

I want to start this sermon with where we ended the service last week, that is, with the benediction from last Sunday.

I said: We leave today going into a future as yet unmapped. Take faith with you as you go; let compassion and hope mark the trails you take; peace and justice be the horizon you seek.

It was a benediction for entering the new year. But it really could be, maybe should be, the way we as Christians enter each day.

I want to start there because that’s the end of this sermon I have in mind!

The Christian faith is about the journey: daily, yearly, for a lifetime.

Just look at the story of Jesus: from his parents’ journeys in the Christmas story, his own journey of 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness, tempted and tormented by the devil...

Or his journey from the Mount of Transfiguration to the cross on Calvary, or his walk to Emmaus after his resurrection.

Or any of the other journeys in the story of God’s people – from the blockbuster kind of journey of Moses and the Exodus to the simple, everyday journey of one woman to the well in the center of town where she meets a stranger.

Rachel Held Evans says that “It has become cliché to talk about faith as a journey, and yet the metaphor holds.”

She writes “Scripture doesn’t speak of people who *found* God. Scripture speaks of people who *walked* with God. This is a keep-moving, one-foot-in-front-of-the-other, who-knows-what’s-next deal, and you never exactly arrive. (But) No step taken in faith is wasted, not by a God who makes all things new.”

What about your steps entering each day, making the journey as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

A few years ago, I heard Dr. Tim Jordan, a noted pediatrician in the area of child development, give a wonderful presentation on effective parenting.

He referred to Stephen Covey and the habits of highly effective people, and he noted especially the habit of starting with the end in mind.

That’s a good thought for all of us in our own journey wanting to end as stronger, more faithful disciples walking with Jesus Christ.

But Dr. Jordan made the point that many parents seem to make their journey of parenting, of rearing their children, not with a positive end in mind, but rather motivated by fear:

Fear of not getting into a good college, fear of not getting a good job, fear of not making enough money, fear of not being popular, fear of not making the team, fear of this, fear of that...

What happens with this fear-based life, he says, is that when our children grow up and go out, they are ill-prepared for the real world!

And that holds true for you and me as we grow up and go out as disciples of Jesus. What is it that sustains us, keeps us going?

A preacher, during his sermon, asked a rhetorical question: “Let every person here ask the question, ‘Who am I?’”

He was startled when out from the congregation came a voice filled with pain and sadness: “I wish to God I knew!”

Listen, that is the cry that rises out of a fearful spirit, an empty spirit.

And that seems to be true for so many who are ill-prepared to live their own journey, not sure of who they are or where they're going.

Let me give you another picture: Do you remember when you first learned to ride a bicycle?

Training wheels made it safer and more comfortable for you to learn. They kept you from falling. They helped you to gain a little confidence.

Then it was time to take off the training wheels – a traumatic experience for both child and parent!

All of a sudden you were exposed to the risk of falling. You had to keep your own balance. And yet with a little bit of determination, you learned how to do it.

And then what you felt was...Freedom!

Now you could ride up the driveway, down the sidewalk, through the fields, along the street.

You could lean into turns and feel the wind in your face. You could speed down the hills, and, don't tell Mom, you could fly off the curb!

It was wonderful and exhilarating. Once you learned to ride without the training wheels, you never wanted or needed them again.

And that's the question for the journey of faith: Are you living your Christian life with the training wheels on?

Is your fear keeping you from taking those steps where faith leads into an unmapped future, from seeking that horizon of peace and justice?

Let's put it in terms of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

Green pastures: Are we afraid of not having enough food? Yes, there are many who live with that fear daily.

But I think most of us here have plenty of food, so much that we really need to discipline ourselves not to eat too much.

Or still waters: A place for rest and renewal, shelter. Yes, there are many who live that fear daily. But I don't think any of you had to sleep under a bridge last night.

Restore my soul...paths of righteousness... through the valley of the darkest shadows...the presence of my enemies. What is really following me all the days of my life?

Is that it? Our life is intense and stressful and maybe we're afraid that life will catch up to us and when we try to step it up a little, we feel like we're running on empty.

There's just nothing in the soul-tank., and we just don't know how we can keep on going.

A preacher friend tells of the time he was walking to church one Sunday in his city neighborhood and passed a coffee shop. He saw a lady he knew sitting outside, and they chatted for a few minutes.

He invited her to come to worship, but she held up her Sunday paper and said, "This is my Bible," and then her coffee cup, "This is my communion."

That's the nonsense that feeds the fear that many of us feel, the void in our lives, the emptiness, the lack of significance...that we are unwilling or unable to give ourselves away to something greater than self-interest!

Like the woman at the well, we have a life that follows us and sometimes prevents us from a life that follows Jesus.

Until, until that moment Jesus offers her and us the living water: a cup overflowing and all I need is a sip...

Like the man I was visiting in the hospital. The nurse had just arranged the pillows, checked his medicines, and he seemed to be in good spirits.

He still had a twinkle in his eyes, a quick wit, that hadn't changed, but so much had changed and we all knew it.

With a mix of warmth and affection, he summed it all up as he slowly said, "If God brings me through this, it will be all right; and if not, I'll be all right, too. God will still take care."

During his life he had drunk deep of the living water. He knew that Jesus knew his life, and still loved him; he had grabbed his handlebars and lived in the freedom of God's love as he journeyed his road of life!

Look again at the Samaritan woman: an outcast, oppressed, property that was passed around, living on the edge of life.

She sat at the table prepared by Jesus in the presence of her enemies and sipped from his cup; and what did she do, she loved others into the presence of Jesus.

She found the love that embraces all of life so that all God's children feel loved and cared for.

Just as we find it at this table prepared by our Lord: the bread and cup, not yours or mine to keep, but to share with another.

Such love is meant to sustain everyone for the journey; not a cliché, but real life with the living Christ.

Such love is never general, but concrete and specific. Jesus spoke in terms of giving away our coats, walking the second mile, turning the other cheek, loving our enemies; as personal as Jesus and the woman at the well.

This kind of love allows us out of our abundance to cast out the fear in those who live day to day with no shelter, no food, no clothing, no freedom, no hope, nobody.

I like how the United Methodist and Roman Catholic churches joined together and said: *Love is pure gift, other-centered and boundless in its range and scope, directed to the whole world. In*

*particular, it pushes out to the poor, the weak, and the unloved. It is love without preference and without distinction...*"

And that brings us to the end I had in mind when we started: As you enter each new day, let your life be filled with compassion and hope, peace and justice, and sustained by the gift of God's overflowing love in Jesus Christ.

From love for love to love: Enjoy the journey!

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.