

Leaning into Lent: I Must Go To Jerusalem
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This morning I will mostly be telling stories. Stories that will hopefully help to prepare us to walk through the season of Lent leading up to Easter. These stories will intersect with the story of Jesus who deliberately walked the road to the cross to which he was called. Our key text for this morning is simply one verse found in Matthew 16:21,

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

We will come back to that story, but first I want to tell another story.

Search for Renewal

This first story is about myself. A few of you were around and conscious about twenty years ago so that you know at least the outline of this story. But some of you were still in diapers or indeed hadn't yet even seen the light of day. The story has to do with the process I went through while writing the 50-year history book for the EMMC that was published in 1987. But this is not a sales pitch for the book. I don't get any royalties from the sale of the book. Furthermore, there are no more books for sale and it will not go into a second printing.

I began researching the EMMC history in the winter of 1982-83. So it took about five years before I could say I had finished telling the story. The experience was something like that of piecing together a giant jigsaw puzzle. Before the writing could begin there was a lot of tedious work to be done – finding the pieces of the puzzle. But slowly, as the pieces emerged, I began to discern a story line. But I struggled to the very end with how I would entitle this story. I tried quite a few titles but they all seemed to fall flat. I will now quote from the introduction to the book which I wrote just before the book was published.

*The title, **Search for Renewal**, came by way of an accident of sorts. As the story developed I was constantly on the lookout for a central theme that would offer a unifying dynamic to the book. When the editorial committee met in October, 1986, following the completion of the first draft, the first criticism offered was that my temporary title did not identify the central thread holding the story together. When I asked my editors what this story was all about anyway, Henry Dueck replied in a matter-of-fact manner that it was a **search for renewal**. And so it is! In re-reading the manuscript it became obvious to me as well that that theme had stolen its way into the text, giving it an unconscious unity. Perhaps that is as it should be. A true story must find its focus in the telling process, not in a theme imposed from the outside.*

So I am wondering this morning, when my story gets told in the “sweet by and by”, if indeed anyone will take the time to tell it, what title they will give it. You might be

wondering the same about your story. Will it be something like, perhaps, *Stuck in the Mud*, or *Lost Dreams*, or *Afraid to Jump*, or *He Paid His Bills*, or *He Died: Not Knowing Why He Lived*? Or will a more positive theme emerge as the puzzle pieces of my life get put together? I would be quite pleased, if indeed I were aware of what was going on, if they entitled my story, *Search for Renewal*. How do you think others would entitle the story of your life?

A Collective Search for Renewal

I am convinced that most followers of Christ actually desire renewal dynamics in their lives. That is one reason we come together Sunday after Sunday – to be renewed in our faith. It seems that, like the force of gravity, the experiences of life have a way of wearing us down, even causing us to grow weary in our walk with God. Do you experience that too at time, like I do? Disappointments, confusion, distractions, pain, broken relationships and unanswered questions all have a way of discouraging us down – making us wonder about where we stand or what direction to take next. In such cases our hearts cry out for renewal and hope – whether we admit it or not.

Now there may indeed be some for whom the weekly gathering for worship and the personal spiritual disciplines they follow are enough to keep them spiritually alive and dynamic year after year. But it seems to me that throughout its history, the church has recognized the need for “special” times of renewal in which we consciously focus on renewal in a collective sense – as a body. A body of which we are a part as individuals.

Some of you may have been following my series of articles that are being published in *The Recorder*, which are actually a summary of the sermon I preached in this church about two years ago. My line of reasoning in the articles goes something like this. In our own history we had special times of the year in which it was expected that we would all search our hearts and commit ourselves anew to God and his mission in the world. In my younger years there were basically two – one being the annual revival meetings and the other the annual missions conferences. Usually they consisted of nightly services for a week at a time. Some of you have no idea what I am talking about! Others remember well.

One could, perhaps, criticize some of these services for being excessively emotional and on occasion even manipulative – something which I have in fact done. But at the end of the day they provided a forum for many of my generation to renew their commitments to God and his mission publicly. I remember a number of occasions on which I “walked the isle” to place my all on the altar of sacrifice to God. These occasions served as boosters, you might say, toward a life of fuller commitment and service. There is something foundational that happens when you commit yourself publicly to God in full surrender. No longer can you just “float along” because your commitment has now also been to the church, and the church is now looking to you to stay true to your commitments.

