

Sermon for Sunday, July 24, 2022
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Traveling With the Spirit - "God's Mission for the Life of the World"
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Acts 13: 1-5

It's good to be back home, here in Decorah and here at Good Shepherd. I was scheduled to be here June 26, but came down with COVID after singing with the Luren Singers and 110 men at the biennial Sangerfest held in Madison, Wisconsin. My COVID isolation ended in time for our three-week trip to Norway. We attended a cousin's wedding in Bergen, and then had some family time at a summer cabin by a fjord. We traveled to the east coast of Norway to connect with Kimberly's family. And I spent two days with cousins I had corresponded with but never met before. And then it was back to Bergen to meet a small tour group and take a six-day cruise up the coast to the top of Norway. This cruise is called "the most beautiful voyage in the world." While the weather was overcast much of the time, on the last day the skies cleared and we were able to see the Midnight Sun. It was a wonderful journey, but it's good to be home. And now, looking back on those three weeks, I realize that the journey has changed me and enriched my understanding of the world.

We've been on a journey through the book of Acts this summer. We call it, "Traveling with the Spirit." The book of Acts is all about travel. It was travel that changed the world, and it was travel that changed the Church. In the very first chapter of Acts, Jesus gave his followers a mission: **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** In today's reading from Acts 13, we see the church doing precisely that, starting to journey to the ends of the earth. But it's not like the early church was following some strategic plan. Our reading tells us that it was the Holy Spirit who was in charge. The Holy Spirit prodded them to leave home and travel. **"While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off."** This was the first of three missionary journeys described in the book of Acts.

Have you ever left home to travel to a new place? I remember as a high school senior traveling from my home in Los Angeles to San Diego for a Lutheran Youth Gathering. I was a bit scared and reluctant to go, but that trip absolutely changed my life. My faith grew and deepened and became much more personal. Looking back on that moment, I wonder how different life would have been if I had refused to go on that trip and chosen to stay in my familiar comfort zone? And just today, six of our high school youth with Pastor Amy and our Youth Director Kelli Gapinski and 300 youth from the Northeastern Iowa Synod will attend a three-day Boundless Youth Gathering. How will lives be changed? What new doors will be opened for each of them?

Some of you know the writing of J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps you've read the books or seen the movies. What many don't know is that J. R. R. Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic. He wrote his stories to be metaphors of the Christian story. When you dig deep, you can see how Tolkien weaves his Christian faith into the plot. Tolkien began by writing *The Hobbit*. At the beginning of the story, Gandalf the Wizard, invites Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit, to go on an adventure. Bilbo was at first quite reluctant to go anywhere.

Bilbo says this about adventures: **“We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can’t think what anybody sees in them...Sorry! I don’t want any adventures, thank you.”** But there was something that made Bilbo change his mind. And what an adventure it became.

When I was growing up, the television show, *Mission Impossible*, was popular. Who didn’t love the stirring theme music by Lalo Schifrin. And somehow each week, the impossible mission was accomplished. In Baptism, you and I are given a mission. We are joined together with other Christians **“in God’s mission for the life of the world.”** Our mission may push us out of our comfort zone, and it most certainly will change us. God’s mission is to save the world, and God invites us to be a part of that mission. God promises to be with us and to give us strength for the work.

I want to share with you a story that was on Facebook recently. It was written by someone who had been in the youth group at the church I served in Sioux Falls. Chris is today a pastor in the ELCA and he wrote this story to honor a friend that had died recently. “Today, friends and family gathered to give thanks to God for the life of [DeWayne Larson](#). DeWayne [and his family] lived next door to us when I was a kid. [Their son] Jeremy and I spent more time together over our growing up years than I’ve spent with anyone other than my family and my wife. The Larson’s are great friends and wonderful humans. The Larson family consistently invited me to church with them ... I finally gave in and during the summer between my junior and senior year of high school I went on a youth mission trip to the southwest corner of Colorado with Jeremy. The trip changed my life. After spending much of my younger years avoiding church and giving up on faith (probably much to the dismay of my family), God smacked some sense into me and called me back like the prodigal son. I then spent time with other good humans at [church] ... who recognized gifts for ministry in me and encouraged me to consider becoming a pastor. This was never on my radar until they gently nudged. So, I went to [Augustana University] and there discerned my call. The point of all this is that you never know where your invitation to church might lead. The Larson’s probably will never know the extent to which their persistent invitation to the kid next door changed his life. But it did.” I was on the mission trip with Chris. I saw the impact it had on all their lives.

Someone has said that evangelism is not something you go and do, but something you do as you go. Whether we travel to the ends of the earth or we stay at home, mission is a mindset of sharing God’s love with everyone we encounter. Our mission is simply to share the Good News of God’s love in Jesus Christ with everyone. The Good News is that God raised Jesus from the dead. Sins are forgiven and we are loved unconditionally. That Good News needs to be shared with everyone and for some of us, that will mean travel.

Travel changed the early church. Travel is still changing the church today. Without travel we fall into the temptation of thinking that God loves us and people like us. But what we learn from the book of Acts is that travel opens us up to a bigger world than just our church, or our town, or our country. The Holy Spirit had to push the church to travel because travel helps us to see the world as God sees it. Travel shows us what an incredibly diverse world God has created with people of different races and languages, different religions and governments, and people with different sexual orientations. God loves them all because God’s mission is for the life of the world. That is the mission we share with all who are baptized.