

CLOSING THE CIRCLE

by Steve Zeisler

I originally chose "The End of the Journey" as the title of this sermon some months ago when I outlined the passage. I had no idea then that this Sunday, June 16, would be the last Sunday that the Picketts would be on staff here, and that recently we would have seen Dorman and Blythe Followwill and their family move on to South Carolina. I didn't know that this would be a time of interesting change and challenge here at the church. The Christian life is well illustrated by the metaphor of a journey, an adventure, as we follow in the footsteps of Christ and go where he beckons us. Remember how the wonderful eleventh chapter of Hebrews talks about those in faith who have gone before us, reminding us that they were sojourners, pilgrims who didn't find a country to inhabit, but were looking for a city that had foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Jesus told us himself that the Son of Man had no place to lay his head, that even though he was Lord of this world, he was not at home here and spent his time traveling toward a greater goal. That way of thinking about the Christian life is one of the reasons I've found the lessons of the second missionary journey compelling.

But the journey doesn't really have an end. Glenn and Julie Pickett are at the end of their stay at PBC, but they're off to a new place of ministry. Dorman and Blythe found that their calling as the college pastor and in other endeavors came to an end, but it wasn't the end of their journey. It was travel to a new place.

Acts 18:22 says rather abruptly, "When he [Paul] landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch." The city of Antioch in Syria is where Paul began this trip (Acts 15:36). Now Paul has returned to Antioch, and the circle has been completed. But the very next verse, without a moment's hesitation reads, "After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there...." Most English translations of the Bible put verses 22 and 23 in the same paragraph. Luke didn't even pause long enough for later editors to insert a paragraph break. The journey just moved on to the next phase---the third missionary journey, with more adventure, more challenge. As we use the metaphor of travel for the Christian life, we should recognize that it will never come to an end, even in eternity.

We're going to go back and look at Acts 18:9-11, which we jumped over in the last message, and then pick up the story again in verse 18, where we'll talk about the trip that Paul takes back to Antioch. There are two main ideas that I would like you to keep in mind as we look at this material. In verses 9-11 we're going to consider the vision that Paul had, when the Lord appeared to him and spoke words of encouragement, and challenge to him. The heart of that vision is Jesus' statement, "I am with you." We'll consider how encouraging and uplifting it is to be told again that the Lord is with us and will not leave us.

The other main idea is from the paragraph beginning in verse 18, in which there is a peculiar observation, an interesting and noteworthy detail about a vow Paul made. It was a way for Paul to say to the Lord, "I am with you." It's important for us as God's children to at times set aside focus, thought, and energy for him, to say, "I'm with you. Other things don't matter so much." I found this particularly helpful in thinking about a sabbatical I'm about to take for the summer months; a time of doing less, giving the Lord space in my life so that I can be attentive to him.

Let's read verses 9-11:

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

Ministering in the face of fear

In the last message we discussed why Paul was afraid to go to Corinth. In 1 Corinthians he says that it was with fear and trembling, with anguish that he made the fifty-mile trek from Athens to Corinth by himself,

knowing that he was supposed to minister there, but not feeling up to the task. This passage can be tremendously helpful to us at times when we're afraid, when we feel that life is harder than we can handle and too much is being demanded of us, when the future looks difficult or even overwhelming to us.

Before we look at the details of what Jesus said, let me give you some context. Some good questions to ask whenever you're doing Bible study are why this is happening here, why now, why in this way, why this sort of activity. It's helpful to imagine other things that might happen. One very useful question at this point is, why did Jesus appear and say these things at this particular time in the story? Why didn't he speak to Paul when he was first afraid? Why did he let Paul experience the sense of having to be courageous under pressure? We have references throughout the second missionary journey to Jesus' doing miraculous things. It says in chapter 16 that the Spirit of Jesus forbade them to enter Phrygia and Bithynia. We know that there was a miraculous earthquake at midnight in Philippi that loosened shackles and set the prisoners free. We know that Paul was given a vision of a man of Macedonia calling them to come across the Aegean Sea and minister there. The Lord had done a number of miraculous things, but he had not personally spoken tender and strengthening words to the apostle before. He did not say what he said here until Paul had undergone the experience of fear. Why would that be?

