8/10-11/19 Oh, The Places You’ll Go Rev. Amy Haines

Gen 12:1-9, Phil 4:10-14 Gospel According to Dr. Seuss

If you could go anywhere, real or imagined, and time and money were not a factor, where would to go, and why? Would you travel to Mars, or to Hogwarts Castle? Would you fly to London, or ride to the bottom of the Grand Canyon? Would you travel alone, or take someone else with you?

Throughout my ministry, I have met men and women who have been world travelers, some for business and some for pleasure. I have also met men and women who don’t like to roam too far from home, and are content to remain where they are.

No matter if we stay near or travel far, all of us are invited on the journey we call life. For those of us who claim the name of Jesus we are also invited on the journey we call discipleship, an intentional journey following Jesus’ ways.

As we reflect on our journeys, and to begin our sermon series that pairs the works of Theodor Geisel with the power of the Word of God, I’ve chosen a book by Dr. Seuss called “Oh, The Places You’ll Go!” Ironically this book was published in 1990, the year I graduated from Franklin High School, as the final book published by Dr. Seuss before his death. This is still a popular book for graduates from kindergarten to college, as it reminds us of the ups and downs of our life’s journeys while encouraging us to have confidence for the road ahead.

Dr. Seuss begins this book with these words…

Congratulations!

Today is your day.

You’re off to Great Places!

You’re off and away!

You have brains in your head.

You have feet in your shoes.

You can steer yourself

any direction you choose.

You’re on your own. And you know what you know.

And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.

You’ll look up and down streets. Look ‘em over with care.

About some you will say, “I don’t choose to go there.”

With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet,

You’re too smart to go down any not-so-good street.

And you may not find *any* You’ll want to go down.

In that case, of course, you’ll head straight out of town.

--“Oh, the Places You’ll Go” by Dr. Seuss copyright 1990 Random House

Think back over your journey to when you started something new. Maybe it was the beginning of a new year at school. A new job. A new relationship as a spouse or a parent. Maybe it was the day you moved into your own place or headed out for the trip of a lifetime.

These new beginnings are often filled with emotion. Excitement. Anticipation. Confidence.

If the boy in Dr. Seuss’ storybook would come to life, he would be strutting his stuff, chest puffed out, arms pumping, ready to take on the world, or at least whatever he would face that day.

This week here in Springboro the children and youth of our school district return to school.

Some look forward to the new year with excitement and anticipation, and will confidently enter the doors of their school.

Throughout this month college students will arrive on campuses across the nation. Freshmen are even now getting to know new roommates and new routines. Returning students know they are another year closer to graduation.

Our human nature encourages us to face new beginnings with confidence and hope.

And yet…

And yet we all know that new beginnings may also bring with them a mixture of emotions, from anticipation to anxiety, from confidence to uncertainty, from excitement to fear.

Students may wonder: Will this year at school be different than the last? Will I struggle to succeed? Will I make new friends? Can I handle new routines?

All three of my children are facing new beginnings this year, and each one is feeling a different set of emotions. Rachel will be in 1st grade, now attending all day, and she is looking forward to school. Timothy will be in 6th grade, with a new building, new schedule and new expectations. While he is OK about school beginning, he is grieving the end of summer. Nathan will be in 9th grade, and while uncertain about the amount of homework he will face, is embracing marching band with enthusiasm.

The beginning of school, from preschool to college, is not the only time we face a mixture of emotions. These same emotions and questions are also often present when we begin a new job, begin a new relationship, or move forward into the next chapter of the journey we call life.

Think back to the journey of life you have lived in the past ten years. Was everything you experienced what you anticipated? Did everything in your life go according to your plan, or did you experience some detours, some closed roads, even a new direction? Were you able to decide where to go, or did circumstances dictate your path?

My hunch is most of us, when we look back, will confess that where we are now is not where we expected to be. Moves, deaths, job changes, tragedy, health, children, military orders—all have led to sudden endings and new beginnings, some we dreaded and some we anticipated.

