

**Stepping Over Fresh Dirt**  
**March 17, 2013**  
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So have you ever been asked to go just somewhere with someone?

Kind of a weird question to ask on its own, I guess.

We all have.

But what I mean is, has someone, out of the blue,

ever just asked you to follow them, or walk with them....

...without mentioning where you're going?

At first you kind of just stand there, still. For a split second, you consider things.

Their demeanor. How they're looking at you.

The tone of their voice.

--Even if you know them from class, or from work... see 'em every day...

You wonder: Are they a threat? Is something wrong?

Do I trust them enough to just walk away with them?

Do they know me well enough to even ask, without explanation?

Do they have enough authority or connection in my life

to request this without telling me why, or where?

Of course, you might not clearly,

or consciously go through each one of those questions,

but the mind quietly runs through that list, plus more, in a matter of a moment.

...Then after that second's consideration, you either choose not to follow...

---you're feet stay firmly where they are,

and you just plain-faced break out and ask what it is they want---to just tell you *here*.

...Or, taking the leap of faith and trust, you decide to follow them,  
and you walk ahead with them slowly...

...Almost suspiciously, as you move. Just waiting.

With each step expecting an explanation to start leaking,

...and the further you go without one, the harder you stare.

The more curious the quiet becomes.

Another image for us, together, today...

(It's related, but we'll get to that, soon...)

I was sitting in the kitchen alone, the other night.

It was dark, and late, the dishwasher was whirring,  
and I was getting ready for the memorial, yesterday.

I have this habit, when I do memorial services.

I always want to get them right---for the sake of the one who passed,  
and for the family who needs that time to be okay.

So, a little bit of my dad's OCD leaks into my ways for a second.

In this routine, I format, and cut, and align, and bind everything in *just* such a way.

And at the end of it all, I pull the ultimate OCD act,

and straighten each book and binder into adjacent 90 degree angles on the counter...

...Ready to be picked up for immediate use at the service, the next day.

Anyway, the other night, while I was sitting there,

cutting, and straightening, and binding,

I suddenly realized that all of this time,

I'd been doing one part of this routine inefficiently.

...That it could be done a better way.

I realized this new way I could be sorting through all of these things was faster and easier.

But even at this realization, I actually paused, and debated a moment.

Wondering if it was worth the hiccup, at the moment,

to change what I was doing and start into this new way, right then and there.

Or if I should just let it pass, and start the new process another time.

I was in my routine, and wanted to keep it. Not because it was better,

but because it was what I was used to.

(Probably something diagnosable, there. But oh well.

...I think we all probably have little diagnosable quirks scattered here and there!).

But no worries. Like all other Methodist ministers,

I've been rigorously tested by the conference.

Which brings me to a third image. (Our last one, for now. ...)

Like I was saying, we have to go through this series

of very long and arduous psychological tests,

as we move toward ordination.

I dunno. ...I guess they just want to make sure that all of these people

who claimed to hear the voice of God in one way or another

aren't just plain old nuts.

(Probably a good precaution.)

Anyway...During one of my last tests, the psychiatrist,

along with other seemingly random questions

used to gauge I-don't-know-what, asks me,

“Have you ever heard the saying, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush?””

I hadn't.

[And actually, ever since that moment, I think of that lady now, every time I hear it...]

She seemed shocked that I was unfamiliar with the phrase.

“Without knowing it, can you deduce what it means?”

Really was an odd moment. This wasn't counseling,

so there was no connection to any conversation or anything.

No context. Just these random questions.

“Sounds like it means it's better to have a smaller,

but sure, advantage than the possibility of a greater one that might come to nothing,”

I said. (Along those lines, anyway)

But what the supposedly wise statement felt like to me, was complacency.

What it felt like to me, was settling for something easy and unsatisfying,

when the possibility of finding and achieving something

more fulfilling in your life is right there in front of your eyes....

...Waiting to be grasped and felt in your own two hands.

The adage felt to me, like a willful 'slinking back.'

Choosing against potentially magnificent possibility,  
for the sake of maintaining a basic certainty.

Same as the original meaning of the words...

...just without the positive connotation, I guess.

So I'm not sure if you've made the connection, yet,  
between those three images.

But all of them *do* actually come together in our sermon for this morning.

This morning, along with the other churches in our conference,  
on this fifth Sunday of Lent,

We pastors have been asked to talk along the lines of this theme:

(I'll read it for you)...

Lent confronts us with our propensity to hold onto old habits and self-serving beliefs. This Sunday's scriptures call us to be willing to experience the sorrow of loss, as we leave behind our familiar, comfortable lives to join Jesus on the arduous path to new, joyful life in God.

I hope those moments I shared with you make a little more sense, now.

And here are those scripture readings to go along...