It is important to observe that Jesus did not say, "I am now with you," as if he had not been before. What he was doing was telling Paul something that had always been true: "Paul, it's me! I'm with you, just as I always have been, and will continue to be." The presence of Christ in our lives is not something new. He doesn't come and go. But Paul had forgotten it. His fears had risen up and overwhelmed his awareness of the presence of Christ. The Lord intends for all of us to be certain of his presence. But as Paul would later say in 1 Corinthians, we walk by faith, not by sight. We have to believe what he tells us, we have to be sure of things we can't see. Our Lord at times reinforces truth by miraculous intervention, but in doing that he hasn't changed what is true. He is with us now, he will be to the end. There has never been a day of our Christian life when we were not the object of his compassionate attention, but by not intervening too soon or too often, the Lord is helping us become mature enough to believe him because he says it's true, with or without a reinforcing vision.

In verse 9 the tenses of the verbs are revealing. It's not quite as obvious in most translations, but what Jesus said to Paul was, "Stop being afraid." The second statement in verse 9 is, "Keep on speaking." The third is, "Do not be [become] silent." The idea of continuing action is important in these commandments. When the Lord spoke to Paul, we can imagine him awake at night, having a hard time sleeping, afraid. Once again he was doing ministry and there was opposition. He expected more difficulties---beatings, jailings, rejection. His fears welled up within him. So it was a night vision when the Lord finally came to him. "Stop being afraid" suggests the continuing action up to this time of being afraid. "Keep on speaking" suggests further that he was speaking. In the first case Jesus said, "You have been afraid, stop it." In the second case he said, "You have been speaking, keep on speaking." And then thirdly he said, "Don't become silent---don't begin that action, either now or in the future."

What might we draw from these observations of Jesus' telling Paul to stop something that has been happening, to continue something that has been happening, and to not start something that hasn't yet happened? First of all, I would say that if this man was subject to fear, then you and I will be subject to fear. Paul had extraordinary courage, genius, and strength of character. If Paul was afraid then there are going to be times when we find ourselves shrinking back from what is required of us. There's no getting around it.

I know there are times when I'm physically afraid, when I have insecurities about the health of my family, our financial future, or other things. More often I'm afraid of rejection, failure, humiliation, being set aside as unimportant, being left behind. I do a lot to avoid being put in circumstances where those kinds of fears might come true. And everybody is going to face some kind of threatening circumstances and be afraid.

The second thing we could draw from verse 9 is that Paul was still speaking while he was afraid. That's very helpful to note. Paul didn't let the things he feared keep him from continuing to do ministry as God gave him open doors. You and I can trust the Lord even when our fears are great; we can remember and be encouraged by Paul's choice.

But thirdly, it's important to hear the word of the Lord. The command is, "Stop being afraid." The implication is that Paul had an option, and so do we. We don't have to be afraid anymore. We have the truth of the Scriptures and the power of the Spirit available to us to address the things that seem to dominate and frighten us. We can say no to them and forbid their influence; we have answers. Hebrews 2:15 says that human beings are afraid of dying, and therefore they are subject to slavery and they do the devil's bidding. But we have the option of saying no to those fears. We can continue to live with them, or we can banish them by the power and authority of Christ and the good news of his gospel.

Don't be afraid, I'm with you

The Lord reinforced his commandments to Paul by reminding him of some important realities. There are three reminders in verse 10, probably one attached to each of the commandments that Jesus gave to Paul in verse 9. "For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." The Lord can say, "Stop being afraid," because he is also saying, "I am with you. I am a part of your life, and I will never cease to be with you."

This wonderful phrase of Jesus, "I am," in Greek ego eimi, resonates through the rest of the Bible. The personal name by which God calls himself throughout the Old Testament, Yahweh or Jehovah, is based on the first person, singular, present tense of the Hebrew verb to be, "I AM." His word to Moses as he sent him back to Pharaoh's court was, "Tell them Yahweh, or 'I AM,' has sent you." Jesus, profoundly drawing on that Old Testament tradition of the name of God, said, "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the way, the truth and the life," "Before Abraham was born, I am!" And when our Lord spoke these words, he spoke of absolute authority, reminding us that he is the God above all, without beginning or end, without limits. In that light, "I am with you" is a marvelous, life-changing acknowledgment. If we believe this, we will never be the same.