While Dr. Seuss began this book with unbridled confidence to conquer the world, he also recognized the unexpected detours of life.

Dr. Seuss says…

Oh! The places you’ll go!

You’ll be on your way up!

You’ll be seeing great sights!

You’ll join the high fliers

who soar to high heights.

You won’t lag behind, because you’ll have the speed.

You’ll pass the whole gang and you’ll soon take the lead.

Wherever you fly, you’ll be best of the best.

Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.

Except when you *don’t*.

Because, sometimes, you *won’t*.

I’m sorry to say so

But, sadly, it’s true

that Bang-ups

and Hang-ups

*can* happen to you.

You can get all hung up

in a prickle-ly perch,

And your gang will fly on.

You’ll be left in a Lurch.

You’ll come down from the Lurch

with an unpleasant bump.

And the changes are, then,

that you’ll be in a Slump.

I love that in this book brimming with confidence, Dr. Seuss reminds his readers that sometimes you won’t. Sometimes life doesn’t work out just as we had planned or hoped or dreamed. Sometimes we will feel left behind. At times we will find ourselves in a slump.

Dr. Seuss continues…

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.

Some windows are lighted. But mostly they’re darked.

A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!

Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?

How much can you lose? How much can you win?

He then talks about the Waiting Place. For people just waiting.

And he talks about finding ourselves all alone. Like it or not.

And being scared so much that we won’t want to go on.

Have you ever found yourself in a waiting place, not sure what the next step of your journey will be? Have you ever found yourself alone and in a slump, not wanting to step out, not wanting to reach out, not wanting to be with anyone or do anything? If we’re honest, we all have.

We’ve experienced the joys of the mountaintop. And we’ve experienced the sorrow of the valley of the shadow of death. We confess the ways we sin against God and one another.

Yet we also know the strength that comes from the community of faith.

Life is not a straight line. Discipleship is not a smooth upward journey from baptism to life eternal. Most of our roadmaps are full of zig zags and side trips.

Being a Christian doesn’t offer us instant immunity from life’s trials. Cancer and accidents and mass shootings still occur. We will fight with our spouses and disagree with our bosses and wonder which way to turn, figuratively and literally.

And yet…

As followers of Jesus we know that we are not alone when we don’t or won’t or find ourselves in the Waiting Place or struggle with which way to turn next.

The greatest gift of our Christian faith is the assurance that we are not alone. We are surrounded by the church, and the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us. God promises that He goes with us, and we have the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us. No matter where we go, no matter where we find ourselves, we can trust that God is with us.

The Bible is the great story of God’s presence with God’s people.

Today we have heard the story of the call of Abraham and Sarah. They were the first to be claimed as God’s people, the first to be promised an everlasting covenant with God Almighty, the first to say yes to following God on a journey of faith.

God said to them,

“Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you.

I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.” (v1-2 CEB)

While Abraham and Sarah knew what it meant to be a nomadic people, imagine how much faith it took for them to follow a new God to a new land. Abraham was 75 years old. They had no descendants; only their nephew Lot.

When Abraham was 99 years old, God made an everlasting covenant with Abraham, declaring, “I will be your God and your descendants’ God after you.” (v7b)

God once again promised the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, and that Abraham would be the ancestors of many nations, even though Sarah had not yet given birth to a son.

When Abraham agreed to a covenant with God Almighty, he had no idea what the journey ahead of him would include. What hardship and trials. What distance and division. What joy and heartbreak. What faithfulness and trust.

When Abraham agreed to a covenant with God Almighty, he had no idea the places he would go. He had no idea the places his descendants would go.

Canaan. Egypt. The wilderness. The exile in Babylon. Jerusalem.

Not all of these places were brimming with hope and joy. Not all of these places were ones where the descendants of Abraham felt God’s presence with them. God’s people explained slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon as punishment for their sins. They had turned away from God. They had worshipped other gods. They had lusted over the land, wealth and kings of their neighbors. They had sought to follow their own path, confident yet misguided.

And yet…

Wherever Abraham’s descendants found themselves, God was still with them.

