

## **Journeying Together**

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May 24, 2009*

Text: Acts 1: 1-11

Theme: *Jesus calls US and empowers US to be witnesses to the Good News of our faith to our family, friends and neighbors (near and far) through an honest, open, long-term, personal journey together.*

When I started thinking about this text, two movies I saw recently came to mind. Hesitant as I am to reveal this geeky part of my personality, one of them is Star Trek. Yes, they've made a new movie based on that venerable science-fiction franchise – and it's actually really good! In addition to the fantastic action sequences, stunning visuals, and awe-inspiring special-effects of this new chapter in the Star Trek saga, the core remains the same as the beloved TV show from the 1960's.

The creator of the original Star Trek, Gene Roddenberry, volunteered for the U.S. Army Air Corps in the fall of 1941, and served as a combat pilot in the South Pacific during World War II. On this Memorial Day weekend, when we honor those who have fought and died for our country, it seems fitting to note that this combat veteran created a world where those who served in the futuristic military called Starfleet embodied our highest ideals. The crew of the starship Enterprise sought to bring peace and dignity to all. They would have to fight – it was an action-based TV show after all – but the crew of the Enterprise were really explorers, called to “seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before.”

This idea of a journey together into the unknown is what inspired me to connect this film with our text for today. Jesus is sending out his disciples to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (v. 8) Indeed, Jesus promised that they would receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which we celebrate next Sunday, and would go boldly out to proclaim his message of reconciling love in all these places.

This must have been a terrifying prospect for the disciples. Indeed in the disciples' time Jerusalem was filled with Jewish religious officials who didn't want to hear a peep about Jesus anymore. Judea is simply the area around Jerusalem, where everyone knew that Jesus had let himself be killed on a cross rather than leading the expected rebellion against the Romans. Samaria, well, that was filled with people who had inter-married with non-Jews and had supposedly perverted their religion. “No good Jew would go there!” (except Jesus...) And the rest of the world? Well, almost the whole of the known world at the time was ruled by Rome, and they are not going to take too kindly to people proclaiming a different kind of kingdom!

The closest analogies I can come up with for “Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth” for us, here today might be Jesus saying, “You, Immanuel Presbyterian Church will be my witnesses in McLean and all Northern Virginia, Anacostia, and Saudi Arabia.”

To be frank, I think the idea of sharing our faith in McLean scares most of us more than any of these other places. In fact, we do travel to Anacostia to share God's love with the Dreamers and many of our members have traveled to Peru to connect with the churches there. These things and the many other ministries of Immanuel in far and not-so-far away places are indeed a vital witness to the way of Jesus. But what about actually letting down the disguises we put on every day with our friends, co-workers, children, and parents here in McLean and actually letting them truly know and understand our faith and its place in our lives?

This is particularly on my mind and heart this week because we have just received the Statements of Faith from our seventeen wonderful eighth-graders in our confirmation class. Next Sunday at the 11:15 service, those of the confirmands who choose to formally join the IPC church family will be here before you. These young thirteen and fourteen year-olds have struggled for these past weeks to put into words what it is that they believe about God, about Jesus, and about the church. Some of them have shared some powerful and personal insights. And even now some of them are weighing the important question of church membership. This is most likely the first time anyone has ever asked these young people to say such things and make such a big decision for themselves.

But it is not only our wonderful confirmands who have been “sweating it” over these past few weeks. Their parents find it almost as nerve-wracking! Many parents and our confirmation adult faith mentors have told me recently something to the effect of “I don’t think anyone ever asked me to write a statement of faith! What do I tell my kid when he or she asks me for help?” Our answer, of course, is simply “the truth.” We’re not concerned here about the confirmands giving the right answers. We tell them to honestly say what it is that they believe at this point in their lives – fully recognizing that what they believe WILL change as they continue on their journey through life. The best thing a parent or mentor can do is simply tell their confirmand the truth about where they have been and where they are now on their own journey of faith. The point isn’t to have the right answers. The point is to journey together in faith – continuing to grow, seek, learn, and love alongside one another, knowing that God, in Jesus Christ, is journeying alongside all of us.

