



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

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When I was growing up in Lacey, one of the highlights every year was a trip to the South Sound Mall parking lot. Actually there were three big trips to the mall parking lot every year: One for a carnival that came to town every summer, one for the 4th of July fireworks show, and once at Christmas to see a special light display called Christmas Island.

I don't know that we would still use the word "special" to describe it by today's standards. It wasn't large or flashy, but it was an icon in the community. It actually used to be a floating display out on Capitol Lake, which is how it came to be called Christmas Island. Then they moved it to a corner of the South Sound Mall parking lot. It never changed from year to year. It was almost like a float in a parade. They had a nativity scene in the middle, with Mary and Joseph and the baby, which was a bit controversial even back then. I remember being impressed by the big star right above the manger.

To view the display, you drove up and parked your car. You could see the entire thing looking straight out the front window, But we would usually get out to get a closer look and listen to the piped in Christmas carols they had playing.

For a kid who had never seen anything else, it seemed like a fantastic light show. Little did I know that a light display can be more than just a thing – it can be an experience. I became an adult and discovered places like Zoo Lights – an entire zoo you walk through and discover in a wild amount of color. There's the Holiday Festival of Lights at Enchanted Village, where all the rides are going and big water slides are lit up.

Then there's my personal favorite: The Spanaway Fantasy Lights. It's a drive through display. You move through the lights as you view them, with reindeer jumping over your car and moving, lit up elves making toys and a whole undersea light display. Stuff is happening all around you as you travel through the park. It's like you're part of the show.

So I was thinking about my childhood understanding of Christmas lights versus what my kids have experienced. My understanding was static, unchanging and small. My kids idea of lights is big, dynamic, full of energy and movement. The difference isn't just the number of lights – it's the whole package. The movement of the lights and your

movement through the display gives you a much more interactive and fully engaging experience

It made me think of two different ways we can have of looking at faith. Our faith can be small and frozen in time. We can see it as this list of things we believe, a decision we made once that we pull out and take a look at once in a while, like at Christmas. But it's static. Or, we can think of faith as a journey – an invitation to be moved. We can be more involved in the experience and become part of the story.

You didn't realize it, but you sat through half of my sermon while you watched the kids program. Their presentation was one big illustration of my point. Look at that first Christmas. So much about the story is marked by moving. Have you ever noticed that? Let's take a look at the list:

The angel Gabriel gets up and goes to Mary and Joseph.

Mary gets up and goes to visit Elizabeth.

Mary and Joseph are forced by the census to get up and go to Bethlehem.

The shepherds get up and go from their fields to the manger.

The wise men get up and go to follow the star.

And of course, behind it all is the fact of Jesus going from heaven to earth. Everything about the story is characterized by motion. God prods and pulls people into new places.

That story continued on into the book of Acts. After Jesus returned to heaven, his first followers criss crossed the known world in a series of journeys. The Jerusalem church was scattered by persecution and forced to go abroad. Paul's travels covered huge portions of the Roman world, and other disciples traveled as far as Africa, Britain and India.

Christianity has been a story of movement ever since. Some has been voluntary like those first wise men, some has been forced like Mary and Joseph. But behind it all is God, orchestrating what happens, putting people where he wants them.

Proverbs 20:24

A man's steps are directed by the LORD.

I used to play my cousin Greg at chess. I would always lose. I thought I was a pretty good chess player, but looking back, it's easy to see why I always lost. I never had a plan. All my movements were responses to his movements. He could see several steps ahead in the game and knew his options, depending on how I reacted. He had strategy. I just tried to keep my King alive as long as I could. It was only a matter of time...

God doesn't just move people around randomly, the way I moved my pawns. He has a plan and a strategy. And it doesn't only have to do with geography. God is not primarily concerned with where we are physically. There is a spiritual journey intertwined with the physical one. And that's what's really important. God wants us to move from where we currently are into a new place in our faith.

Why is God interested in having people “get up and go, go, go?”

I would briefly suggest that there are three simple results that come from all that movement. First,

When we go, we grow.

When your body’s muscles move, they grow and develop, and when we move spiritually, it brings growth and development to our faith muscles.

I think of Joseph’s story. Matthew tells us that even before Joseph and Mary were married, he was a good man. He was someone who wanted to do the right thing. But he had a limited understanding of how God operated. He couldn’t see how Mary being pregnant could be a good thing. Like any of us, he was skeptical of the notion that there was no human father involved. So in the name of all that was decent and proper, he decided he would just send her away quietly. That would be a kind and gracious solution under normal circumstances.

But there were deeper truths at work. The angel Gabriel invited Joseph to embark on a journey that was going to take him into uncharted territory in his faith. He was going to learn things that were far more significant than being nice and kind.

One of my favorite Stephen Sondheim quotes is that nice is different than good. Too often we settle for nice in our faith and don’t push through to the truly good. We opt for the polite, decent level of being religious without letting God do a work.

George Mueller grew up in church back in the 1800s. Being in a Lutheran denomination in Germany, he did all the steps Christians are supposed to take like confirmation. He even preached a sermon or two. But he didn’t have any depth of faith. It wasn’t a growing, important part of his life.

