

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ

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Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas, December 26, 2010

Genesis 12:4-9, Isaiah 50:10, Matthew 2:9-10, I Corinthians 13:8-13, Matthew 2:13-15

A JOURNEY OF FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

In my youth, I enjoyed driving for its own sake – just to go out and drive with no route or destination in mind. I no longer feel that pleasure behind the wheel. For me, driving has become just transportation from one place to another. Walking is another matter. As a teenager, I could hardly wait to get my license so I could drive instead of having to walk. These days, I miss the walking but still must often take the car instead because I have too much to carry, too little time, or someplace else to go after my first destination. So, I get from place to place, but getting there has become an expenditure of clock time rather than an enjoyment of life time.

Calendar time says another Christmas has passed, but I rather enjoy the afterglow of the holiday when the rush is over so we can stop driving ourselves and walk a while. When I walk literally around town, I see things I miss completely when driving; the same is true figuratively when I stop driving myself on clock time and walk for a while on life time. Instead of passing through quickly, I become myself part of the environs, interacting with the landscape, the neighborhood, the town and with the people and nonhuman creatures that live here. As a boy, I knew the land, the trees, the sidewalks. When I drive, I interact with traffic and stop lights so that clock time takes over and the only place in mind is my next destination.

The long story of our faith begins with a journey. God calls Abram and Sarai to set out for a land they do not know. Genesis soon shows us it is a journey of faith not miles. Yes, they will reach a new location, but in the process they will become new people. God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah which represents, not only an enlargement of the promise, but also the change in their very nature as persons and their destiny in life. Destiny differs from destination, but for the Bible, destiny is not fate but promise. Fate requires nothing from us but resignation because there is nothing we can do to change it. For us, life is not predetermined fate to which we must resign ourselves but continually growing promise from the God we can trust, which summons us to faith, hope, and courage.

As a society, we are becoming what a social scientist friend of mine tells me is now being called the “audit culture.” Faulty measurements are being used to control people and their work from the top down without requiring that those in charge understand the struggles

and complexities of that work. Instead of trying to understand, they audit. Just the numbers. Only the numbers matter, and we pretend they tell the whole story when really they don't tell very much at all. Desperate for control and self-justification but in the name of accountability, we audit everything from the education of our children to the value of Christmas and the worth of a person's life. By reducing as much as possible to numbers, people increase the illusion of control over complex human interactions that cannot be reduced to numbers without being grossly falsified. An archaeologist a thousand years from now digging through the records of this era, might conclude that our society worshiped a god named "Data." I suppose that if this god conducted the last judgment, called rather (of course) the Final Audit, our lives would matter only for the way they looked on paper. Have you read that China is now suffering from a shortage of capable workers? China! With a shortage of capable people? How can a country with such a huge population and a flourishing educational system lack educated workers? The answer, China believes, is that their students score very well on standardized tests but cannot do much else because they have been educated only on paper. It seems the students cannot take the realities of life and formulate problems to then solve because on the tests the problems are pre-formulated for them and there is one and only one right answer, which is already provided. This is not educating but just constant auditing.

Now, what does all of this have to do with a journey of faith, hope, and love, which is the title of my sermon? A lot. Let me explain.

The audit culture reduces life to measurable outcomes. God evaluates our lives much differently. To God, human life is much more a walk filled with experiences and unexpected interactions than a drive from point A to point B. Life is not supposed to be a rush to get to the end. Neither can life's story be told by measurable outcomes, least of all the measure of dollars.

The apostle Paul is the Bible's consummate type-A personality. "Forgetting what lies behind," he writes, "and straining forward toward what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." The word for Paul's personality is zealous, and he will not let interruptions like being beaten and left for dead slow him down. Paul doesn't walk; he runs, and one of his favorite images for his life is that of a race he means to win.

Yet, curiously, it is Paul who explains to us God's very strange auditing system. God does funny math which wrecks havoc on our self-audits by introducing a decisive factor that cannot be measured. In God's auditing system, our grandest achievements amount to zero if we act without love in attaining them. Anything minus love equals zero. Even faith, great faith that can move mountains, without love is worthless.

Do we comprehend what God's funny math means for us? It means you – you yourself as a person with a life, a story, relationships, and (I hope, still) dreams – and not your measurable achievements are God's concern. Your learning is not the record of your grades and test scores. Your worth has nothing to do with the amount of money you control or the number of people who report to you. Your faith cannot be measured by the correctness of the doctrines to which you assent with or without questions; in fact, as Paul makes clear, even faith enough to work miracles would not account for the real work of faith which is trusting God for the sake of other people as well as for yourself and your own life. It means life is primarily relational, not outcome-based. It means you are a person loved by God and given life as a gift of God's grace, not a set of measurable outcomes.

I don't know about you, but I appreciate a short sermon on the day after Christmas, not because a short one is easier to write which it is not, but because Christmas (the holiday) is a lot – a lot of everything and sometimes too much. It is a lot of driving in the figurative sense toward one day we expect to fulfill all the effort but likely will fall short unless we see, not only the baby in the manger, but the people with whom we share life. Such deeper seeing at Christmas or any other time requires that we stop driving ourselves and walk together for a while, regularly. Life is relational and so requires time to interact. We need time to listen to tones of voice and look into faces, to appreciate the people we love and others as well, including strangers when our paths meet. As I've been saying throughout this Advent and Christmas season, God has come to us in the human. That's what the Incarnation means, and Jesus' incarnate humanity is something we carry forward at his command for our own sake and for the sake of some small part of the world for which he gave himself. Being human is not a measurable outcome. It is a journey of faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love. Amen.