

ENTERING GOD'S PROMISED LAND

Text: Philippians 2:1-11

LHUMC 10/13/13

Does Your Church Have a Prayer?

Series #6

I. Introduction (before scripture reading) (Some context for today's scripture)

A. Picture a church where:

1. The people argue about who is greatest, lording their spiritual gifts over each other. That conversation goes something like, "I'm good at this, which makes me better than you, because you are only good at that."
2. The people argue over which of their former pastors were greater. That discussion goes something like, "I was baptized by Rev. So-and-So, and you were baptized by Rev. Such-and-Such. And we all know how things went when he was here."
3. They argue about who is holiest. That discussion goes something like, "I follow all of these rules, and you don't. So we all know who is holier."
4. They argue about their backgrounds—"I was raised in the church, and you were raised God knows where...Enough said!"
5. They use the fame of their founding pastor to advance their own agenda. "I was there with Rev. So-and-So when he started this church. Isn't he wonderful? And so am I!"

B. My guess is that we've all heard at least a few conversations kind of like that over the years, or perhaps even more, thought these kinds of thoughts a few times ourselves over the years.

C. And yet, that church I described is a composite of all the churches that Paul wrote his letters to, including the Philippian church.

D. To use the terminology we've learned in the book over the past few weeks, the people in those churches "had some giants", and "asked the wrong questions", and obsessed with the "within" at the expense of the "beyond".

E. These people pointed out the timelessness of the human condition, even as it is lived out in the church.

F. And it is to these people and we people whom Paul writes these great words that I read today. Words that remind us of who really has the power, and the remarkable, some-would-say upside down way in which he lived out that power, and what we might learn from him on our trip to the Promised Land. (Read scripture)

II. I have to admit that as I finally made my way to the last chapter in the book, my hope was that I'd get a beautiful, detailed vision of what's on the other side of that door. Didn't you kind of wish we'd get a picture of the Promised Land after all this talk about this journey that we're on to get there?

A. But as I began to read, I realized that would have been too easy for a number of reasons.

1. First, it took those first pilgrims back in the Old Testament forty years to get there, so to expect a six-week book study to get us there was perhaps wishful thinking.
2. Second, I'm beginning to understand that for us as a church, and for any church, getting to God's Promised Land is kind of like what John Wesley used to say about perfection—that it is something we are continually striving to reach.
 - a) And like I worry about people who say they are perfect, I would probably worry just as much about a church that said it had made it to God's Promised Land.
 - b) Just think how insufferable people in that church would be!
3. And then the other thing I'm realizing is that there isn't any book that could adequately describe what the Promised Land looks like for us here at Lake Harbor simply because for every church, there is probably a different Promised Land that God is leading us to.
 - a) For every church is unique—from where it is located to the people who are already there to the people in its neighborhood to its past realities to its current reality.
 - b) Our Promised Land will be different from a church across town or even down the street, so no book could ever capture that.
 - c) Instead, what this book is attempting to do is help us on the journey, so we can begin to not just envision what our Promised Land might look like, but figure out what it will take to continue the journey.

III. And so in that spirit, there are some words and images that kept coming back over and over in the book, as you may have noticed. And this final chapter kind of sums some of them up, and all are things we have to have or do or experience if we are to have a chance to get through that door.

A. The first is trust.

1. Again, going back to the first story of that first journey to the Promised Land in Exodus, those folks' main problem was trust.
2. Specifically, they were unable to trust God and God's promises.

3. And so despite the fact that God had promised to deliver them to a land flowing with milk and honey, and not only that, to see them safely through the journey, every time there was a bump in the road, the Israelites murmured and grumbled; many of them even wanted to go back to Egypt, even if that meant a return to the slavery of the past.
 4. What we need to remember is that as God wanted what was best for them, God still wants what is best for our church.
 5. I believe that a sign that God's Kingdom has come will be when not just our church but every church finds their own unique Promised Land.
 6. But for that vision to happen, it's going to take trust.
 7. Because any trip to the Promised Land will at some point at least be a trip through a wilderness filled with giants.
 8. The question will continue to be at those times when the temptation will be great to either wander aimlessly in the wilderness or give in to the fear of those giants that we may sense in front of us and head back to the Egypt of the past, will we still have the trust in God's promise that God will be with us all the way to the Promised Land?
 9. I still love the "trust walk" analogy (explain)—this journey to the Promised Land that we are on is as if God has his hands on our shoulders, leading us through a wilderness that we are blind to see our way through on our own.
- B. For the second recurring theme of this chapter and whole book, I'll go Greek on you and use the word "kenosis".
1. "Self-emptying" is the best definition for that word.
 2. And it is no accident that the words we heard from Paul where he is actually quoting the words to a hymn that they would have known, is often called the "kenosis hymn".
 3. What Paul understood in reminding them of the words to that hymn that they sang in church was that their only hope in making it as a newborn church was if they, as individuals and as a church, could empty themselves of those things that held them back.
 - a) They would have to empty themselves of their agendas
 - b) They would have to empty themselves of this human need that we all have to win.
 - c) They would have to empty themselves of their need to put themselves first.

