

February 25, 2007
"The Point of the Journey is THE JOURNEY"
First Sunday of Lent
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Gen 12:1-5a Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." 4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. 5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

(Luke 4:1-13 NRSV) Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, {2} where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. {3} The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." {4} Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" {5} Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. {6} And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. {7} If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." {8} Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" {9} Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, {10} for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' {11} and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" {12} Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" {13} When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Dr. John Sylhavey was once called the most brilliant man in America. He was a professor of History and Philosophy at Harvard for 35 years. Dr. Sylhavey grew up poor. He fought in World War 1, and afterwards he did some of the first mapping of Alaska and then he worked his way through school. He acquired 2 bachelors degrees, 3 masters degrees, and 2 PH.D.'s! Dr. Sylhavey wrote 36 books in his career, and composed 2 operas.

In 1965, just as he was about to retire, he was asked to address the graduating class at Harvard. This is what he said:

I am now an old man. I am at the end of a long and hard career of teaching. And I am amazed that you would ask me to speak to you, you who are just starting out. But here is what I have to say.

For over 20 years most of you have been climbing the creaky ladder of American Academic Institutions. In that time you have read thousands of pages of text. You have written and re-written hundreds of papers. And now you are about to go out into the world, and you ask me what you should know. What you should know is this: **THAT YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING AT ALL.**

You ask me how I know? I know because I have spent many years in Academic Institutions; I have read millions of pages of text, and written a few myself I have tried to understand what I need to know, and yet know, as I finally leave my post, I realize that I don't know anything compared with what I really need to know. My job, and your job, tomorrow and every tomorrow is to begin to learn what it is that I really need to know in life.

Amazing, how simple, and yet how profound. Here is a man who is one of the most learned men in America, and yet he says that he is not yet done ----- as a matter of fact he would say that he is only beginning!

If we are honest, isn't that really true with all of us? I know that has been true in my life!

Twenty-two years ago when I graduated from The Duke Divinity School --- with my hard earned and hard won Masters of Divinity, I thought that I had learned it all --- certainly all that I needed to know --- and I was ready to inflict that learning on the world.

I FOUND I HAD SOME LEARNING TO DO

I found myself serving a basically rural church just outside Plymouth, Indiana.

! How does a city slicker (or at least a suburban boy) minister to an older rural congregation?

! How does one minister to a church that has no desire to grow or have new people attend, but are happy paying the bills and doing their thing?

After four years I was asked to start a new church

! I had no clue about how one starts a new church

When they asked me to start the church I was asked to start a "traditional

United Methodist Church" that would attract young people. As you can guess, that model didn't work very well. So after a year and a half, we shifted to a "contemporary model" of worship ---> do you think I "knew" how to do that? --- I didn't have a clue!!

During that time — I read everything I could get my hands on — I went to every seminar I could — trying to figure out how to reach young people.

In the process I met Lyle Schaller, the Church Growth Guru. He was fascinated with some of the things that we were doing, and used Celebration as a case study for a seminar he lead. He also wrote of Celebration Church, and its young upstart pastor in a couple of his books and articles.

After six exciting years I left Celebration,
my precious child -
that I nurtured and helped give birth to,
that I sat up many sleepless nights with as it went through (and I
went through) the growing pains of childhood.

I was sent from there to serve a church and manage a staff at Simpson, a large transitional church in downtown Fort Wayne --- and did I know what I am getting myself into had I learned enough?

After three heartbreaking years of trying to convince a dying church that God had something more for them — and realizing that I could not re-create my experience in Warsaw; I was sent here. To a church that was on the verge of GREAT THINGS. A church that is full of Christians who are looking for ways to put their ministry into action. Had the past years taught me enough?

In the past nine years we have done some amazing things:

- ! almost tripled the budget
- ! grown by 30%
- ! added staff — including an associate pastor
- ! added all kinds of awesome ministries
 - Winning At Life
 - Open Gym
 - State Street Center
- ! Built our fellowship hall.

