



October 3, 2021  
Sermon Series: *Regather*

*Our Journey of Faith Leads Us*  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

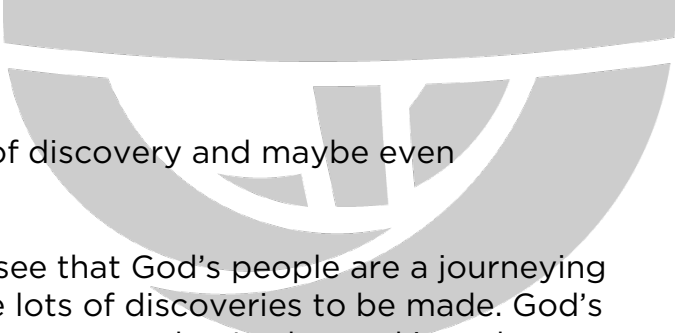
JPhilippians 2:12-15; 4:10-20 NRSV

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup>for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. <sup>14</sup>Do all things without murmuring and arguing, <sup>15</sup>so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.

<sup>10</sup>I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup>Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. <sup>12</sup>I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. <sup>13</sup>I can do all things through him who strengthens me. <sup>14</sup>In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. <sup>15</sup>You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. <sup>16</sup>For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. <sup>17</sup>Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. <sup>18</sup>I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup>And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. <sup>20</sup>To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Somebody once said: "Journeying begins with leaving." Deep down we know this to be true, but we're not always sure if we like it. We leave the womb for this larger world and call it birth. We leave the home of our childhood and call it growing up. We pass through the middle years and enter into something called retirement. And sadly, we leave our earthly home and call it death.

We are a journeying people. Like it or not, there's often pain associated with leaving, both the pain of leaving and the pain of being left. Still, there can be joy too, for without leaving there can be no arriving. Whether that arriving happens with our feet or our minds or our



hearts, journeying regularly involves some sort of discovery and maybe even transformation.

Spend time reading the Bible and you'll quickly see that God's people are a journeying people. They're often on the move and there are lots of discoveries to be made. God's people come out of Egypt and into the wilderness; across the Jordan and into the Promised Land; off to exile in Babylon and then back home again.

Sometimes those journeys are large and expansive, and at other times they are small and personal: Moses standing before a burning bush in which he meets a God he did not know before; a young and anxious couple on the way to Bethlehem with a baby coming soon; a church planter named Paul traipsing all over Asian Minor and telling anyone who will listen about a remarkable rabbi named Jesus.

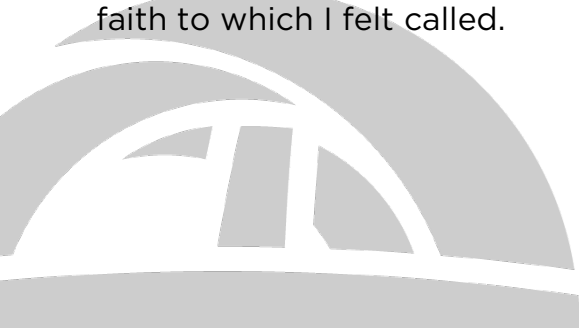
Friends, you and I are invited to be part of God's journeying people. We won't always know where we're going, and we're not sure what we'll find when we get there, but we go anyway. This was abundantly clear at Zumbro during a congregational assessment in 2013. We were working with Holy Cow Consulting. There were 302 of us who took part in the assessment. We found out that we are a Magi culture. We're like the Magi of old. In other words, we're like the Wise Men on their way to worship the baby Jesus. We're fond of the journey itself, of talking and listening, of asking questions and exploring possibilities, and sometimes we like it so much that we do it over and over and over again. And if we're really inspired, we might even follow a star. Thus begins our mission statement: Our journey of faith leads us. Who knows what might happen? When you are part of a journeying people, you might end up in places you never expected to go.

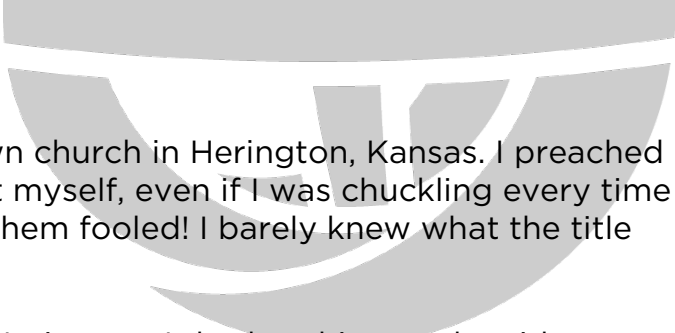
I never expected to be a pastor. During my formative years, my dad was a pastor of a couple of country churches in South Dakota. It didn't look all that exciting to me. In fact, there'd been a split in one of the churches before we arrived. Several families had left. I didn't want to be a

part of a mess like that. I wanted to be a math teacher and a basketball coach. That sounded cool to me!

