a journey, the background of travel.

Whether they are religious or secular it's there in so many of the stories and so many of the movies that we are familiar with. So think about the root of Western literature.

- Go back to ancient Greek literature and think of *The Odyssey* of Homer, the story of Odysseus (Ulysses) and his ten year journey back from Troy, the battles in Troy, across the Aegean to Greece. [Come to think of it, taking ten years to cross the Aegean makes I-95 look positively speedy!]. Ten years, and in those years, on the sea, in the journey, all kinds of things happen there, beyond personal control. Once you're out there on the journey, once you're traveling all kinds of things happen.
- Or think about early English literature and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It's the story of a journey, a pilgrimage, in which lives are shared.
- Or think about religious literature in the days of the Reformation. You've got John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.
- Or bringing things right up to date think about the movies that are playing in our theaters just now. Four of the best movies that Hollywood has to offer this month involve journeys as a major theme. There is *The Hobbit*; and the *Hunger Games* and *Wild* or *Into the Woods*. All of them, without exception, involve somewhere in the story a journey willingly or unwillingly taken, in which good and bad occur, and in which there are gains and losses; in which there is the expected and the unexpected. And through it all some lesson is to be learned, some growth occurs (personal growth, spiritual growth) that would not have happened or occurred had you just stayed at home; or, at times, had you not been forced out of your home, your comfort zone, heading on the way, traveling to who knows where.

It's within the context of the journey that all kinds of things begin to happen and if you don't allow the journey to take place, or to begin, if you never leave or re-leave, then those things don't happen either.

All of this of course takes us back to our own book, our own story the Bible which is filled with one travel story after another. Not just with precepts, rules and regulations, but with stories. And many of those stories are stories about journeys.

- Go back right to the beginning, to Genesis Chapter 3, and you've got the unwelcome journey of Adam and Eve out of their home, out of the Garden of Eden, to the outside, to the world outside because they have sinned. They need to learn a few spiritual lessons and they are going to learn them not at home, not in the Garden of Eden but outside. So God sends them packing and they cannot get back in again – unless there is a Savior, of course, who can bring them home again, into that place where the journey is over and they will find their eternal destiny.

- Or, in the book of Genesis as well, there's the story of Abraham and Sarah traveling to the Promised Land. And in that traveling they are growing in faith and trust in the God who leads and guides them.
- Or in Exodus, there's the story of Moses [which actually brings us to yet one more movie, *Exodus*, playing this month – that's five major movies out there which have “traveling” as a major theme. Surely this is not by accident? It is there repeatedly because it's in our psyche this sense of traveling, or need to travel, or resisting travel.] So there is Moses traveling with all those people, with a whole congregation of people, out of slavery, across the Red Sea towards the Promised Land. If Odysseus takes ten years to get home, Moses takes 40 years on this journey – with many lessons learned along the way. Among them the lesson of spiritual leadership, how to be a leader in the midst of a group of people who don't necessarily want to go in the same direction. It's on the journey, not in the classroom or at home, that Moses is learning those lessons, on the way to the destination that God sets.
- Or think about the story, still in the Old Testament, of Jonah. Jonah running away from God. Jonah traveling. Traveling first by ship and then in the belly of a big fish and then hoofing it by foot to the city of Nineveh (modern day northern Iraq). And then on the way he has to grow spiritually – he has to deal with his prejudice against the people of Nineveh. He hates these people; but God loves these people. And it's on the journey that God confronts Jonah with this ugliness within his life that he has to deal with. It's in the journey that the growth takes place.
- Or you move to the New Testament and to our Christmas story I've already mentioned that the theme of journey is in my mind today because of the story of the Magi, the Wise Men, who are traveling from a place far off in the East, to a backward part of the Roman Empire to bring their wealth to a family and to a child they know next to nothing about. It must have been humbling for them to do this, to take this journey and to meet with this family and then to offer their wealth to this child. Could it be that their friend laughed at them or mocked them, but that they were determined, anyway?

Within the Christmas story (in Luke 1-2) there are three more travel narratives as it were.

- There's the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, traveling to her cousin Elizabeth, and along the way she wrestles internally with this news that she has received that the angel shares with her about her baby. To begin with, surely she said to herself that this is not how she expected life to be. But on the way to Elizabeth a song arises within her heart, a song of praise to God, and she begins to sing this song of praise to God who has lifted her up from obscurity and given her this role in his purposes. We call this song the Magnificat.
- And then there is of course the story of Mary and Joseph traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem and trusting God's provision for safety and for shelter when there is no room in the Inn. On that journey they learn to trust God step by step just as we learn step by step.
- And then too there are the shepherds in the field and their journey is short. They are just outside the town of Bethlehem, in the country fields, and the angel tells them to make the

journey into town, into the community, as if to say, “you have been invited to go meet the Son of God – but you have to travel from here to there to see him.” What a surprise! These shepherds, who in the opinion of others would be just nobodies, were the first to be invited to meet with Jesus the king.