Keep on speaking, no one will harm you

"Keep on speaking" is the second commandment, and the second reminder of encouragement is, "No one is going to attack you and harm you." This promise is in one sense specific to the ministry in Corinth. It was born out in the trial before Gallio, where the enemies of Paul were made to look like fools, and the Christian church was established as a legal Roman religion.

But in addition to the specific application in Corinth, what Jesus was saying to Paul was true in a more profound sense both for Paul and for us. We have the right to claim the promise that no one is going to attack us in order to harm us, because the rest of the Bible teaches it. Now, Jesus didn't say that no one would attack us and cause us difficulty or make us experience pain, or cause us to suffer loss. The word translated harm here is kakoo. It really has the idea of doing damage. "No one is ever going to be able to damage you," is what Jesus was saying. No one is going to be able to destroy the important things that make you who you are--your intimacy with Christ, your identity as a child of God, your hope of heaven, your membership in the body of Christ. The enemy has no access to those things. So the Lord was reminding Paul, "Why are you afraid? What is the worst they can do to you---throw you in jail, beat you up, take your money? You've been in jail, you've been beaten up, you've been in poverty. But the important things they can't touch. They can't harm the heart of someone who knows he is a child of God."

In my college football days, the position coach for offensive linemen was Mike White (who is now the head coach of the Raiders). I recall a time when we had lost a game that we should have won. Monday at practice we were kind of flippant about the whole thing. But Tuesday stands out starkly in my memory. The coach was furious. We ran more sprints, pushed the sled farther, did more grass drills, ran up and down things and over things, crashed into each other, and pushed immovable objects. Guys were throwing up through their face masks and crawling off the field and crying out in agony. It was an awful day of a serious football coach making the team take him seriously. I can remember my legs hurting so badly that I couldn't stand up. I would have given anything to be anywhere else.

That experience was extremely painful to go through, but I never once felt that I was being harmed. We knew that this was going to come to an end, that the coach probably had some good purpose for the whole thing, that

he expected us to show up the next Saturday and play a game. He wasn't going to kill us; he needed us. Pain was being inflicted, but harm was not.

The heart is where harm or damage or destruction takes place. If someone has access to destroy you on the inside, that's terrible. If all they can do is inflict pain, that ends eventually. That's what Jesus was saying here. "Keep on speaking, because no one will attack you in order to harm you. I'm not going to let anyone damage you."

Don't be silent, many don't know yet

Then we come to the third reminder in verse 10, which couples with the commandment in verse 9, "Don't become silent; don't give up your ministry and become inward-focused, shutting yourself off from concern for unbelievers and for representing the Lord in the world." The reminder of the Lord is this: "I have many people in this city who don't know yet." That was addressed to Paul in Corinth, but it also has wider application. There are folks who are longing to be included in the family of God, who are desperate, who have not yet encountered the life-changing message of Christ. Don't quit for their sakes.

These are in many respects profound, life-changing reminders. They have at their center the words of Jesus, "I am with you." Because he is with us, he has the right to command us to live this way and to remind us of what is true and what isn't. Because he is with us and never will leave us, life can be different. We can banish fear, keep on speaking, and refuse to grow silent.

Setting aside ministry for the Lord

Now in verses 18-22 we turn to an account of a peculiar journey. It's peculiar in the context of the book of Acts because of its lack of detail. Paul left Corinth, went quickly to Ephesus, dropped off friends there, and traveled hundreds of miles to Caesarea, then up to Jerusalem, then three hundred miles north of there to Antioch. All of this happens in just five verses. Very little detail is given, but what we are told makes the point that Paul is echoing what he heard Jesus say to him: "I'm with you. At this time in my life, in these circumstances, I'm going to make a choice to deliberately focus on you, my Savior and Lord. I'm going to attend to you, spend time with you, and put you first." Ministry became secondary to Paul's experience of resting in the Lord.

Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken. They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus. When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.

The familiar Bible expression "to go up to" almost always refers to Jerusalem. Paul landed at Caesarea, which was a port city on the Mediterranean. Then Luke says that he went up and greeted the church (in Jerusalem), then continued to Antioch. He had begun his travels at Antioch of Syria, and he was now finally back there.

