

GET MOVING

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 7, 2018
based on Hebrews 11:8-10; Matthew 2:1-12**

The sermon this morning is the beginning of a sermon series entitled, “Journey to Jerusalem,” which will continue up until Easter. Let us begin with a moment of prayer--

Have you ever noticed that in the Christmas stories, no one stays in the same place? Mary and Joseph journey to Bethlehem, then must embark on a journey to Egypt, in order to escape from King Herod. The shepherds leave their fields and go into town to witness the birth of the Christ child. And the wise men make the longest journey of all—traveling from somewhere in the East to come to Bethlehem.

The idea that faith involves a journey is by no means a new theme in the Bible. The story of Abraham, summarized in the verses we heard from the book of Hebrews, is the story of a long journey, as Abraham sets out for a new homeland. It is no surprise, then, that the journey theme continues in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus called his disciples to leave their nets or leave their tax collector’s stand and follow him on a journey that led finally to Jerusalem. We will be tracking that journey during the course of this sermon series.

But the Bible is not simply a travelogue—a collection of interesting journeys. The journey rather is understood in the Scripture as a picture of what faith is. Indeed the journeys we see in the Bible broadly illustrate four key aspects of what it means for us to live in faith today.

We see first of all that faith involves *moving with trust into uncertain ground*. From Abraham to the wise men to the disciples, Biblical people of faith head forth under God’s call, even as they are not at all clear where exactly they are going and what they are getting into. That is a good image for the new year—we embark into a new year even as we do not know what exactly the year will hold. But of course everyone must head into the new year, whether they are prepared or not. What is distinctive about Biblical people of faith is, first of all, that they choose to move forward into uncertain ground because they sense God’s call, and secondly, that as they move forward, they do so with a trust in God. It is this connection with God that makes all the difference on the journey. The wise men are a very good example of this.

The wise men, or magi as the New Testament calls them, were philosopher-priests who, because they were highly regarded in their culture and financially well off, were most likely living a stable and safe life, somewhere in the Mesopotamian or Persian region. They believed that God reveals signs in the heavens, and they saw something which convinced them that God was doing something extraordinary in the land of Judea. This, however, did not mean that they needed to sign up to go there. It would have been much easier for them to just sit back and not get personally involved. But they responded to a sense that

God was calling them to move outside their comfort zone, and they embarked on an extensive journey.

Today, even as people often acknowledge that God is at work in the world, it is easy for people to just sit back and refrain from personal involvement. The result is that there are many people in our society who believe in God but who nevertheless become stuck and stagnant in faith. But quite the opposite often happens in church! One of the most exciting aspects of church life is that people are constantly sensing God's call and stepping forward into new terrain for spiritual growth or service. We see this, for example, whenever people sign up to go on one of the mission trips that we have each year, which takes them out into an uncertain and challenging environment. We see it when people sign up for Disciple Bible Study. Right now, there are more than 30 people involved in either Disciple I or Disciple IV; they are close to half way through the journey. Since Disciple is a 34 week, in-depth Bible study with daily readings and weekly class sessions, it is natural for people to have a bit of hesitation about signing up for this sort of challenging ground. Yet since I have been here at this church (which is more than two decades) we have had more than 250 people take Disciple I and close to that number do an Advanced Disciple class. Like the wise men, people in our church are responding to God's prompting today and are moving forward, in various ways, in journeys of faith.

As the wise men moved forward, it is also significant *how* they moved; they did not simply grope their way, but looked to God for direction, and trusted in God's leading. They received initial direction through the heavenly sign, and were continually open to course corrections as they moved along—as occurred for example when they sensed God warning them not to return to King Herod after visiting the infant Jesus.

So also, as we move forward in various ways, we need to look to God with trust to guide us in our journey. Our guidance today comes through God's Word and the working of the Holy Spirit. Thus we are led into that first aspect of faith—to move with trust into uncertain ground.