These are stories of traveling in which God does his work in and through this movement from one place to another and then you move on to Jesus himself as an adult.

- Jesus’ ministry is a ministry of traveling throughout the length and the breadth of Galilee up and down to Jerusalem and then the final story before Easter, on Palm Sunday, it’s traveling again. It’s a journey again: down the Mount of Olives and down across the valley and up into the city traveling on the way to his death for you and me.
- And after the story of Jesus, after his life, his death and his resurrection, yet another traveling story. Jesus’ arch enemy, Saul the Pharisee, who becomes known as Paul the Apostle, is traveling! He’s traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus to persecute Christians. This is the wrong road, spiritually, it’s completely the wrong road, but it’s on this journey, in the middle of nowhere, that God through Jesus Christ confronts Saul and calls him into his service. God does not condemn him for being on the wrong path, but calls him to join him, to join God on the right path.

And for the rest of his life Paul carries on that journey, quite literally, and with great physical strength, taking the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, news of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, on a journey throughout the known world of the time, the world of the Eastern Mediterranean region. Journeying this time, not to destroy Christian faith but to proclaim it – faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, to follow the metaphor, the image, to proclaim the Savior, who had met him while he was on the wrong path; who ignored not only all the wrong things he had done but also ignored all the right things he had done, ignored it all, and said to him *while he was on that journey* **“It’s you I want. Just you. None of the other trappings. It’s just you I want.”** He might never have heard that message if he had stayed in Jerusalem. But it was there in the middle of nowhere that he heard it, as it were, for the first time: **“It’s you I want. Not what you’ve done, not where you’ve been, not what you were born into, but just you, for myself, for my own.”** And on that road Paul enters into a new relationship with God that nothing and no one can take away.

He describes this experience as he writes to the Christians in the Greek city of Philippi in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter, like this. He says

*“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh [DR: that is, in who you are by birth or by achievement], I have more reason for confidence. Circumcised on the eighth day [DR: this is like being baptized at the right time]. A member of the people of Israel of the tribe of Benjamin. [DR: this like claiming that I was born a Presbyterian, I was baptized a Presbyterian, and I’m even a Scottish Presbyterian. I’ve got it all right!!] . . of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews as to*

*the Law, a Pharisee [DR: I'm in the best group, in the most devout group] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the Law blameless.*

Nobody had a better birth or family than me, says Paul. Nobody has been more zealous to follow God than me says the apostle Paul. But because of that day, on that journey, I see now that none of that adds up to anything. It's not worth anything.

*Whatever gains I had these I now come to regard as loss because of Christ. [DR: The Christ I met on the road or the Christ who met me while I was on the road.] More than that I regard everything as lost because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I've suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain [this one thing that I may gain] Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness [DR: a relationship with God] that comes with my birth or my achievements but one that comes through faith in Christ [DR: or through the faithfulness of Christ to me] – a relationship with God, given by God as a gift, and received by faith.*

This is what the apostle Paul learned in that moment while he was on a journey on the wrong road, traveling, journeying, to pursue and persecute Christians, and finding instead that God through Jesus Christ was pursuing home, not to persecute him, but to grasp his life for good, and for purpose, forever, never to let him go. This amazing new relationship was found not at home but on the road. And in this case even while he was on the wrong road.

On the road, the right road or the wrong road. On the journey. A wonderful metaphor to describe where it is that God wants us to be when he interacts with our lives. Not always playing it safe at home, but always moving on, moving on with God, and allowing God in that journey to do the unexpected and wonderful in and through our lives. Life as a journey into the unexpected, with God at work, precisely when we are out of our comfort zone and on our way.

In Paul's case it was on the road that God assured him not only of God's unexpected love but of Paul's unexpected new destination. Paul calls it "resurrection." He now knew that he had an eternal home in heaven, and that his journey, leaving whatever security there was down here behind, would lead to an eternal security that nothing could ever take away or shake. If he had been loved and confronted by God for good while he was on the wrong road, surely God, would see him safely through to his ultimate destination.

