

June 5, 2005/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

The Journey of Faith

Genesis 12:1-9 *Now the Lord said to Abram, “God from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you....”*

Matthew 9:9-13 *As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me,” and he got up and followed him.*

Last week it was my turn to give my spiritual report to the Festival Center Mission Group. One of the questions we are to respond to in our report is: How do I believe God is working with my life at this point? As I reflected on this and began writing my report, I realized that I was dealing with the same thing I had been reporting on for nearly two years! And really it’s the same issue I’ve been dealing with my whole life—what it means to live by faith. Along with that, what is the nature of faith. The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama says that God kept Israel wandering around the desert for forty years just to teach one lesson—what it means to live by God’s word and leading. How inefficient! Forty years to teach one lesson! But that lesson is the all-important one and we don’t learn it instantly or in a few years. It takes a lifetime. What does it mean to live by faith?

I thought of the two years since the vision of the Festival Center mission emerged and saw an amazing journey, for me personally and for all who have been part of it either in the mission group or in other ways. It has been one step into the unknown after another. At each point along the way, I have had to take a deep breath in my spirit and move forward, not knowing what I am doing really but trusting that the way will reveal itself.

This journey of faith that we talk about is not first of all the achieving of great things or accomplishing goals. It is our inward resonance to the call of God into hope and life. It requires our living completely in each present moment where God’s presence is known, where we experience joy and peace. The journey of faith is a paradox, really. There is this forward movement into something we don’t even know much about—God’s dream for the world. But the forward movement is grounded always in the present moment and our ability to be fully present and open to God.

It is good that we talk here about faith in terms of a journey. The challenge for us is always to be sure that we are on that journey and not just talking about it, that we are living the journey. Are we, each of us and us together, really listening intently for God’s call in our lives now? Are we being as present as we can be through the daily practice of silence, prayer, and meditation so that we discern God’s present call amidst the competing voices in and around us?

Last Sunday I was at the Good Shepherd Church of the Brethren in Blacksburg. During the Sunday school time, I was asked to talk about the Church of the Covenant, about spiritual disciplines and mission groups and so forth, all the things we work with. I realized in the midst of this that I was growing uncomfortable. I don’t like being in the position of some kind of spiritual expert who has answers. At one point I wanted to say,

“Folks, I’m afraid you’re wasting your time with me. I don’t know the answers. I’m not even sure what I’m talking about. This business of following Christ is tough, confusing, and a daily challenge. It’s full of adventure and growth and joy, too. But it’s a matter of paying attention every day, of taking one little step after another, of learning how to let go of everything and trust God, sometimes through tears and anxiousness.” I felt a bit like a fraud!

I found comfort in the stories of Abram and Jesus’ calling of Matthew. They are central to our faith in the Jewish/Christian tradition. The biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad writes of the Abram story that “in this call and this road which was taken, Israel saw not only an event in her earliest history, but also a basic characteristic of her whole existence before God.” [Genesis, p. 154] And with Jesus, his whole career as teacher and savior centers around gathering a community of followers who learn and embody the message and reality of God’s kingdom. Both stories are simple, brief, and give us no details about how it all happens, what those who are called go through in their spiritual lives, and so forth. God tells Abram, “Go to a land that I will show you. As you do this, I will make you a blessing to the world.” Abram just packs up and goes. Jesus walks along one day, sees Matthew sitting at his tax collecting booth and calls him to follow. Matthew gets right up and goes. That’s it. That’s all we are told. God calls. We get up and go. How it all happens, what sorts of things we experience along the way are for us to discover in our own lives, our own experience. We are called to a journey with very little to go on. All we hear is that it is a journey and that God will bless us and others through us along the way

All Abram hears is that God is going to show him a land. That’s all he has to go on. Abram is probably a nomad already. We’re dealing with a culture that is not yet a settled, farming culture. So Abram is used to moving around. However, his circle is pretty well defined and small. Here I think of us here. Our circle is pretty small and tight. We’ve been journeying in very familiar and comfortable territory. But now God calls us to a new land, to widen the circle. We know something of this faith-as-journey business, but maybe it’s become too comfortable and familiar. We can easily get so used to the language about faith as journey that we stop the journey ourselves.

The other thing is that this call to follow Jesus, to respond to God’s call in our lives is not just one thing, not just one way. Abram is called to go to a new land, to pull up stakes and move out. Matthew is called from his tax collecting booth. Something is left behind; something is journeyed toward that is unknown. But we mustn’t say it happens only one way or another. In Gen. 26:1-3, Isaac, Abram’s son, is called by God to stay in the land when the threat of famine arises. Don’t leave, says God. Don’t go to Egypt for safety. Sometimes God calls us to make an outward change, take on a new mission, change our lifestyles. We become sedentary, settled in, and God calls us to move out, to go in a new direction. Sometimes God’s call is to stay where we are and not run away. This may be God’s call related to the inward journey, the facing of something in ourselves that keeps us unhappy and imprisoned, or always on the run. This call may sound like, “Be still, and know that I am God.” Sometimes our rush to some outward activism is a way to avoid God’s call to stay put and go deeper in our own spirits, to face some of the things we don’t want to face about ourselves, and to journey into healing and wholeness. So we must not say that God’s call is always this or that. We each need to become sensitive to what God’s call is for us at this point in our lives.

Abram is told nothing about the land he is to journey toward. No details. No MapQuest he can download from the internet. All he is told that it is a “land that I will show you.” The details he will learn only as he undertakes the journey. Matthew is not told what he is going to be doing as he follows Jesus or where Jesus is leading him. In The Cost of Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes of the story of Matthew’s calling that this call is completely devoid of content. Jesus’ call is simply to follow him, run along behind him. We find out along the way what it means as the way unfolds beneath our feet and in our spirits. It is an adventure of leaving our security and trusting God as our sole security. This accounts for the strange experience we have as people living on a journey of faith, the experience at times of not really knowing what we are doing or where we are going. It is precisely NOT having answers, not being sure of everything. We move out in faith that this journey IS the way of life, that God is with us and will reveal to us along the way the meaning and direction of it all.

That is why it is called a journey of FAITH. Faith is trusting God daily, each moment. What will this day bring to me on this journey? How will I deal with this step of the journey that fills me with fear or insecurity? The journey of faith, of following Christ and God’s call in our lives, is not a matter of holding to religious beliefs or implementing a plan we have cooked up, imposing it on others and the world. It is a matter of our being open and teachable. This is why the journey is nourished by the practice of prayer. Prayer is precisely that keeping of ourselves open to and seeking the guidance of God’s spirit. We don’t know everything beforehand; we learn it along the way. How do I establish a recreation program for young people, giving them a place for outdoor activities and developing healthy bodies and spirits? That question opened the way for what eventually grew into Camp Kum Ba Yah. How do I do something to help the unemployed poor prepare for finding a job and keeping a job? That kind of question gave birth to New Land Jobs. How can I get a load of firewood to this person who is freezing in her hovel in the central city? Such a question was the first step on the journey that led to the Firewood Ministry. And so it happened with the Lodge of the Fisherman, the Gateway, L’Arche, the Haven, the Festival Center