

## “LOOKING BACK TO GO FORWARD”

My biblical text for our celebration this morning is Luke 4:16-20. It is Jesus' homecoming and his outgoing: "When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Based on that piece of scripture, I want to preach from the topic: "Looking back to go forward." The celebration of any anniversary is built on looking back. The world does this, churches do this, and individuals do this. We look back to see where we've been and what we have come through. When we look back, we take stock, sometimes wince, weep with joy, gain clarity, and celebrate resilience. I want to talk about looking back in the church this morning, because, even as I speak, states all over the country are passing laws to make it illegal to look back at our complicated American family story

What aids us in our looking back is that each of us carries with us a spiritual photo album. It's in this album that we keep the memories of our moments with God. High and low moments. Defining moments. The real blessing of this spiritual photo album is that it's the place where we store up examples of the ways in which, God has been real, able, good, and generous to us. In God's grand design of us, God made us to be more than a repository of what God has already done. Our memories don't live on an isolated island in our consciousness. Somehow in the genius of God, our memories are connected to our imaginations. Which means we can look back to God to go forward with God.

That's what's happening in the 4th chapter of Luke's Gospel. Jesus is fresh from the wilderness. Fresh from social distancing. And now he re-enters his hometown. And I imagine that his re-entry prompted some precious memories. You know he saw familiar faces and places. He probably saw where he went to school, maybe even some of his former instructors. Being a carpenter, he probably saw some structures he built or helped to build with his Dad. His first move upon coming home, scripture tells us, is to return to his community of faith- his worshipping community. That place where he was born and raised, known, and loved. Before he went forward, he had to look back.

And on that day, he not only showed up, he pitched in. He participated in worship. He stood up to read the 61<sup>st</sup> chapter of Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me..." is what he recited. Jesus understood and so must we, that this thing we call the church was first and foremost born in the imagination of God. It was spirit conceived and spirit authorized. It was God's idea and therefore it enjoys God's favor. God dreamed of placing pockets of people in the earth like a little yeast in a mound of dough. A people who loves God not only with their lips but in their lives. A people committed to Jesus' ever-widening friend-making campaign. St. Paul would later describe the church as, "citizens of heaven."

St. Paul is saying to us here and now, I don't care what your passport says, your primary citizenship is in heaven and your secondary citizenship is on the earth. Which means I am not an American follower of Jesus. I am a follower of Jesus that happens to be an American. In case nobody ever looked you in your face and told you who you are and whose you are let me be the first. You were shot into this present age by an all-wise God. There's nothing accidental about you. Therefore, there's nothing arbitrary about this gathering. We are here at God's invitation. And we are sustained by the inexhaustible power of a power-sharing God. When we have had a vision, it was because a faithful God revealed a vision to us. Our distinctiveness as an organization comes from the fact that we are related to a unique God with an Excellent name, who cannot be bought off, delayed, or outdone. We have been set apart to be ambassadors of this loving and living God right now!!! What a high privilege! Wherever you find yourself, -no matter

the resistance and no matter the breaking news, that is who you are and that is who we are. Jesus went back to look forward.

And what does the church of God's imagining look like? I'm so glad you asked! It's right there in the text. Looking back to God should result in enterprise, not simply nostalgia. There's a reason why the windshield is larger than the rearview mirror in your car. At important inflection points in our lives and even church anniversaries it's essential to go back like Jesus did so we can know how to go forward for God. What does the prophet say and what does Jesus reclaim? He says, recollection, which is remembering, must result in kenosis, which is the pouring out of yourself. He says that the adoration of God should result in the oblation for God.

There is a direct relationship between the heights of worship of God on Sunday and the lengths you will go for God on Monday. What happens when you and I look back to God is the transfer of energy, to be and to do. In another place, Isaiah said, "I saw the Lord high and lifted up..." and that beautiful moment in his life climaxes with Isaiah saying, Lord, I'm not perfect, and my people aren't perfect, but "Here I am Lord send me." And because we know that every human being is made in the image of God and has dignity, value, and worth, we refuse to tolerate the oppression of any member of the human family.

Jesus a genius! Jesus knew that you have to look back to go forward. But you also have to walk it like you talk it. The world is still watching the church and the only future for the church is to close the distance between itself and its pioneer and perfecter. The world is still hungry. Just like those ancient Greek's request memorialized in the 12th chapter of John's gospel, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." The world still knows Jesus is real. So, take heart. They know that he is real by what he did. Jesus didn't simply share a biblical passage that day. Or give an inspired reading, Jesus read the scroll, paused, and said it is "fulfilled in your hearing." That's what you and I are saying when we say amen. We are saying that our mind and heart are coming into line. And when your mind and heart are in line, there is peace.

In an ancient prayer attributed to St. Francis the church prays, "Lord make me an instrument of your peace, where there is hatred let me sow love, where there is injury, pardon where there is doubt faith, where there is despair hope..." and it goes on from there. But let me call to your attention to something St. Francis said in that beautiful prayer, he said Lord make me..." And what I am saying to you this morning is Jesus never prayed to God to make me do anything. And since we are his followers, neither should that be our prayer. When Jesus says it is "fulfilled in your hearing" he's saying, I am pleased to partner with you God. He's saying, I am my truest self when I serve you. He is saying I was created for this commission. He is saying, buildings are nice and even a blessing, but when you imagined a church; God-when you sent me forward, you imagined a people whose deep joy was to make you known, to the world. Jesus is saying you don't have to make me do anything, God. I come alongside your purposes of my own free will. That is the height of spiritual maturity. That is the highest form of worship.

Yes, this is our 175<sup>th</sup> Church Anniversary, but it's an ordinary worship service. An ordinary gathering of ordinary people led by a very ordinary pastor. And may I say, with all due respect, I looked around and I see ordinary architecture and ordinary looking pews. And I looked down and I see ordinary looking carpet. The pulpit though historic, is also ordinary. And yet, West Bend and Wisconsin have been changed from that place. Even the world has been changed from that this Midwestern city on the bend of the Milwaukee River, an ordinary place. And it occurred to me, that the ordinary person worshipping at the ordinary church, sitting in the ordinary pew, in an ordinary town or city, by the grace of an extraordinary God, that there's still the hope for the world! If a little brown boy from Nazareth can change all eternity and a little brown boy from Atlanta can change a nation, what can God do now if you said yes to that same God this morning. That is the genius of God still at work in the world. Somehow through the reading and preaching, we can look back and go forward. And with a simple yes to God again today, God can change a heart and a home, a city and a state, and yes even the world. I still believe. I still believe.

Happy Anniversary, Fifth Ave. United Methodist Church!