Did I have a clue how to lead you through most of that? NO, but I read and studied and tried to stay one step ahead of you.

I am constantly aware of how much learning I have yet to do! I really appreciate Dr. Sylhavey's when he said: "My job, and your job, tomorrow and every tomorrow is to begin to learn what it is that I really need to know in life."

What I have learned so far on my short journey is that learning is something that we never finish.

If we stop learning, our journey is over.

Cut short!

Robbed of reaching it's full potential.

Learning is the never ending cycle and challenge of life!

Just as it is with learning —> so too it is with Christianity! Our Christian journey is a continual process of learning and experiencing the power and the fullness of Jesus Christ!

Too often we see being a Christian as a state of BEING. Being a Christian thus falls into the same category as: I am right handed, I am getting grey, I am a man ——> I am a Christian —> but Christianity is not, nor can it be, a state of being. Being a Christian is adopting a certain lifestyle.

Too often we view Christianity as merely subscribing to a set of beliefs.

I believe in the constitution of the United States, therefore I am an American;

I believe Jesus died for my sins, therefore I am a Christian.

Some take it even farther; I believe in adult baptism in flowing water by immersion, therefore I am a TRUE Christian. Or, I believe that one must speak in tongues or be slain by the Spirit, so I am a true Christian.

BUT, Christianity is not simply believing the right things. It is not just subscribing to some set of beliefs.

The point of Christianity is not to arrive at some knowledge, nor even to arrive at some state of maturity, nor even to arrive in heaven! The point of Christianity is the journey that we find ourselves on as we strive to experience the fullness of Jesus Christ. As we strive to be Christ like!

Christianity is not some destination --- it is a JOURNEY. And I know of no one inside of this building, or even outside of it, INCLUDING MYSELF, that has arrived!

Christianity is a journey--- filled with struggles, trials, temptations, disappointments, joys and sorrows ---> accomplishments and failures. Being a Christian means being part of a journey that sometimes sees us taking one step forward and two steps backward --- one success and two failures --- Sometimes we gain ground, sometimes we slip and fall --- but always we are on the journey!

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament

illustrates this perfectly. "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'GO from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'"

Go, God says. Pack your things and be off. Go to the place that I will show you. Forget the maps, forget the travel guides, GO!

Trusting when God says go, is awfully scary! I know! There have been times in my life where God has said very clearly to me; GO.

In January of 1995, I went to Jamaica on a work mission to help renovate a church. There were three of us from Celebration Church that went. And every day, we had to carry up to the top of this huge hill, on our backs or heads, all kinds of supplies ---so we became known as "the three mules."

When the three mules went to Jamaica, I made one vow --- leave Celebration Church in Warsaw.

And believe it or not --I did.

Except once.

One beautiful evening I sat all by myself watching the sunset. When I had left Warsaw I was struggling over what my role should be at Celebration Church should be in the future.

- ! Did I have it in me to go another year
- ! Did the church need my style of leadership
- ! What was best for my family?

Lots of questions were running through my head --- but I left them behind. Except that one beautiful evening -- and that evening I clearly heard God speak to me --- what God said was GO. Go to the place that I will show you!

That wasn't what I wanted to hear.

What I really wanted to hear was STAY, and everything will work out. But God said GO -- and worst than that simple phrase was that God didn't tell me where to go.

When I came back I told our District Superintendent what happened and that I believed I need the cabinet to move me. And he said NO ---> not one no, but many, many times he said NO!

Now, I want to say to you, that the District Superintendent was (and is) a very close friend of mine. But, finally, more out of desperation --- because I felt I had to be obedient to this call in my life ---I told him that whether or not another church was found for me I would resign effective June 1. That is how clear this call was to me!

Then something strange happened --- the phone rang --- It was the District Superintendent.

I think my renewal leave was very similar.
But this time, I left with a different set of questions.