But as you all know, revival meetings and missions conferences like I have described no longer work – and by now I might be sounding like an old man trying to recover a distant past. Times have changed and we could spend a lot of time analyzing why they don't

work anymore. But for now it will be enough for us to simply recognize that such services seldom work in our contemporary context. I have lived through the time in which the church tried to keep them alive, but in the end they just fizzled. Perhaps it was time for them to die so something new could be born. In any case, for the past two decades or so I have been looking around for something to replace what we have lost.

And in this vacuum, where we seldom make a call for public commitment, I have noticed how we have tried to depend on whatever new religious fad happened to come around which we could jump on board – to give our spiritual lives a boost. But mostly I have seen these fads come and go – like forest fires blazing up and dying out. There was the Bill Gothard movement with his Institute of Basic Youth Conflicts. There was Robert Schuller’s positive thinking movement at the Crystal Cathedral. There was Jimmy Bakker’s promise of health, wealth and success. There was the Moral Majority headed by Jerry Falwell that tried to bring renewal by legislating morality. Then there was Promise Keepers, the “Left Behind” series by Tim LaHaye, the Prayer of Jabez phenomenon started by Bruce Wilkinson – and many more movements both large and small. And it might well be that many found renewal of one kind or another in such movements. But I have also witnessed how many were left scattered beside the road in disillusionment when these movements disappointed them.

As I have been suggesting for a few years now, I think it’s time for us to come home. Back to the church, where we institute an annual season of renewal, as much of the global Christian community has done through the ages – and I am speaking here about a revival of Lent. I see it beginning to happen in many evangelical and Mennonite churches and it is finding resonance with the younger generation. Finally, it seems to me, I may have found an answer to a long quest I have been on. Evangelical and Mennonite churches are beginning to embrace Lent as a time for renewal, and I recommend that we give get on board.

So I have entitled this sermon, which is already half done by now, simply, **Leaning Into Lent**. It is the first sermon in our Lenten Series here at Gospel Fellowship Church – a series we are calling “Search for Renewal.”

Back to the Jesus Story

Let’s go back then to the story involving Jesus. We have already noted in our text how Jesus makes an open resolve in the circle of his disciples to go to Jerusalem. In many ways you could say that up to this point he had had quite a ride. He had survived the temptations in the dessert. He had performed many miracles, taught many lessons, and the crowds had come and gone depending on the circumstances.

But also he was aware that the forces of opposition were mounting steadily. He was not surprised by this. He seemed to have an inner knowledge that the society of the time would make him into a scapegoat and conspire to get rid of him. But he also seemed to be

aware that it would be through this victimization that God would usher new possibilities into the world – Resurrection possibilities of hope, peace, joy and eternal life.

Jesus could have decided to get as far away from Jerusalem as possible – because he knew that his greatest hour of trial would face him there. Or he could have simply hung around Galilee until they came to nab him and drag him down to Jerusalem. But Jesus made a conscious choice to set his face toward Jerusalem. And he told his friends he was doing this even though he knew he was walking into a den of lions.

In the week that followed, in fact in chapter 17 Matthew says it was six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John up a mountain. And there Jesus was transfigured before them. And a voice from out of the cloud said in the hearing of the three disciples, ***This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.*** (v.5) I think it is significant that this affirmation from God the Father came in the wake of Jesus' decision to set his face towards Jerusalem.

I think there is a lesson here for all of us. As was the case with Jesus, so it can be with us. When we respond openly to the call of God and set our faces toward “our Jerusalem,” as it were, God is well pleased – and he will affirm his pleasure with our commitment to us personally and to those closest to us. So I invite us all to “Lean into Lent” by reaffirming our commitment to walk in the way to which God has called us. I have the faith to believe that if we do, God will meet us to show us his glory and power and speak words of affirmation to us and those closest to us.

To close my challenge this morning, I would like to tell another story I did not have time for a few weeks ago when I spoke about infirmities that hinder our prayer life. I have since that time crafted it into an article you can find on my web site. But I will retell it here, because it has encouraged me in my own “search for renewal” to which I am committing myself during this season of Lent.

