

Our Expedition: Pilgrims on God's Great Adventure Planning



"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians 4 verse 13. This is one of my favorite scriptures. It is a verse that has sustained me and kept me going through some anxious moments.



As I come now to preaching my first sermon here amongst you will you please slowly and prayerfully repeat it with me. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."



The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Living a life of faith is not simply assenting to a set of beliefs, it is about a way of life. Living a life of faith means being a pilgrim on a journey, on a voyage of discovery.

It means we trust in God and remain faithful in our relationship with God so that we are constantly being transformed and perfected into the people that God is calling us to be. We are pilgrims together on an expedition with God as our guide. We can also think of this expedition as an adventure, a time when we get to know our fellow travelers better, and when we meet new people. An expedition can be a time of surprises when you do not know how things will work out; it can be a time of challenge, a time to take risks, and to learn to rely on each other's gifts. It can be an occasion for transformation and personal growth both for the participants and for those whom they meet. It can bring experiences of great joy and wonder.



For the next few weeks in our sermons, I am going to use the metaphor of an expedition as a way of thinking about our faith lives and the life of this congregation. But, before we set out on this expedition we had better do some PLANNING.



First, we'll need to consider who is coming along on this expedition. Next, we'll have to decide what to take with us. And then, we'd better examine some expectations for the journey. As I read our gospel lesson for today, listen for some answers to these questions.



I'm reading from Luke 10:1-11 and then verses 16-20:
<read scripture passage from NRSV>



So who gets to come on our expedition? Jesus appointed 70 people and sent them out into the world. I've just read from Luke chapter 10, just one chapter previously, at the beginning of chapter 9, Luke tells us that Jesus sent the twelve disciples out. But, now Jesus sends 70 others out. Why 70? Some say that this represents the 70 nations listed in Genesis 10, or the number of Gentile nations. Others say that it stands for the 70 elders that we can read that Moses appointed in Numbers 11. 70 was also used as a round number for a large company. And 70 is a number of completion, a number that represents wholeness.

70 also sounds like the average worship size of this congregation. And just in case that number is a few more than 70 evidence says that the early Greek and Hebrew manuscripts disagree on the number. The Hebrew version says 70, but the Greek says 72. So you are all included! There's no escaping! We are all appointed by Jesus to go on this expedition.

Jesus doesn't mention any qualifications either, He isn't just sending out the 12 trained leaders. There are no requirements for certain gifts, graces, prior experience, or school grades, and no restrictions on gender, age, ethnicity or physical ability. He doesn't mention accent either! I used that one as an excuse for a while! "Some people won't be able to understand what I say." It didn't work! I'm standing here today! I hope you will gradually find tuning into my accent gets easier and easier.

And Jesus didn't specify nationality, but God does have a sense of humor. My first words to you are on Independence Day, a day that we do not celebrate in England!

Thankfully we are not sent out alone. Jesus sent the 70 out in pairs. Perhaps this was because the law required 2 witnesses legally to an event. Or maybe it was for safety and practical reasons. Going with someone else gives us a partner to dialogue with, someone to hold us accountable, to support and encourage us, to point out what the other one misses, and someone to complement our own gifts and strengths.

I am very grateful for those who have been alongside me in my faith journey. We each have many people in our lives that mentor us, and nurture us and there are also those to whom we are a mentor. Who are you called to travel with? Who are you going to nurture and who will nurture you?



Next we come to the question of what we need to take on this expedition. Jesus says, "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals"!! In other words, travel light! How often do we end up taking more baggage with us than we need?

It is true in a higher sense too. We take our prejudice, hatred, resentment, and grievances along with us. When we are loaded down, we have a tendency to think about the load. It distracts our attention, saps our strength and drains our joy. It keeps us from accomplishing what we might do. We need to leave behind things like our pride, our desire for credit for what we do, and our excessive concern for material things.

There's also a tendency to spend so long debating over what to pack that we never get started on the journey. Are we ready, or are we going to spend so much time planning that we never set off? My last year at seminary was a time of me saying, "I can't graduate yet – I'm not ready - there's so many more classes I need to take." And my mentor saying to me, "You're ready. Go. Do."

Travel light. There is no list of requirements as to what we need. We are simply instructed to deliver the message: "The Kingdom of God has come near." We can do this.

So, what can we expect to happen on this mission?



"I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves."

Great! What a way to gain a following! Sent out empty-handed, Called to live out a faith we confess and armed only with a message to speak to the wolves. If we are not accepted, then we are told to simply leave them with the message and move on.

Yes, it is scary. It is a hostile world where some of those with sanctioned power prey on the innocent.

The message we come with will not be accepted everywhere we go. There will be failures and rejections on the way. But we are asked to accept that, and we are told not to respond with anger or frustration or despair. Our instructions are to just move on to the next opportunity.



And when we are welcomed, Jesus says we should eat what is set before us. We are not going to be in our comfort zones. Perhaps you like sushi, perhaps you don't! The people we are called to welcome may not be like us. They may not eat the same food, they may not like the same music, they may not like the same clothes, they may not enjoy the same activities. They might even watch soccer games while playing vuvuzelas!

But this is where the transformation happens. By meeting others where they are, we can learn from their experiences too. As we form new relationships, we too are changed in the process. We will not be the same people as the ones who started on the expedition.

I have just spent the last four years at seminary. I am not the same person as I was before. Yes, some of my transformation has been from the lectures and bookwork. But alongside that were the interactions that I had with such a diverse student body. We ranged from young adults straight out of college to a couple of students in their early 70's. We had international students, first-generation immigrants and long time citizens. There were native-Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latino-Americans and Euro-Americans. We had women and men, straight and queer, able-bodied and differently-abled. And people from all socio-economic groups and political spectrums. We had many Christian denominations represented, and some students from other faiths. Our classroom and meal-time discussions were lively and difficult at times. But by sharing our stories with each other, none of us were left unchanged.

I'm sure that as we begin to spend time together, I will be sharing some of those stories with you, while you also share your stories with me and each other, and with those in the world that we are sent out to meet.



Now when we read the newspaper, listen to the news, or surf the internet, the Kingdom of God may not seem very near. How can we do what Jesus says and proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near?

We can see the signs of the Kingdom breaking in when we work towards justice and peace, when the whole of creation is cared for, when all are loved and welcomed, when the wounded are healed, when the poor and vulnerable are cared for, when violence, greed and oppression are denounced, and when the gospel is proclaimed. We know what the Kingdom of God feels like when we encounter the loving, caring, encouraging, supportive presence of one another. Through the faithful ministry of disciples like us the Kingdom of God starts to become a reality. And so we are able to boldly and confidently go out and proclaim that the Kingdom of God is near.

And what happens when we do so? The good news is that despite the wolves they encountered, these 70 ordinary men and women who were challenged by Jesus to use their gifts in the service of the kingdom returned overjoyed and successful. They actively saw the evil forces of the world being overcome. Their lives were transformed along with the lives of those they encountered. The Kingdom started to break in.

Isn't that the kind of experience that we want too? By going on this expedition, we have the expectation and promise of authority and great joy. The Kingdom of God is near and we have the task of proclaiming it.



Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We are all invited, called, and sent by Jesus. We don't need to spend a lot of time packing, and in fact, there is much we are better off leaving behind. There will be rejection on the way; we are not promised smooth traveling. Yet we will have many lively, transformational encounters and we will experience much joy. And we know that at all times Christ will be with us and strengthening us as we go.



Let's return to the Philippians scripture that I started with, and affirm that promise together. Please say it with me: "We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us." AMEN.