

“On the Road Again: First Steps”

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Ezra 3:1-7, Luke 4:14-21

I had everything packed in the car. I had carefully loaded my camera bags with my video cameras, tripods, and sound equipment. Cindy and I then hopped in the car and headed for the interview we were going to be doing with Justin and Alexis Black. If you are unaware of who they are, Justin and Alexis both grew up in the foster care system. They met in college, married, and then wrote a book entitled, “Redefining Normal,” which is about their journey through the system and how with God’s help they redefined their lives. It is a great book. Cindy and I were excited about meeting them, and doing the interview, and so we headed up I-75. When we had driven about two hours, Cindy asked me, “Are you sure you have the right address?” “Of course,” I replied. “Why don’t we just pull over at this upcoming rest stop,” She said, “And be sure.” As Cindy was making her wise recommendation there was a still, small voice in the back of my head saying...didn’t you get a new address? Pulling into the rest area, we phoned. “Oh no,” Alexis said when she answered. “We moved to Kalamazoo a couple of months ago.” I apologized for the mix up and they were gracious letting us know that it would be ok if we were late. I then plugged their address into Google Maps and realized there was no easy way to get from where we were to where they were. I suppose the upside was that Cindy and I saw parts of Michigan we would never have seen otherwise. We finally made it to their home, were received warmly, and got a marvelous interview...which by the way you can watch on our website. That story kept coming back to me this week as I thought about first steps; the first steps of a journey. That while it is true that the longest journey begins with a single step, it always helps if that step is in the right direction.

The same holds true for our faith journeys. To start, or to start again, it helps to be pointed in the right direction. The question is, how do we do that? How do we ensure that our first steps are in the right direction? Fortunately, both our stories this morning offer us insight into how we can move in the right direction regardless of where we are in our journeys. Our story out of Ezra describes the first steps that the returning Jewish community made when they returned to the ruins of Jerusalem after years of exile. I say that Jerusalem was in ruins because the Babylonians had literally burned what could be burned and pulled down what could be pulled down. The city was a heap of rubble. One would think that the first priority of the returnees would be to rebuild the walls of the city for protection, or to raise a defense force; for they were surrounded by enemies, nations who did not want the Jews to rebuild their city and their lives. But the returnees did not do that. Instead, they built an altar to God. Then they made their first offerings. Then they made plans to rebuild the Temple. In other words what the Jewish people did was to begin their journey by orienting themselves to the God who had saved them. The people engaged in religious practices and rituals that made sure that their hearts were rightly oriented, toward God and not toward fear. In this way they believed that this new opportunity they had been given to be God’s people would be successful.

Our story out of Luke offers us a different look at what first steps might look like. Jesus has been baptized, anointed by the Spirit, and successfully resisted the temptation to wander off the path God had set for him. Our story then is Jesus taking his first steps in his new journey. The text begins with Jesus reading from the prophet Isaiah “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed*

*me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" Then Jesus sits down and says, *"Today these words have been fulfilled in your hearing."* In other words, Jesus is telling the people that he is the anointed one. He is the one who has come to save the world. To put it another way. What Jesus is doing is taking his place in "The Story." The Story is what I referred to a couple of weeks ago when we were packing for this journey. We were to pack The Story, the Spirit, and the Son. The Story was the story of God at work redeeming the world. It was the story that God had not only been working for redemption over time, freeing God's people from slavery and bringing them home from exile, but that now, in Jesus, God was going to something decisive to bring the restoration of the world; to set humanity free from sin and bondage. We can see this a bit more clearly when we focus on the word "Today" with which Jesus began. It meant that "The Story was not a someday, some time, in some way story. It is a story in which Jesus is taking his place in that moment.

Both stories point us to possibilities for our first steps. First, we can and should intentionally orient ourselves to God through religious practices and rituals. I realize that this sounds very churchy, but the reality is that we are creatures of habit. What we do and how we do it, what we believe and how we live those beliefs are all guided by our practices. In their book "Redefining Normal," Justin and Alexis talk about the "practices" and "rituals" that their biological families taught them. These practices and rituals were not life-giving. They were destructive. Only by learning and practicing new ways of living, including orienting themselves to God, were they able to live lives of joy and hope. If we want to be those whose lives are moving in the right direction, in the Jesus direction toward life, then we need to develop practices and rituals that point us down the path God desires that we take. These can be as simple as attending worship, whether online or in-person. It can be a practice of prayer, extemporaneous or familiar. It can be meditation or Bible reading. Or it can be all the above. The advantage of engaging in these practices is that once they become a ritual, like our morning or evening rituals, they will help to ensure that our first steps are pointing us in the way we should go.

The second way in which we can ensure that we are headed in the right direction is to place ourselves in The Story as did Jesus. What I mean by this is that The Story is both an ancient story and a story being lived today. It is a story that is not only intended to inform us of what God has done and is doing, but it is a story in which we are to play a part. Justin and Alexis found their part of the story. They felt led to create a ministry to assist children and teens not only in the Foster Care system, but in any life circumstance, to discover how to reorient their lives toward life and joy. Being part of The Story means discovering where God can use our gifts and talents to help make creation look more and more like the Kingdom of God, so that God's will can be done on earth as it is in heaven. And if you are wondering where you might serve, or where your place might be, get in touch with Rev. Bethany or me and we can offer you some guidance.

I realize that many of us have been on our faith journeys for a long time and we might be wondering what do these first steps have to do with us? The answer I would offer is that it is a good thing to on occasion, pull into a rest stop, and check to be sure that the address to which are headed is the right one...and then take some new first steps. My challenge for you then during this week is to ask yourselves, how am I orienting myself daily to God, and where is my place in The Story?