In Egypt. In Babylon. In Jerusalem. On Mt. Sinai.

Sometimes only a faithful remnant clung to the everlasting covenant made with Abraham.

Yet they knew and gave thanks that even in spite of their sins, in spite of their shortcomings, even when they turned away from God, God was still there. Loving them. Claiming them. Forgiving them. Calling them back to faith and faithfulness.

This is the great story of the Old Testament. Not a story of God’s wrath, but a story of God’s grace, as a couple became a nation, and a nation became God’s people.

Oh, the places God goes! To be with God’s people.

In the Gospels we see God’s presence in a manger, on a cross, and in an empty tomb. In the Gospels we see God’s presence reach out through Jesus to the least, last and lost of the world. In the Gospels we see God’s presence move beyond just one people to all people, as Jesus is God’s gift of salvation sent to redeem the world.

The story of the New Testament is still the story of God’s presence with God’s people, no matter where they may find themselves across Jerusalem, Judea, the Roman Empire, and to the ends of the earth.

Yes, at times the disciples were reluctant, to follow where Jesus called them to go. Yes, at times the disciples were confused, for Jesus’ ways were so different than anything they had been taught in synagogue or society. Yes, at times the disciples were in the waiting place, uncertain where to go or what to do next.

Yet no matter where the disciples found themselves, Jesus was with them. Loving them, calling them, guiding them, encouraging them. And after Jesus had risen from the dead, the Holy Spirit was God’s presence with them, continuing to teach and remind them of Jesus and Jesus’ ways. Of Love. Of Hope. Of Forgiveness. Of Grace.

Living as a follower of Jesus in the first century was not easy. They were looked upon as outsiders, as those who had perverted the faith, as enemies of the state, with a radical message of love and a redefinition of family.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi admitted his struggles seeking to be a faithful follower of Jesus. Then he wrote,

“I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor. I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength.” (v12-13)

Paul learned to be content, no matter where he found himself—welcomed or rejected, free or in chains, in Jerusalem or in Rome. His contentment was not based on the stuff he owned, or the reception to his letters, or his standing as a pedigreed Jew. Rather, his contentment came from knowing and being known by Christ, crucified and risen.

Today, we are called to follow in the footsteps of our faith ancestors. To trust that God is with us wherever we may go. To find contentment in the presence of Christ rather than the ways of this world. To follow faithfully where Jesus calls us to go as his disciples.

Today, we are called to continue the journey of faith, confident in God’s presence, guidance and care. Even when we find ourselves alone or in the waiting place.

Dr. Seuss concludes his book with these words:

So…

Be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray

or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O’Shea

You’re off to Great Places!

Today is your day!

Your mountain is waiting.

So…*get on your way!*

Ahead of us are mountains and valleys, circumstances of plenty and need, distress and contentment. Through it all, on the journey of life, through it all, on the journey of discipleship, remember that God is with you. Through it all, trust in God’s guidance, rely on the Holy Spirit’s strength, and follow where Jesus leads you.

I want to end today with words of encouragement written by Rev. Jennifer Gingras in the style of Dr. Suess:

Congratulations! Today is our day!

We are disciples, Those who follow ‘The Way’.

We have God as our guide. We have the Bible in hand.

Our job is to spread, God’s love in the land.

We aren’t on our own! The Spirit will guide us.

On our discipleship journey So don’t make a fuss!

We’ll pray during the day, And again in the night,

Asking God for guidance, For the Spirit to alight.

We go where God calls, Sometimes beyond reason,

Outside our comfort zones, in our least favorite season.

When God calls, Don’t worry. Don’t fuss.

Just listen to the Spirit. God be with us.

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So… No matter our talent or the size of our gift

We can help others and God’s name we lift

We are disciples. Today is our day.

To enact God’s love in a Christ-like way.

So…let’s get on with it, whatdy’a say?

--excerpted from a sermon “Oh, The Places You’ll Go! (As Disciples)”

for Holy Humor Sunday, 4-12-15, Rev. Jennifer Gingras mcc-ucc.org

Let us pray.