Then one day, his friend Beta invited him to a prayer meeting. And in his autobiography, George Mueller writes,

We sat down and sang a hymn. Then broth Kayser, now a missionary in Africa, knelt and asked a blessing on our meeting. His kneeling down made a deep impression on me, for I had never seen anyone on his knees before, nor had I ever prayed on my knees...The Lord begins His work in different ways with different people. I have no doubt that on that evening, He began a work of grace in me. Even though I scarcely had any knowledge of who God truly was, that evening was the turning point of my life.

Maybe today is the turning point in your life. God is inviting each of us to move beyond just nice to something really good – a faith that grows and is deep. I want a faith that challenges me to keep getting better. I want a faith that stretches me beyond where I’m at. I want a faith that’s part of my whole life and one that makes me part of the story like

that lighting display. I want a faith that will grow me up so that in another 20 years, I won't look back and say, "I haven't changed a bit." Ravi Zacharias says in relationships you're either growing closer to someone or further away from them. Don't you want a faith that has you constantly growing closer to God?

Going means growing. Secondly,

When we go, we know.

Following God's lead, being open to be moved by him is where we begin to really know him more. Mary is a great example of this. She learned more about God in an experiential way. We sang some of the words of her song this morning:

Luke 1:46-49

*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me -- holy is his name.*

Mary could see how what God was doing was showing his mercy to her personally as well as the world. She recognized his hand in her life. Over and over again, Luke will mention how Mary treasured up events in her heart. She was processing and internalizing everything that happened on her journey.

Some of my best conversations with my kids happen when we're traveling. Either we're in the car or we're going for a walk. There's something about that time between doing other things that lets you have deeper conversations. There are some ways of knowing God that only come from being on the road with him.

Micah 6:8

*And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.*

That concept of just walking humbly with God is powerful. He's not wanting us to do big impressive things for him. He wants to go for a walk with us, to be known by us, to spend time with us. I love the way the Old Testament describes some of the great characters. "Enoch walked with God." "Noah walked with God." God invites us to go for a walk, and when we go, we get to know him in more personal ways.

Donald Miller wrote about a friend of his in his book *Blue Like Jazz*:

A guy I know named Alan went around the country asking ministry leaders questions. It sounded very boring except for one visit he made to a man named Bill Bright, the president of a very big ministry. Alan said he was a big man, full of life, who listened without shifting his eyes. Alan asked a few questions. I don't know what they were, but

as a final question he asked Dr. Bright what Jesus meant to him. Alan said Dr. Bright could not answer the question. He said Dr. Bright just started to cry. He sat there in his big chair behind his big desk and wept.

When Alan told that story I wondered what it was like to love Jesus that way. I wondered, quite honestly, if that Bill Bright guy was just nuts or if he really knew Jesus in a personal way, so well that he would cry at the very mention of His name. I knew then that I would like to know Jesus like that, with my heart, not just my head. I felt like that would be the key to something.

When we go, we show.

God takes us places so he can take the gospel with us. The shepherds did a great job of this. They were so caught up in it, they couldn't help it

Luke 2:17-19

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

I really like Adams peanut butter. The rest of my family prefers Jif, but I love the natural goodness of 100% peanuts and salt. The only time I don't like it is if it's been in the refrigerator a long time and it's more than half gone. Because when Adams peanut butter is cold, it just stays in a lump on the bread. You can't spread it at all. And for a good PB&J, you need even coverage across the bread. So I've learned that I can microwave the jar of peanut butter for a few seconds to get it soft and spreadable again. Because a flavor that good needs to be on every bite of my sandwich.

A very simple reason God keeps people on the go is to spread the gospel evenly everywhere. He moves us around to ensure that people hear the message of good news that Christmas is all about.

2 Corinthians 3:14

In the Messiah – in Christ – God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade. Through us, he brings knowledge of Christ. Everywhere we go, people breathe in the exquisite fragrance.

Got another email from my brother-in-law in Iraq this week. He was saying how hard it is to be so isolated from other Christians. The old idea that people on the battlefield turn to God doesn't seem to hold true there. There just aren't many people of faith in the hospital where he's working. The other day, he walked into surgery and another doctor was commenting that he had heard about some Christians going to the White House for a meeting and they were talking about being the "aroma of Christ". He asked John, "So what the beep is the aroma of Christ?"

John took the verse we just read and explained to him where the concept came from. And all the while, that's exactly what he was being. In a place full of despair and

cynicism and doubt, John spread a little of the fragrance of Christ. He didn't go over there to preach, but like the shepherds, he can't help sharing about Jesus. People there noticed a difference in him immediately in the choices he makes, the way he treats people and the way he talks. John sure didn't want to go to Iraq, but God has been directing his steps, using that time to spread Christ in the middle of fixing broken bodies in a dark place. God never intended for Christianity to only be about us lumping together like a clump of cold peanut butter – he wants us to spread out. I love the Chris Rice song that says, "Carry your candle, run to the darkness, go light your world."

That's what Christ came to earth for – to be a light in the dark. He made the biggest move of all, and he invites us to walk alongside him, to grow, to know him better and to show him to people who have no idea what he's done for them.

Christ doesn't force his way in. The shepherds, the wise men, Mary and Joseph all had the option of saying no to the journey. But they chose to be moved, and their lives were never the same. The question for us is this morning is this: Are we content with a small, static "Christmas Island" kind of faith, or are we willing to move, to get up and go, go, go, to experience more and become part of the story? Christ holds out his hand and invites us to walk with him. As the kids sang in their song, this is the journey of your life. Are you ready to take it?