Why, in an account with so few details are we told of Paul's haircut and vow? (It's very Jewish. Numbers 6 describes the vow of a Nazirite, which I'll discuss in a moment.) Also we note that Paul went into a synagogue in Ephesus where they wanted to hear from him for a change. Hadn't Jesus recently said to him, "Keep on speaking"? You would think this was a great opportunity. But there was something else that was driving him, some prior responsibility that he had undertaken. He agreed to come back if it was God's will, (and he did). And lastly, we find the brief references to both Jerusalem and Antioch, and we might consider what role those cities played in Paul's life.

As I've said before, what Paul was doing at this stage of his life was attending to the needs of his own heart. He had ministered a year and a half in Corinth, traveled to four cities before that, been through the founding of churches, begun to write the letters that came to make up much of the New Testament, led people to Christ, and established leadership in various churches. He was someone who had spent himself for more than three

years of powerful ministry. His vision of the Lord seemed to have been a catalyst for him, and in general he realized that he needed to spend some time replenishing himself spiritually, enjoying his relationship with Christ, not listening to the needs of people but listening to his Savior, growing again in his own spiritual walk, undergoing what many in our day have called spiritual disciplines, in which for a period of time we refuse to do other things in order to give the Lord first place.

What is a Nazirite vow? Most of the sacrifices of the Old Testament were to be accomplished quickly. But the Nazirite vow was intended to last for a period of time. Because hair does not grow quickly, the Lord used lengthening hair to establish a spiritual discipline that was to continue for an extended time.

The other requirement of the Nazirite vow is that the person was to abstain from everything having to do with grapes: wine or anything that looked like wine, vinegar, raisins, grapes, the skins of grapes, and so on. Why that odd thing? It was not difficult to do. The vow maker wasn't required to sell everything and give to the poor, or to live among lepers. It was not difficult, but it demanded daily attention. Grapes and grape products were so common that care was required at every meal to meet the standard. The burden was not heavy, but it required the vow maker to be attentive.

These two things taken together have been helpful to me I look forward to an extended period of time (with or without a haircut), not for heroic achievement, but for regular attentiveness to the Lord; to ask a number of times throughout the course of the day, "Lord, what am I supposed to be learning here? What thanks should I offer?"

I believe Paul undertook those two things. He was a Jew, and he had been raised with Nazirite vows. He said, "I need to disengage from the pressure of ministry, from having to prepare to teach, from teaching hours every day in the home of Titius Justus, from having to respond to everyone's spiritual needs. I need some time to be refueled spiritually, to say back to Jesus, 'I'm with you.'"

Paul couldn't stay in Ephesus when they asked him to, because, finally, he was returning home. Jerusalem had been his home when he was a student. There he had fallen in love with the God of the Bible---the psalms, the prophets, the Torah. These were his roots. Antioch was the place where they had first believed in him in ministry. He was going back to the people who were his brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers in the faith, to connect with them again, to be reminded of the foundational things. He couldn't stay in Ephesus because part of this restoration time for him was to be with people who could minister to him, to be where he could be touched as he had been when he first fell in love with God.

There's something that is worth observing here. The place where you came to Christ, the people who first loved you for the Lord's sake, the first songs you knew are important. The kind of music that mattered to you when you were first in love with the Lord is likely to last for a lifetime. I was talking to Audrey Allanson here last week, and she told me she loves old hymns. Audrey grew up in Britain. That's where she first knew that God loved her. Every week she listens to a British TV broadcast of hymn-singing. That truth comes back powerfully with those old hymns. If you came to Christ at Mount Hermon, and first began to grow in the Lord there, you will be profoundly affected by going back to such a place like Mount Hermon, if not specifically Mount Hermon, because of what it meant in laying a foundation for you. Ron Ritchie talks at times about the role Catholicism played in his life, and how much to this day he is affected by going into the great cathedrals of the world. Cathedrals don't do much for me at all. I don't have that as part of my history. But Ron will frequently say he finds himself subdued, reflective, and reverent just from being in such a place that has some history for him.

That is what Paul was doing. He was going back to Jerusalem and Antioch because this was all part of the process for him, once again, of putting the Lord, not ministry, first. It's exciting to see a man of the caliber of the apostle Paul set aside time from doing ministry and from being with his friends in order to be refreshed as a servant of the Lord, in order to have something to say to others. Christian leaders should only be listened to if they have something of the Lord to impart. And the only way to have that is to spend some time with him.

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