...Those words from The Book, for us to meditate on, together:

From Isaiah 43:

16 Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, 17 who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. 20 The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness,

rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, 21 the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

What speaks to you in those words? What is the prophet describing to us, here?

...Let's hold them in our minds for a moment...

Okay, and here's our other reading from Philippians Ch 3:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

What does Paul say to us here? Some pretty amazing things, right?

Let's sit with those thoughts, too, for a moment...

So this first passage from Isaiah, it shares with us this idea of the amazing work of God, right?

God's action in the world, defying all we commonly know of life and reality,

outside of the miraculous participation of God

through each hour of the days of our tiny lives.

---Rivers in the desert, a path under our feet, while lost.

The ways God works against all odds to fulfill God's promise in our lives.

...The ways we might feel overcome by the difficulties we see lying ahead,

and how God, defying all rational prediction,

can bring us safely from one side of our troubles, to the other,

as we keep our hold on God strong....

... As we let ourselves rely on God---as we lean into God...

...to see us through, in ways we could never expect, or plan for.

Our reading from Paul... I love it...

...Which is unusual for me, with him. I prefer Jesus...

But he says a wonderful thing, here...

He talks about all of his old ways. His old habits. The things he was used to.

Things which were completely foreign to this new life...

...to this resurrection, he's found in God,

through the truths shared by Jesus while he was here...

And what else does he talk about, here?

His willingness to lose those old things, right?

To lose them for the sake of what he's gained in trusting God.

...And what else? We'll talk about that more, at the end...

So to tie this all together tighter...

Going back to those moments—those images---we shared at the beginning.

All three of them are examples of the ways we react to God's leading in our lives.

The first... being asked to go somewhere by someone without explanation...

And our reaction of feeling unsure, even suspicious about the request,

And our choice to either walk ahead in that calling,

or stay persistently where we are,

demanding to know what was going to happen, before taking the steps.

[That's the same process---the same pattern of the decision we make,

when we feel God tug us, isn't it?]

The second... sitting there alone in the dark,

Wondering if I should stick with my old formatting and binding routine,

just for the sake of the habit...

...just for the sake of the comfort of keeping things the same...

...despite the fact that a new,

unexpectedly better way was clearly there in front of my eyes...

[That tendency to want to just stick with familiar,

stays with us when we consider God's call, doesn't it?]

And the third...

...considering that complacency shown in that old adage about the bird in the hand.

The ways we're taught to hold onto less out of fear of losing,

for the sake of uncertainly gaining more...

[that tendency to hold back out fear of loss,

even at the sight of something more to be gained]

All three of these moments describe what happens in our heads  
when we consider the movement and power of God in our lives,  
And the ways God leads us and moves us, as we go along.  
Outside of what we can ever expect...

...So often outside of the  $A+B = C$  realities life teaches us  
will happen outside of the consideration  
of the miraculous power of God to change that reality  
however God chooses to fulfill God's purposes.

So how do we do it?

How do we react to God's call for us to move forward and move on?

I've been good at this in some moments...

...in most of those moments, feeling scared, but hopeful.

And I've been bad at listening to this leading, too...

in those moments feeling scared, but stubborn.

But our scripture readings today, ask something of us, don't they?

I think they ask our souls the question,

'How willing are we to die and be resurrected?'

'How willing are we to let go of the comforts of what we know,  
to move ahead in the mystery of God, as we step forward?'

‘How willing are we to let go of that bird in our hand, and stake out the bush?’

‘How willing are we to walk ahead from where we were,

with no explanation as to where we’re going?’

And it’s hard. It’s really difficult to do this.

And I’m no whiz at it, I promise you that.

But that’s the very thing we’re called to do,

when we’re in a real relationship with God, isn’t it?

Not just the bible reading, or the recited prayers...

...but in real, living, and active friendship, and willing dependency upon God.

In that passage we read from Paul, he talks so beautifully, toward the end, there,

About his willingness to move forward.

To step onto that unknown path

jutting out from the side of the one he’s traveled...

I’m going to read it again, just because it was so nice...

In thinking about this resurrection Jesus led us to find...

...again, he said:

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

We’re called to press on. To keep going. To stay close with God,

no matter how strange, or unusual,

or unfamiliar the places ahead might seem as we go.

To step onto that fresh dirt from the well traveled path

we've so far felt most comfortable following.

And let ourselves journey into a resurrection of the soul.

This Lenten season,

as we open ourselves through fasting and prayer to the sound of God in the silence...

Let's open ourselves to the unexpected newness God creates for us every day we're alive.

And trust God to move with power and miracle through our own lives,

to show us things we couldn't even predict we might ever have seen,

from where we stood in past moments.

Let's do our best, to open our minds and souls to God's voice in our lives...

...To let go... and be resurrected.

Amen.