4. And so the hymn raises up Jesus as the ultimate and eternal example of “kenosis”. In using it, Paul is saying very simply— “Look at the emptied-out, servant Christ, and be like that!”
 5. It seems so simple, yet as we all know, it can be very difficult to live out Christ-like kenosis in these days when it is so easy to get sucked into how the world defines power; these days when to be “full of ourselves” can be a way to get “ahead”.
- C. The next image is the image of “consensus”.
1. One other thing to know about this hymn that Paul quotes to his church is that it is also called a “creedal” hymn. “Creed” being a statement of belief.
 2. So by using it, Paul was also reminding the people that despite their differences and even in the midst of their arguing over all of these non-essential things, this view of Jesus was an essential on which they all agreed.
 3. As the book says, consensus, this ability to put our agendas aside and ask the right questions and hear each other out, is absolutely essential on our trip to the Promised Land.
 4. We will never get there if we are going in a hundred different directions.
 5. The book raises the story from the Book of Acts of the so-called Jerusalem Council, where leaders of differing opinions on the issue of membership requirements in the earliest church gathered to work out a solution to a problem that could have been the death of the church.
 6. It may not be an understatement to say that we might not be here today if not for the Jerusalem Council!
 7. And it could certainly be said that our politicians could learn something from the Jerusalem Council!
 8. Despite great differences in opinion on God’s vision for the church, Paul and Peter and the others who were there understood that the power of consensus needed to be greater than their own need for power, and so they were able to come to an agreement that leaders on all sides agreed to carry out.
- D. And then the other word that keeps coming back is “transformation”
1. I once heard transformation defined as “change on steroids”.
 2. If that’s a little crass for you, think “change with a capital C.”
 3. Transformation is life-lasting, life-changing change.
 4. It is change on the inside and the outside (or the “beyond and the within” to use our book’s terminology).

5. Actually, the dictionary says that transformation is “the change in form, appearance, nature and character.” Pretty much another way of saying the same thing!
6. Transformation is a different way of looking at ourselves and at the world.
7. And most of all, for the church, transformation is God-induced and God-directed change.
8. And I think it is safe to say that if those first disciples hadn’t been able to take Jesus’ words to heart and transform themselves from mere “fishers of people” to “cross bearers” we wouldn’t be here today.
9. And if the early church hadn’t been able to take Paul’s words to heart and transform itself in a world that was changing just as rapidly as our own, we wouldn’t be here today.
10. The question becomes will we still be here ten, twenty, fifty years down the road if we aren’t able to continually transform ourselves on our ongoing journey to the Promised Land.
11. As I think I said a few weeks ago the words “We’ve never done it that way before” may really be the seven last words of the church if we give in to the false sense of security that can come from those words at the expense of the sometimes wild ride of transformation.

IV. Conclusion

- A. So as we come to the end of this book study, which you understand does not actually give us a specific destination but more of a road map as to how to get there, one lasting image came to my mind—a suitcase.
 1. What the book, and what Jesus and Paul are trying to get us to do is to see that there may be things in our suitcase that we need to get rid of on our journey to the Promised Land—baggage like fear, and our need for power, our desire to stay in the past, our need for mere survival. All things that those first travelers back in Exodus had in their suitcases, and as we’ve seen, that was not a pleasant trip.
 2. This study has urged us to repack—to take with us these things like trust, and consensus, and kenosis, all of which leads to the transformation needed if we are to ever complete the journey to God’s Promised Land.
- B. But the good news in all of this is that as we continue the journey in whatever direction it may take, God will be with us.

C. And in the meantime, to quote the closing paragraph of the book, “we will live and relate with each other and our surrounding community in an envisioned reality that glorifies God.”