Finding Daddy's Heart

Recently Ruth and I hosted a Spanish pastor couple in our home for three days. They needed some time away from a hectic schedule working with immigrant families in the city. We provided a room, meals and conversation for Angel and Blanca when they needed it. By the time they left we were encouraged and strengthened, perhaps more than they were.

One evening Angel told us the story of his youth in Trujillo, Peru. He grew up in a non-Christian home. Although his father was a model parent, he was not a believer. Even so Angel's eyes lit up as he told us about the relationship that he had had with his father while still at home. Ever since he could remember, he said, he and his daddy had always gone for long walks. “I was always telling him everything I thought,” he said. “If I had a concern, I shared it with him. And he always talked to me as well, introducing me to the big world unfolding around me. I always felt very close to my daddy.”

“When I became a teenager my friends thought it was strange that my daddy and I always talked. Most of their fathers did not cultivate a close relationship with their sons like mine did. But that didn’t stop the special relationship I had with my daddy. Once I ended up in a group of boys who were plotting violence. I felt uncomfortable with the idea, so when I went home I told my daddy all about it. I agreed with him that it would be best for me to disassociate myself from them, and I did. Even though my friends couldn’t understand it, I treasured this close relationship I had with my father.”

“One day I heard about Christ and decided to follow him. When I came home I told my daddy all about it. He didn’t scold me or make fun of me. Instead he engaged me in conversation, trying to figure out what had happened to make me so much more ready to help with household chores than I was earlier. He started following me to church to hear for himself what I was learning about God – from the outside of the building, of course. Eventually he stepped inside to listen and soon became a believer as well. And now we are still very close friends. When I call him in Peru, I tell him everything that is on my mind. And he listens and responds in a sincere and loving manner.”

Then Angel paused for a moment in telling this story and mused quietly, “I think my relationship with my father has helped me develop a good prayer life with my heavenly Father. People sometimes ask me how long I pray. I am often afraid to tell them that sometimes it is one or two hours or more. They can’t believe it. They say that after five minutes they can’t think of anything else to say. But for me, praying to God is like talking to my daddy. I just tell him everything that I am doing and thinking. I never ran out of things to tell my earthly daddy, and it seems I never run out of things to share with my heavenly Daddy either.”

I sensed that what I was hearing was both profound and holy. I had often read about how a good relationship with an earthly father can prepare the ground for a healthy prayer life with our heavenly Father. But since so many of us have never had an intimate relationship with our earthly fathers, Angel’s story seemed like a nice theory and perhaps a far-away dream. But here was a young man who was claiming that his non-Christian father had modeled a kind of relationship that had prepared him for a life of prayer as a Christian in later life.

My heart leapt for joy on his behalf. But it also wept with grief at what so many of us have missed. So many of us have never known that deep, heart-felt communion with our earthly fathers. And because of that we find it hard even to imagine what communion with our heavenly Father might mean. I meet a lot of broken people. And the one thing they seem to have in common is that they have never found their father’s heart. And so they continue to struggle to imagine what it could mean to feel close to their heavenly Father.

But I have come to believe that not all is lost. Some of us still have an opportunity to capture a deep relationship with our fathers or mothers, or our sons and daughters. And this we should pursue passionately. However some of our fathers and mothers are already gone, and some of those who remain are just not interested in connecting with our hearts.

But I believe that God has a “Plan B” for those of us who missed such modeling on the first round. And that is the church. I believe that in the church God has gifted people to become surrogate fathers and mothers to those of us who missed a heart-felt connection on the first round. At least I have found that to be the case for me.

So we can take heart. God promises to come meet us where we are and give us a second chance at experiencing unconditional love from the fathers and mothers he provides. And for all those of us who failed to give our children that relational model so necessary for a healthy prayer life as adults, he does two things. First, he encourages us to reach out to our children now with unconditional love wherever they are. And second, he gives us opportunity to show this parental love to others who have missed it on their first round.

As this happens, I believe that for many of us dialogue with God will start coming as naturally as it does to my Peruvian brother, Angel. So be it, Lord!

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to ask two questions. 1.) Are you ready and willing to “Lean into Lent” in 2006? And 2.) Why don’t we lean together so that we might hear God’s voice of affirmation together as well.

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