

NEW DAY DAWNING

LIVING WITH HOPE WHEN LIFE CHANGES

Part 2

The Three Steps Forward

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You may have heard the old proverb that “the hardest step of a journey of a thousand miles is the first one.” Well, today as we continue the series called “New Day Dawning: How to Live with Hope when Life Changes” I want to talk to you about a journey that is just three steps.

If you pull out your outline you can follow along and we can walk through this together. As we look at Scripture, we see in the life of Jesus that he and his disciples endured and experienced a lot of change. We see that they were continually on the road, traveling. They were a traveling people. They were regularly going from here to there and from one place to another.

1) The Step Away

It’s not just Jesus and his disciples that were always on the move. That’s the nature of life for us with God. It’s a journey. Early in the Bible in Genesis 12, you can read the story of Abraham and Sarah and see that the first step in this journey with Jesus is the step away. This is the first step.

“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’”
—Genesis 12:1 (NRSV)

That’s what we see with the life of Abraham and Sarah. In Genesis chapter 12 verse 1, it says that God spoke to Abraham and said, “Go from your home, go from the land of the Chaldeans the land of Ur to a land that I will show you.” You should underline this phrase in your outline or Bible: “Go from your home.” This means they have to walk away. They have to leave something

or someone behind. They have to separate from. In order for them to experience the life that God has in mind for them they have step away.

That is not just true for Abraham and Sarah, it is also true for all of us as we follow Christ. In order to experience the life God has in mind for us, we need to step away from some things in our life. We need to go somewhere else to experience and to receive the blessings that God has for us. That same step away is clear as day today in the gospel story about a man who has been possessed by demons. He's hurting himself. He's self-destructive. He's not in his right mind, not in his right spirit. Before we meet this man we read that Jesus had crossed the Sea of Galilee with his disciples to go to the land of the Geresenes.

“Then [Jesus and his disciples] arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.... So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him. ”

--Luke 8:26-27 (NRSV)

Now, that wasn't a heavily Jewish area. It was an area populated by people who were hog farmers, swine herders. No self-respecting Jew in Jesus' day raises hogs. That's just not what you do. That's against what the Bible says in Leviticus. Jewish cultures especially avoid pork. But Jesus takes his disciples where they shouldn't be. He takes them to the “other side”. There is a sense where it is kind of forbidden in some ways. When they get to the other side, they encounter this man who is possessed by demons. The other Bible Gospels say that he lived among the tombs and he would cut himself on the rocks. He was uncontrollable. He was wild. He was a danger and a threat not just to himself but to others. They tried to constrain him and contain him and tie him up and bind him down but he was just too much. The chaos and the destruction in this man just burst through. He would injure himself. He carried a lot of brokenness and pain.

So Jesus walks up and he heals him. Jesus frees the man. And the man leaves behind this life of self-destruction, and he leaves behind this life of being a threat to others. He walks away from a life of hurt and brokenness.

One of the things that we all need to do, we all at some point in our lives, we've got a walk away from hurt. It's easier, of course, to hold on to it. It's easier to nurse the injury to keep it alive. But one of the most important things for us in our walk with God is to step away from old hurts. To receive, to experience, to embrace the untold goodness and blessing that God has imagined for us, we've got to walk away from some of these old hurts and these ancient grievances.

"[Elijah] asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.'"

—1 Kings 19:1-4 (NRSV)

We can also see how stepping away helps by looking at the life of Elijah. But Elijah didn't have to walk away from some hurt or injury, Elijah had to step away from some of his dreams.

I know that many, most, maybe all of you have had certain hopes in life. You have dreams. You have expectations for your future and for your family, for your kids, for your life, and for your work. You dream dreams. You look forward to something and are filled with a sense of excitement and motivation and sometimes those things come to pass and you celebrate. You have a party, a cookout, and put on some music and kick up your heels to celebrate your dreams. But sometimes those dreams and those hopes don't quite materialize. When that happens, we have to let go and walk away.

