

## GOING

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.  
For you shall go out in joy,  
and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.  
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,  
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.*

*Isaiah 55: 10-13*

*As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.*

*John 20: 21*

This the third and final sermon in a series we are calling “(Still) Being the Church.” It is based on the 3 G’s of our vision statement, Gathering, Growing, and Going. And it is a reminder that, even though we can’t yet worship together in person, we haven’t stopped being the church. We have considered the ways we are still gathered in community, even as we are scattered. We have been encouraged to continue to grow together in faith hope and love. This week, we are looking at what it means, in our current context, to go out and make Christ known.

The sermon text is from the Gospel of John, but before we get to that, I’d like to take a brief stroll through the first few chapters of the Gospel of Mark. And let me set up that stroll with a story from Frederick Buechner.

In a book called *The Alphabet of Grace*, Frederick Buechner imagines a conversation with his grandmother concerning a series of lectures he is preparing to deliver at Harvard University. “The way I understood it,” she says, “you were supposed to devote these talks to religious matters. Incarnation and Grace and Salvation were some of the noble words you used.”

And in his imaginary conversation Buechner replies, “Feet are religious too.” She comes back with a skeptical, “That’s what you say.”

And so he explains, “If you want to know who you are, if you are more than academically interested in that particular mystery, you could do a lot worse than look to your feet for an answer.” He says, “When you wake up in the morning, called by God to be a self

again, if you want to know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are.” (*The Alphabet of Grace*, 24-25)

You could certainly say that about Jesus, particularly as his ministry is presented in Mark’s gospel. There are a lot of footprints in that narrative. It begins with John the Baptist, who is sent to prepare the way of the Lord. So, at the outset, even before Jesus makes an appearance, we get a hint that this gospel is about a way to follow, a path to leave footprints on.

Then, the first appearance of Jesus is when he is making his way from his hometown of Nazareth, down to where John is baptizing folks in the Jordan River. After his baptism and wilderness trek, Jesus hits the road and begins an itinerant ministry throughout the region of Galilee. He walked beside the sea, where he called the first of his followers. He passed through wheatfields on the way to the next village. He went up mountainsides to teach, and crossed the Sea of Galilee in a boat to heal. Almost every section of the teaching of Jesus or story about healing is preceded and followed by an itinerary or travelogue: “They went to Capernaum . . . and entered the synagogue.” “As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon.” “He returned to Capernaum.” “Jesus went out again beside the sea.” “Then he went home.” “Again he began to teach by the sea.” “When evening had come he said, ‘Let us go to the other side.’” “He left that place and came to his hometown.” “Then he went about among the villages teaching.”

So, at the outset of this gospel, Mark establishes a restless rhythm, pulsing with strong verbs of motion. Sometimes I wonder if those twelve disciples had a hard time keeping up with him. Seems like every time they stopped to catch their breath, he would be on the move to the next place. I imagine that they were sturdy, working men. But having occupations like fishermen or tax collector meant that much of their working day was spent sitting in a boat, or on the shore, or behind a table or desk. They may not have been used to being on the move so much. And not only did these disciples follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Once they got into this rhythm and up to speed, he began to send them out on their own, in pairs, to the villages and towns of Galilee.

Certainly, as we mentioned last week, Jesus also took time to get away from the crowds and the pressures of his ministry. He would regularly gather with others and study the ancient wisdom of Torah and the prophets. Sometimes he went off to sit alone in a quiet place and nurture his inner life. He didn’t neglect the more contemplative part of life, but he didn’t find enlightenment by sitting under a tree, and he didn’t set out to establish an order of followers who would closet themselves away, even for the laudable purposes of prayer and worship. His ministry was active and public; it was oriented toward going out to make the good news of God’s grace known, in whatever way was available to him.

Now, let’s pause here and reflect on something that may be obvious to you. It may seem a bit odd to be talking about going out when we haven’t even been able to come in for some six months now. I mean, technically speaking, we have been out for all this time now. But, as we have seen with both our gathering and our growing, there is more than one way of understanding what it means to go out and make Christ known.

Going out is about more than just leaving our building after a Sunday worship service. Because being on the move is not only about motion, it is also about direction. They say that in

a crisis there are those who run away from danger to save their own skin, and there are those who put their lives at risk, running back into the burning building to save others. Now, I don't think following the way of Jesus necessarily calls for a reckless disregard for personal safety, but it does re-orient our lives and often calls us to go in a direction we might not ordinarily go, and to encounter people we might ordinarily avoid.

Going out is a way of orienting the mission of our congregation to those places outside of the four walls of this building, and orienting our lives toward those people who are outside the circle of our friends. And that means paying attention to where your feet take you. Or, even more to the point, paying attention to where the feet of Jesus went and following in his footsteps.

And, of course, we also know that all of the coming and going in the gospel narratives sets up the final journey of Jesus as he sets his face toward Jerusalem and the cross. And we know that when push came to shove, even his closest followers ran the other way, deserting him when the risks of discipleship became clear.

In John's gospel we learn that after the crucifixion of Christ, his followers retreated to a safe place, a room where they could lock the door. And it's not clear whether they are locking themselves in or locking the rest of the world out, but what is clearly stated is that they retreated in fear.

If we haven't known that feeling before, it may be that now more than ever, we feel a bit closer to those disciples. I will admit that I have days when I would like to lock out the world, and retreat into my safe place with my books and my music and my kitchen.

But we also know from the gospel story that the locks do nothing to keep the resurrected Christ out. Christ finds a way into our lives and our safe retreats and first offers a word of peace and assurance to calm our fears. But then he reminds us that "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." In so many words, he reminds us of something we have noted often. That to stay where your are, in safety, is a barren life; it is no life at all. But as Buechner says, where your feet take you, that is where your life is. To go out into the world in risk is to embrace life and to find life and to bring new life where it is needed.

We have a lot to be fearful of right now. And we have good reasons to not go out. Sometimes being a good neighbor means keeping our physical distance from others. So it calls for creative thinking to find ways to continue to orient the direction of our lives, and the life and mission of our congregation, not inward in fear, but outward with joy—out where a hurting, fearful, often angry world is in desperate need of a word of peace, a gesture of reconciliation, and an awareness that they are loved.

And as God sent Jesus into the world to embody that message, so now Christ sends us, in whatever way we have available to us, to make that message known to others. The dynamic force that gathers us as a community and nurtures our growth, is the same dynamic force that empowers us to go out in joy and make Christ known.

May it be so.

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