But Paul was not one of those who merely put up with the journey in order to get to the destination. For Paul, it was a sense of the journey itself that mattered. The journey wasn't just an obstacle to be born with grudgingly on the way to that destination. The journey itself was important too. The journey itself was the vehicle of God by which Paul's life would be transformed in the present as well. Paul was sure that God would use all the bumps and long empty stretches, all the twists and turns, all the obstacles, all the traffic jams and delays, all the other people in the way, as a vehicle through which his life would be transformed into the image of Christ his new Lord and Savior. The journey itself was to be, as was the wilderness in the Exodus story, a place of transformation. In that transformation God's purpose for Paul was that

Paul would come to know God through Jesus Christ. Enter into a relationship in which he would know intimately the one who was his Creator and his Redeemer, coming to know him not only in his head but to know him in his heart and life. The Redeemer who would walk with him always, and see him safely to his destination would also be the redeemer who would transform Paul's life into the image of Christ. ***But only, says the apostle Paul, in our passage of scripture, only if we press on. Only if we strain forward. Only if we stay on the path with Jesus Christ until the journey's end.***

So this is what Paul writes in the rest of our passage in Philippians 3, at verse 10. On this journey, he says,

*I want to know Christ.* [DR: This is now part of the purpose of the journey. In and through the journey we're in the car with Jesus. I want to know Christ]. *And the power of his Resurrection* [DR: And then these strange words]; *and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him even in his death.* [DR: I'll take the good and the bad, because God will use the good and the bad, even the suffering, to conform me to the image of Jesus Christ.] *If somehow I may attain the Resurrection from the dead. Not that I've already attained this or have already reached the goal. But he says I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 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* [DR: He's always on the move], *I press on toward the goal.* [DR: There are going to be obstacles which are going to push us back to our old home, our old comfort zone and away from God's journey and God's destination. But he says] *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the Heavenly call or the upward call of God and Christ Jesus.*

Keep on traveling he says, and along the way in the journey we'll come to know God through Jesus Christ; and God will use all the bumps and the bruises, all the twists and the turns, all the obstacles and suffering, all the vehicles in our way, as tools to transform our lives into the image of God made known in Christ for which we were created.

This is not just Paul's call from God, this kind of journeying. This is our call too, whether we've had a powerful Damascus Road, Paul- type, experience on the road or not. All roads can lead to Christ! Your road may be wrong, or right, exciting or ordinary. It doesn't matter. But: . .

- Somewhere on the journey, God wants to confront us as he did with Paul, and give to us a traveling companion – the sense that we have a relationship with God that we cannot ever lose because we have not and cannot ever earn it, no matter how well born we are, no matter what we have achieved. A gift! And because it is a gift nothing can take it away.
- On this journey God wants us to know not only that we have this relationship, but that we have an assured destination, an eternal destination, absolutely secure with God in Jesus Christ; a destination that, once again, we did not earn and therefore can never lose

- On this journey, God wants us to know that our lives are always to be growing, moving in the direction of Christ, transformed into his image. Along the way our traveling companion Jesus Christ says to us, I want to know you and I want you to know me; and in every step with you on the road, I want to transform your thinking and your doing and your being, your life, until bit by bit you are transformed into my image, the image for which we were created and which one day will be complete when we arrive at our final home.

But all of this brings us back very briefly to our strategic plan and to the outline of the plan that you have in your hands and to which I draw to your attention again:

([http://nationalpres.org/sites/default/files/Ways%20to%20Get%20Involved%20in%20the%20Strategic%20Plan\\_0.pdf](http://nationalpres.org/sites/default/files/Ways%20to%20Get%20Involved%20in%20the%20Strategic%20Plan_0.pdf)) – This journey has some very noble and ambitious goals: to become like Jesus Christ. And you may be left feeling “*Well how in the world do I become like Jesus Christ? This is such a huge goal. Where do I begin? How do I start?*” Well, ultimately, that is precisely what a plan is for. It’s a place to start; a map which helps us begin the journey [or in my case re-begin, restart the journey!!]. It doesn’t matter whether it’s the first time or the second time. The map gives us a sense of direction for those first steps. Gives us some milestones along the way so that we keep moving on this journey together. If you want to be restored to the image of Christ then

- it begins with a passion for spiritual growth.
- It begins with a passion for regular worship.
- It begins with a passion to be ambassadors of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed.
- It begins with a passion for the health of the local Christian community.

These are all tools that God will use on the way. And if these steps are too big, then look at the little bullet points in the middle. They are even smaller steps to take, one step at a time in the direction of Jesus Christ and companionship with Jesus Christ to reach our destination and to become like Christ along the way.

So my prayer for you, and my prayer for me, in this coming year, is that

-- we will see this year in our lives, in our work and in our church as *a year in which we are journeying with Jesus Christ*, a journey in which he has much to teach us along the way, and much work to do in and through our lives.

-- And we’ll know we’ve got some guidelines, some steps that we can take to keep moving along the way.

-- And that today, you will commit yourself to one of those steps that will get you out of the door on this journey, knowing that God will lead us safely, and transformed, to our destination in the end. May we follow, may we travel, and may we journey together

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