Elijah, had to let go and step away from some of his dreams. As a prophet, he spoke for God. He was there to help people to encounter and to experience the reality of God. He wanted people to know that God is real and God is powerful. He wanted people to know that God loves them and God wants to help shape their lives. Elijah was God's spokesperson during a difficult time in the life of Israel. King Ahab ruled the land. King Ahab had married a woman named

Jezebel, from the region of Tyre and Sidon. She was a foreigner, and so she brought with her foreign ways and in her religion. People within the nation of Israel began to celebrate and to participate in this foreign religion. That was not what God had in mind for the people. God wanted them to be undivided in their loyalty to him that God might unload and unleash the bounty of the kingdom upon them. But they were distracted and diffused in their thinking. So Elijah was there to help call them back, call them back to the truth, to bring them back to the true nature of God's deep love for them. He preached and he preached but it didn't have any effect.

Then at one point he challenges the priests the prophets of Ba'al, this foreign deity, to a duel. It's high noon at the OK Corral and he tells them gather up these piles of wood and build an altar. We're going to call upon our God to light up the fire and so you build this great altar of wood, sacrifice a bull, lay it up there and you ask your God to create a fire. Ba'al's specialty is fire and lightning and powerful primitive elemental forces of nature. Elijah tells the priests of Baal to call upon their god make it burn up. So the priests of Ba'al do. They get to work. There they are, hundreds of them, dancing and singing and chanting and calling upon Ba'al to make it happen, to show himself. They dance around all that entire day and then began to cut themselves to try to get Ba'al's attention. They dance a jig out there moving around trying to really exert themselves, breaking a sweat to try to invoke the power of Ba'al. But nothing happens. You know why? Because there is no Ba'al. There's just nothing. So then Elijah says, "Okay, now it's God's time." They have this great pile of wood, they sacrifice the bull upon the wood, the altar, and Elijah says, "Now let's make it more difficult. Let's cover it all with water." And so they pour water all over until the altar is overflowing and then Elijah just steps back and looks at it and says, "Okay God, you're up." Just then, flames burst out and consumes the altar and everything on it. Suddenly, then the people pay attention. Their eyes are bugging out, their jaws hit the ground, and suddenly they see that their God is alive, that God is on the scene, and they can feel it. They feel the warmth. God's presence is tangible. It's audible. They are immersed in the presence, and the power of a God who acts in the world. Right then and there they give themselves to God and they rededicate themselves to the Lord and the Elijah pumps

the fist — we did it! — but then the next day or so, word gets back to Jezebel that her prophets and priests had been massacred, that the showdown didn't go in their favor and so she sends Elijah a text, a telegraph, she gets word to him, and she says, “Listen... you're a dead man.” Suddenly that old nemesis, the foreign religion and its influences, asserts itself, and Elijah just loses it. His dream of having the entire nation rededicated and focused exclusively on the Lord is suddenly slipping away, and he crawls away. He runs away out into the wilderness where he simply wants to die. And that's what he says today in this lesson. “I'm no better than my ancestors. Just let me die, Lord.” So in a sense he had walked away from his dream.

There are dreams that you have had. There have been hopes that you've entertained, for family, for career, for health, for traveling, for enrichment, that simply didn't come together. One of the things we have to do in order to receive the fullness of God's love and riches is to walk away from a certain dream. In our journey through this world with God in Jesus Christ, the first step is an ending. It's letting go. It's walking away.

2) The step into nowhere land

“So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.”

--Exodus 13:18 (NRSV)

The second step in this journey within our faith is the step into nowhere land. We walk away, and then we step into this middle place that is unfamiliar. Whenever God listened and heard the Christ the people in Egypt they were enslaved and God freed them and the Bible says that the guide took them and led them by way of the wilderness. God is freeing them from Egypt in captivity and there's this place that flows with milk and honey, a place of such unimaginable abundance and richness and such blessing that it boggles the imagination. God has them take a step away from the place of pain and agony and oppression toward this incredibly beautiful new future. But, the route there is not a straight line. Instead, God takes them through the wilderness and in the wilderness things are unfamiliar. Things are strange. It's barren and lifeless. There are unknown threats out in the wilderness. The people are exposed to the elements. They are exposed in all kinds of ways.