Nevertheless, the prospect of stepping forward into uncertain ground can at times give us real pause, because there may be a significant element of risk in doing so. Last night, my family and I arrived back from a trip to Cairo, where we were visiting Mavis' brother and family; he works for a U.S. government agency in Egypt on projects involving Egyptian antiquities. There is always unrest in the Middle East; indeed there have been a number of terrorist attacks in Egypt in recent weeks and months, especially on Coptic Christian churches. It is difficult to be a Christian in Egypt today. Overall, however, my family felt the greatest threat not from terrorists . . . but from Egyptian highways, especially the main thoroughfare going through the center of Cairo, which we traversed several times. It is an extremely busy highway where, by ignoring the lane markings and driving on the narrow berms, Egyptian drivers are able to create six lanes of traffic on a four lane highway, with additional invented lanes for motorcycles. Very interesting . . . but

why do you need more than a few inches between the cars anyways? We noticed that large number of vehicles have multiple dents and scratches. In the end, however, we emerged unscathed, except for my brother-in-law, who sustained an ankle injury after a collision . . . with a camel.

You never know what risk you may encounter when moving into uncertain ground; and certainly we see this in the Biblical stories of faith. There was enormous risk for Abraham when he set out for a remote new country. Certainly there was risk for the wise men; their journey was a quite dangerous one which took them far out of their homeland. So we see that faith often involves *stepping into risk*—but doing so *with a reliance upon God*.

Both Abraham and the wise men were able to step successfully into considerable risk because they relied finally on God's help and providence, and this would become a major theme for the disciples, which we will see unfolding in this sermon series. As the disciples journeyed with Jesus, they often became nervously aware of their very tenuous circumstances—such as when Jesus was preaching to a crowd into late in the day and they had no food, or when they were crossing the Sea of Galilee in a small boat and a storm blew up, or when they were approaching Jerusalem in very threatening political circumstances. The disciples were often worried; but again and again, Jesus said to them, "Have you no faith?" Jesus continually called his disciples to move into risk with a trust that God was with them and that God would provide. So the Lord calls us today to be willing to step into risk—with a reliance upon God.

Then there is another key aspect of all the Biblical stories of people stepping into a journey of faith—people always *journeyed with others in a community of faith*. Abraham journeyed with Sarah and a support group of servants, the disciples of course were journeying in a group with Jesus, and the wise men also were several.

Last month our Children's Choir presented a delightful Christmas musical in which there were four wise men in the cast. That enabled them to spell out the word, "wise." But it is also in fact Biblical to have any number of wise men, because the Bible does not tell us how many there were. We only traditionally think there were three, because they brought three gifts. The only thing that is clear is that there was *more than one*; and this is the point—in Biblical journeys of faith, people do not journey alone. There is a spiritual power in journeying together. This is why we join together in the church! We can support one another in the journey, and we journey well when we are traveling together in a community of faith.

The final aspect of the faith journey, which is evident throughout the Biblical story, is that faith involves *looking toward the destination that we have in God*. There is a sense, of course, in which everyone's life could be described as a journey, since everyone moves through a variety of life experiences; but for some, the journey in the end amounts to little more than an aimless wandering. Faith means that we travel toward a higher destiny—a destiny that is given to us by God. The book of Hebrews talked about this in the passage

that we heard, when it said that “Abraham looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11:10) The journey of faith is an everlasting one, as we are heading toward the eternal city of God; and the point of Hebrews is that Abraham was able to make his difficult journey because he kept in view his ultimate destination in God’s Kingdom.

So today, when we keep our eye on our ultimate destiny, it puts the rest of life in perspective; and it can give us the motivation to carry on, especially when there are tough parts of the journey. You may often have had the experience of making a journey where the traveling was rough, but you kept on, and it was all finally worth it when you arrived at the joy of your final destination. So Paul would say, “I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18) In life as a whole, we can persevere in faith when we look toward the ultimate goal of God’s eternal promises.

So we are invited to embark on a journey of faith. It is notable in the Christmas stories that God does not let anyone sit still! God summons the holy family, the shepherds, and the wise men to a journey; and as they respond, they connect with the extraordinary working of God. May we likewise step forth in faith today.