Then one day in college I was out for a walk. I heard a voice from beyond, and it was about as clear as could be: "Go to seminary! Become a pastor! I've got some work I want you to do."

I'm not exactly sure why, but a little like Moses at the burning bush, I took those words to heart. That weekend I went home from college and told my dad the news. When I told him - I'm not exaggerating - his normally stoic Norwegian face almost broke into a smile. My dad was a man of few words, at least when sharing his feelings, but he seemed genuinely pleased. During my four years at seminary, I got increasingly excited about the journey of faith to which I felt called.





My first call as a pastor was to serve a small-town church in Herington, Kansas. I preached my first sermon. I was feeling pretty good about myself, even if I was chuckling every time someone referred to me as “pastor.” I sure had them fooled! I barely knew what the title might mean to people.

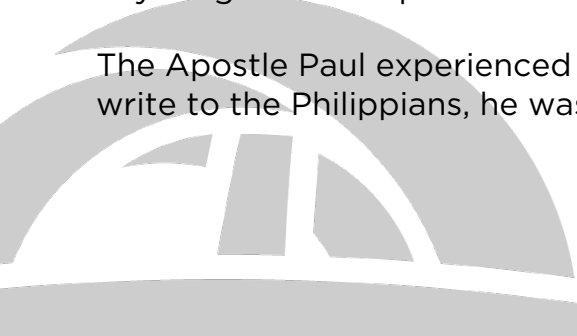
The very next day there was a cross burning in Herington. It had nothing to do with my sermon, mind you, but like many in town, I drove by to see it. There were the smoldering ashes of a cross on the front lawn of the only black family in town. The man was an antique dealer named Chet. I found out later what a nice guy he was. I was shocked. The very next Sunday I got up in the pulpit. And – I’m not proud of this – I said absolutely nothing about what had happened. Call me a big fat chicken, but clearly being pastor was going to be a whole lot harder than I ever imagined.

Friends, we are God’s journeying people. It seems like anywhere we go, and anything we try to do, there will be struggles. My second call was on the front range of Colorado. I was the second pastor in a new mission start. There’d been an economic downturn in the tech industry. People quit moving to town and joining our church. I took it personally and went through a serious depression. My third call was to a congregation in south Minneapolis. It was tucked away in a quiet neighborhood. We had a hard time getting anyone to notice us. Like many urban congregations in out-of-the-way places, we struggled to simply hold our own. My fourth call was to a suburban congregation in Bloomington. It was on a main road – France Avenue South. People noticed us there. We had a thriving preschool. But at times our discipleship ministry felt about a mile wide and inch deep.

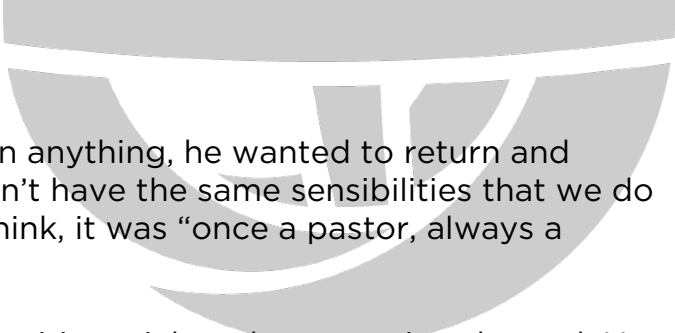
My fifth, and final call, has been to Zumbro. You, of course, have been practically perfect people. Then again, I started here a week after the Churchwide vote in August of 2009. The ELCA was opening up its doors to gays and lesbians. A number of families had left the church even before I arrived. Where was my dad when I needed him?

We are God’s journeying people. Nobody said it was going to be easy. Trying to change minds with their prejudices and judgments, trying to change hearts with their loves and loyalties, can be just about the hardest work in the world.

To be honest, the challenges can be almost too much to bear at times – at least when we try to bear them alone. That’s where the Body of Christ becomes tremendously important. You see, sometimes minds and hearts get opened up together by the power of God’s Spirit. Busy people volunteer to be Care Ministers for the homebound. We become partners with a hospital in Tanzania. We make lefse and meatballs and fruit soup, and raise thousands of dollars for local charities. We feed hungry people burritos out of a big, yellow food truck. We love our neighbors by getting ourselves vaccinated. We become a resource center for youth and young adults at risk of homelessness. Friends, here’s the truth: when minds and hearts get changed by the power of God’s Spirit, just about anything becomes possible. And not just discovery is involved, but transformation.