I mean to apply this same principle to our witness in our families and neighborhoods even beyond the time of confirmation. Whether the witness is parent to child, child to parent, neighbor to neighbor, or whatever the relationship, real witness is about honestly and openly journeying together in faith. Why is this so important? Because the vast majority of people don’t find the loving presence of God through television, and they don’t become instruments of God’s love simply through osmosis. The number one factor for young people becoming faith-filled adults is the witness of their parents, sharing their faith by word and deed. The number one reason anyone comes to a church and begins or re-starts a life of faith in adulthood is that someone invited them. It is that willingness to journey together in faith, honestly and openly, that makes all the difference.

Jesus certainly knew that. He lived, ate, slept, and physically journeyed with his disciples for three years straight. He didn’t expect that they would get it after one sermon or one miracle. He didn’t just say “read this book.” He actually gave his very life and being – his time – to his disciples. And here, in our passage, he has even returned to them after his crucifixion to spend forty days with them in his resurrected form. Even now the disciples don’t really get it. They’re asking about the earthly kingdom of Israel. Jesus is once again talking about something much greater – the kingdom of God – where God’s way of true love and lasting justice for all is the order of the day, every day.

Here Jesus is still with the disciples in all their imperfections, and gives an amazing promise: that while he will be returning to his heavenly father to pray and intercede for them, he will always be with them in the Holy Spirit. And it is only when the Holy Spirit comes into these disciples and they experience the full, open, personal presence of the living God that they know what it means to be witnesses.

The quote I put on the front of the bulletin from Dietrich Bonhoeffer is all about how God comes to us – not as we are “supposed to be – but as we really are. “God loves *real* people without distinction,” this victim of Nazi injustice writes. Bonhoeffer certainly knew a lot about “real” people and our very real faults. But affirms that God loves us just as we are. And knowing and accepting this, we then are free to be who we really are with one another. That’s what the real witness of journeying together in faith is all about!

This very real, human relationship is what Star Trek is really about, too. But I need to let that one go to tell you about an even better example of what I'm talking about from the movie, "The Soloist." As the movie's website says "In 2005 LA Times columnist Steve Lopez met Nathaniel Ayers, a homeless musician living on Skid Row." The movie is the story of that encounter and how it changed both their lives. The movie, of course, takes some license with the very real events. But the most powerful scene in the film is when Lopez has brought Ayers to a homeless services organization called The Lamp. Lopez is talking to the director of this organization and says something to the effect of - Lopez has been writing about Ayers and trying to help him for months. But no matter what he does, Ayers just doesn't seem to get any better. Lopez wants this "expert" on the homeless to "fix" Ayers. But this man is more of a real expert than Lopez has bargained for, and tells him "the best thing you can do for him is to just be his friend." "I don't want to be his friend!" Lopez shouts back.

It would be so nice if we could just get someone else to take care of sharing the love of God with family and neighbors. "Can't we just leave it to the experts?" It would be so nice if there were just a perfect set of right answers we could give, doctrines we could recite from memory – a "solution" to the very real, personal journey that is faith.

Well, as you've probably long since figured out, there is no easy answer. The journey of faith is life-long and very personal. Sharing faith with others is indeed a very long and personal journey together. Some of you may find this rather easy. Praise God! But I know that I grew up in a family where it was achingly painful to talk about anything as truly personal as faith. We went to church every Sunday, no doubt about it, but it was that one person who really took the time to ask me what I believed and shared what he believed on a very personal level that made all the difference in my faith.

Even with that experience, coming from the background I do, it's hard to share that real, personal faith. It's just hard! And I'm a church professional!!! I started wondering a couple months ago, "How much have I really shared with the youth at Immanuel?" Now I've taught classes, led service projects and retreats, preached a few sermons, and had many very meaningful experiences here at Immanuel. And I know that a number of youth and parents have shared that these experiences were meaningful for them as well. But have I ever really shared anything about my own on-going journey of faith? Maybe the answer was yes, but still I felt God moving in my heart to step outside my "comfort zone" and be more personal.