We don't like being exposed. We want to be safe. We want to be comfortable. But in this in-between place in the wilderness, there is a sense of being under threat because we don't recognize where we are. It's easy to get lost in the wilderness. It's easy to lose our sense of orientation not knowing where east is from west and north from south. We are left basically stumbling and fumbling our way, feeling our way, groping our way forward. Even people around us look different. We might not even recognize *ourselves* as we go through this wilderness.

Last night after worship, somebody pulled me aside and says, “You know what, this is a whole lot like aging. As we age, things look different. My mother regularly tells me that she looks in the mirror at 84 years old and she'll say to me that “she wonders who that old lady is looking back at her.” Her life has changed. Her husband, my father, has passed on. Her friends have passed on. People have moved in and out of the community. The world around her looks different. That's what the wilderness is like. You know, this doesn't just apply to us when we age but in all kinds of situations — changing communities, changing jobs, changing, transitioning — it happens to all of us in this middle place, the middle of nowhere.

“I didn't go up to Jerusalem to consult with those who were apostles before I was. No, I went away into the deserts of Arabia and then came back to the city of Damascus.”
--Galatians 1:17 (Living Bible)

The Apostle Paul talked about that. One day he was on the road to Damascus. Along the way he was met by Jesus. An incredible blinding light, knocks him off his horse. When he gets up he opens his eyes but he doesn't see. He doesn't recognize anything. It all looks different and then and then he goes into the wilderness into the sands of Arabia where it's all different. We all go through this middle section, this in-between place, a no-where land.

3)The step into your new future

In the Bible it says that the people of Israel were in exile, in one of the nowhere wilderness times when God said “listen folks I’m doing a I’m doing something special here. I’m doing a new thing. Pay attention.”

Do not cling to events of the past or dwell on what happened long ago. Watch for the new thing I am going to do. It is happening already—you can see it now!”
--Isaiah 43:18-19 (Good News)

As we go through the middle wilderness time, we will begin to see signs of growth. New life. Small green shoots pop up from the ground. It appears subtly at first. It appears in small sections at first but eventually as we begin to train our eyes and begin to look for it, you begin to see it more and more but that’s the nature of perception. You know, if I were to say to you look at these green paraments. They are brand new and so big, and bright, and bold. I mean, really, can you not see them? Baby! It is GREEN in here! Now, if I were to say to you, you “today look for green. Keep your eyes for the color green wherever you go. You would begin to see it everywhere. You’ll see it in the sanctuary, on somebody’s earrings, on someone’s tie, on somebody’s car, on a building. I mean, you’ll see it everywhere as you begin to look for it. It begins to just flood your attention.

That’s what God says to us and the people listen in Babylon: “I’m doing a new thing. Look for it. You’ll see it more and more. You’ll be drawn into it.

“Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”
--Philippians 3:13-14 (NRSV)

The Apostle Paul has this incredible saying in Romans chapter 8 he says that and the Philippians beloved I do not consider that I’ve made it my own but this one thing I do I forget what lies behind it and I strain forward to what lies ahead I press on toward the goal and God

calls it as he did Paul at some point to leave it behind and to strain, to lean into the future because great things are developing and coming your way.

I started off by saying that you know the hardest step of a trip of a thousand miles is the first one. When I say we're gonna talk about the journey and just three steps, it makes it sound pretty simple, doesn't it? Just three little steps. But you should know that these steps are a lifelong journey. As we are saying goodbye, as we are letting go, as you are walking away from some person, as you step away from a situation, as you let go of some hurt or a grievance, God's promise to you is that God is with you every step of the way.

As the Psalm says

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

—Psalm 23:4 (King James)

Let's get going, people. Our future awaits.