The Apostle Paul experienced his share of struggles along the way. When he sat down to write to the Philippians, he was writing with the heart of a pastor. He’d started the church



years before. He'd been close to them. More than anything, he wanted to return and encourage them in the faith. Back then, they didn't have the same sensibilities that we do about former pastors not returning. For Paul, I think, it was "once a pastor, always a pastor."

But Paul was stuck in a Roman prison. He was awaiting trial, perhaps nearing the end. No retirement package for him. His work of sharing the good news of Jesus had led to the very real prospect of death. Earlier Paul had written: "For me, living is Christ, and dying is gain." Paul didn't have a death wish, but his dire circumstances were causing him to be reflective. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," he said. Paul was grateful, even joyful, for the journey of faith that he and the Philippians had been on together.

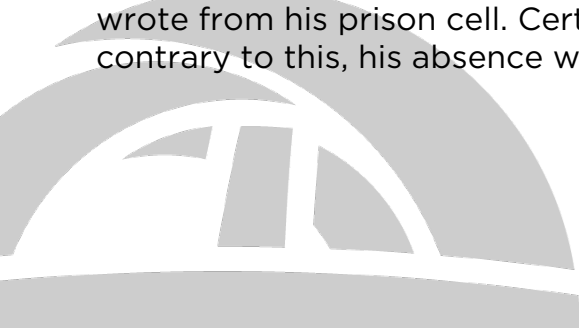
Paul felt especially close to the Philippians. As far as we know, it was the only church from which Paul accepted financial support. Otherwise, Paul supported himself with a tent-making business on the side. Paul was deeply moved by the efforts of his congregation. His stoic side, a little like my Norwegian father, had a hard time bursting into applause. But perhaps the contentment he expressed for any and all situations was thanks enough. He wrote: "What you shared with me was nothing less than a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God." More and more the letter to the Philippians was sounding like Paul's farewell to them.

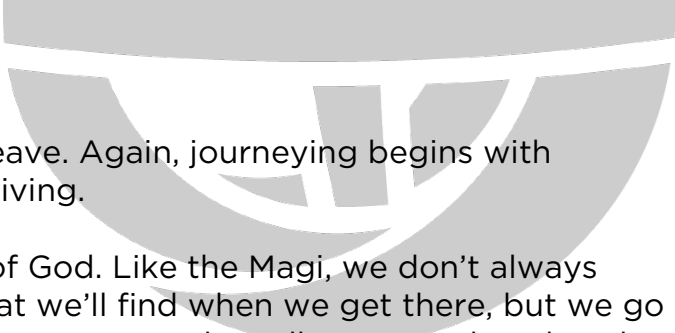
Friends, as I near the end of my ministry at Zumbro, I don't place myself in Paul's shoes, but I am profoundly grateful for the relationship I've had with you over the years, and with my other congregations too - struggles and all. Our time together, particularly in the midst of Covid, has been a stark reminder that so much of church life is about relationships: the songs we sing together, the prayers we offer up for those who are hurting, and - when it's safe to do so - the handshakes and hugs that warm our hearts and encourage us on our journey of faith.

As I wrote in the Big Idea guide this week, there's often a special bond that develops between a pastor and congregants as the events of life are shared - births, baptisms, confirmations, weddings, new jobs, hospital stays, funerals. These milestone moments are holy, and they bind pastor and people together in deeply personal ways.

Truth be told, sometimes these holy moments are in a pastor's own life. Without your overflowing support and prayers after my accident in 2018, I would have stopped being a pastor long ago. I'm glad that I didn't. Reading and rereading your cards early in 2019 encouraged me to give it another try. Despite the challenges, it felt like one of the best decisions I ever made.

When it comes time to leave a congregation, most pastors I know - including me - feel a tug at the prospect of saying goodbye. Paul was feeling some of these same things as he wrote from his prison cell. Certainly his presence would be active and life-giving; and contrary to this, his absence would be passive and draining. As is often the case, though,





we can't have it both ways. Pastors eventually leave. Again, journeying begins with leaving. And without leaving there can be no arriving.

My good friends, we are the journeying people of God. Like the Magi, we don't always know where we're going, and we're not sure what we'll find when we get there, but we go anyway, and maybe even chase a star or two. As we go, we do well to remember that the mission goes on. Our journey of faith will continue to lead us. We will continue to build bridges of understanding and peace. We will continue to reach out with compassion. And we will continue to share the hope of Jesus. One thing is certain: Whether a pastor is present or absent, there is more than enough for us to do!

As we go, we take with us the Prayer of Good Courage: "O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the endings, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us, and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