So, at our almost monthly senior high gatherings at the Chipotle in Tysons mall, I decided to do something different. After our usual catching up, chomping on burritos, and discussing options for what's coming up with our youth group, I pulled out these Faith Talk cards. [Pull out pack with cards and show to congregation.] Dan gave them to me when I first got here, but I'd never really looked at them until just before going to Chipotle about two months ago. "Well, it can't hurt to try them," I thought to myself. So, I pulled them out at Chipotle, and was rightly teased for carrying a fanny pack – it sort of does look like one. The youth suggested I put this pack on my belt and go around drawing cards like a gunslinger from a wild west show. [Draw card and read to congregation.]

Anyway, after we had fun with them, I gave the youth the decks and essentially let them choose their own questions. Some of them are pretty easy, but some of them are really deep. But it wasn't just the youth who got the question cards. I drew one randomly. This last time I actually had the youth pick one for me to answer. Of course, I never got the softballs. "Tell about a time when you struggled with real doubt." "Great," I thought sarcastically. "Here I am wanting to share my faith, and now I'm being asked to talk about a time when I was filled with doubt!" But, as we tell the confirmands and as Aaron has said many times from this pulpit, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith, apathy is." So I shared the honest story of my time of great doubt.

And then something amazing happened. Even when youth answered the softball questions they had selected, they said something meaningful. And, to my surprise some of the youth went for the deeper questions, like "Talk about a time when you felt close to God." I learned a lot, and I also found I had

something personally significant to say to the tough questions I got, too. The last two Chipotle gatherings have, to my surprise, turned out to be some of the best sharing times many of us – the youth and myself included – have had since confirmation!

Why have I told you all about this? Because if a church professional like me sometimes needs a set of cards or a questions book to get beyond the surface, then you all certainly can give yourself permission to give those a try with your kids or your friends! Maybe it takes turning off the DVD player and iPods on a trip back from a travel soccer game and letting your kids pick out some questions for YOU to answer! *Good luck parents!* I'm sure you'll be fine. Maybe it takes being willing to go with a neighbor to a Bible study or other class where You have to answer some tough questions yourself. If that's what it takes for you to open up about your faith journey, then by all means use those resources!

But also I say this because being a witness is not just a one-shot deal. Confirmation doesn't mark the end of a journey with our young people, it marks the beginning of that life-long, very personal journey alongside a young person who is now an equal adult member of the congregation. We try to continue that journey in Senior High Sunday School. Sometimes it works, sometimes not. I and the many people involved in youth ministries try to continue that journey in other creative ways as well. But still, the most important place to continue that journeying together in faith is at home – after confirmation, and even after the youth head off to college!

Similarly, with our adult neighbors and friends, a one-time invitation to church is not enough. It may take a few invitations. It may take sharing what the sermon or prayers or music meant to you after the service at coffee or lunch. It may take joining that class or Bible study. It is all about that long-term commitment to journeying together in a very personal way in faith.

You know in real life Steve Lopez, the LA Times writer from the movie “The Soloist” is still friends with Nathaniel Ayers. I heard an extended interview with him on an NPR show recently, and he says they go out to Dodgers games and the symphony. And Lopez still gets his 7 a.m. phone calls from Ayers a few times a week. Sometimes Nathaniel Ayers is coherent, sometimes not. But Lopez has learned that just by being Ayers friend – overcoming his own fears and desire to push Ayers off onto someone else to fix and being in that long-term commitment to journeying together in friendship – that can actually have a more powerful affect on Ayres brain chemistry than any medication.

Maybe we need to have the courage to answer our own version of those 7 a.m. phone calls from our kids and our neighbors and being ready to share our lives of faith with those who want to know about our own journey. Study after study says they DO want to know, and that nothing is more effective than this kind of on-going personal journey together that I am describing.

Jesus really didn't give his disciples much of a choice. *“YOU will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and YOU will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

May all of us recognize the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of living faith that is in us – no matter how small or imperfect we may think it is – and join ever more fully in that call to journey together in real, lasting, personal faith with those in our own Jerusalem and beyond.

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Jim Stover