I left questioning my faith, who God is and who Jesus is in my life.
Those of you who read my blog got to see some of the questions that I was and continue to wrestle with.

I had become disillusioned with the institutional church, and I questioned whether I could continue as a part of that system.

God and I spent many hours wrestling in the desert together. And this time, I did not get such a clear answer. This time I heard many other voices, that tried to show me other ways.

- ! Returning to dealing with all the issues that hung over Ridge Church's head while I was away
 - A large deficit
 - A potential deficit for 2007
 - The need for a capitol campaign

- ! A friend calling to tell me that he had suggested me for a certain church, because I would be the perfect pastor for them (and get a substantial raise in salary).

Did I get a clear answer. NO.

Often times we do not get a clear vision as to the direction that our journey is to take. But, nevertheless, we are all called to the journey.

Dr. James Dobson says:

All too often we expect to see God's leading like the headlights of a car -- providing direction way out in front of us! In reality, God's leading is like a flashlight, dispelling the darkness in our midst and providing direction in the present.

On our journey often we consume too much energy yearning for and expecting a bright beam of light — and we refuse to move until we have it -- and we MISS the guiding light of Christ in the present, at our feet, leading the way every day of our lives.

Christianity is a journey, and the point of the journey is the journey! We need to learn to look for the unexpected in life instead of always anticipating what

hill we must climb, or next hoop we must jump through.
Look for the unexpected--- for therein lies the Holy moments of life!

Experience the journey rather than simply moving through life thinking that you know it all — thinking that you have arrived, because the truth is — we all have more to learn -- we have only just begun!

To be a Christian means that we are involved in the here and now --- today. Not pinning for that day of reckoning when God will set the world straight. Jesus didn't teach us to sit down and think we have it all together and wait for eternity --- Jesus tells all of us to GO!

Mat 28:19 - 20 "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

But as I say all of this, we have got to quit being so obsessed with getting from here to there! We have got to quit looking at the end of the journey and missing out on what is happening right here and now. When we look that way -- - we are miserable, because we can never fully get there.

The point of the journey IS THE JOURNEY! Are you getting my message yet?

People who put all their hope on an afterlife and fail to see the beauty of God's creation in this life --- have missed the entire point of being a Christian.

Do you remember when you were a child and were on a trip and you would ask your parents a question that went something like this: "Are we there yet?" Compare the agony and the unending nature of that trip with a trip that you have been on and traveling was the trip. The traveling was an adventure in and of itself! Which trip would you rather go on today?

If we don't involve ourselves in the journey--- if we are continually asking: ARE WE THERE YET?, when it comes to our Christian journey ---> then the journey becomes of absolute misery and our walk with Christ is an illusion.

BUT when we are able to involve ourselves in the journey itself, we find ourselves engaged with the living Christ and we find beauty and meaning in life. Remember what God said at the end of every day of creation: IT IS GOOD! Let's not forget that, because the beauty of God's creation can carry us through those moments when our journey is going through those valleys that the Psalmist called the valley of the shadow of death!

Jesus is constantly calling us to look at today. It quit focusing on the illusory

signs of tomorrow. To embrace the gift of today, to experience Jesus presence in the here and now. Experience Him as we journey today.

The problem is, when we are always looking somewhere in our future for our fulfillment, we miss the presence of the Christ in our midst --- the presence of Christ in the present!

The point of our Christian journey IS THE JOURNEY'

Over this season of lent, I want to examine this concept that being a Christian means that we are fellow travelers and with that in mind I want to examine some of the Rules of the Road, that I have come to understand.

The point of Christianity is the journey that we find ourselves on: It is a never ending journey

The point of the journey is the journey--the ways in which we encounter Christ along the way --- thereby continually experiencing the fullness of Christ in new ways.

None of us know it all! None of us have arrived. May we all open ourselves to experience the present as we continue our journey with Jesus Christ as our guide!