

**ON THE ROAD AGAIN; HEBREWS 11:8-16; AUGUST 7, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

The title of the sermon, the thrust of the text today, evoke Jack Kerouac and Willie Nelson and lots of other vagabond, minstrel, innovative, artistic, on the move Americans. The road is a big piece of our national identity. Even though we're two hundred and forty years old we're still young in many ways, willing to go where other nations, nations and cultures far older than the US, are unwilling to trod.

Summer is a time for road trips. Several of you have told me about your travels this summer. We've also made a few as a family – to Long Island for a relative's Muslim ceremony welcoming a new baby; to see old college friends I hadn't seen in over thirty years on the eastern shore of Virginia.

Next week my son Douglas and I will caravan to Fort Bragg to move his worldly possessions to Chapel Hill, NC where he is enrolled to be a student. Then, at the end of August Carol and I and our sainted Labrador retrievers Ninja and Brie will go to New Hampshire to be with our other son, daughter in law, the amazing Eliza Bea – our granddaughter and my sister and brother in law. We've been shouting 'Road Trip!' in our house more than a few times this summer.

You might say that the Bible is one long series of God's people shouting "Road Trip!" In nearly every generation, century and millennia since Abraham and Sarah, responding to God's summons they pulled up tent stakes, gathered the livestock and set out on their journey to a promised land, to build a homeland for all God's people.

The lesson today from the Book of Hebrews is acutely aware of God's people being sent. In fact, you can make a strong case that faith is defined as the willingness of God's people to go to new places and unknown destinations.

Fred Buechner says that, "To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only journeying for the world's sake – even when it sickens or scares you – that little by little we start come alive. This was not a conclusion I came to in time, Buechner says, it was a conclusion from beyond time that came to me." If we get stuck or too sedentary, it could be a sign that we're not living in the Spirit, not keeping a pulse on God's will for our lives; it could be a holy summons to start packing our bags.

We're not reading a Hallmark card or the Travel section of the *Times*, Hebrews says: "By faith Abraham set out...by faith he received power of procreation...from one as good as dead descendants were born...All these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them."

"They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth; for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland....they desire a better country."

The implication is that this journey for God, with God, as God's people is what it means to be faithful; it's what we do and who we are.

We're talking about the willingness to risk, with eyes wide open, going to an unknown destination. Abraham, writes one scholar, had no idea where he was going when he started out. If we consult the myths and legends of our faith, we find Adam and Eve, Noah and his family and descendants – all of them with itchy feet.

God's people set out not only geographically but also into the interior country – the heartland or land of the heart – where faith takes root, where Israel is born and reborn; where Jesus is constantly knocking on the door; and where he appears to his followers, then sends them to the four corners of the earth.

This is faith as journey, as adventure, as willingness. God's people end up in Egypt, become enslaved, then God calls Moses to lead them out into the desert again; they find a homeland, they build a temple, and the super powers invade and scatter them once more. Finally they come home, to their holy land and Jesus appears to them.

Ecclesiastes says: to everything turn, turn, turn. And the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" is about finding 'the valley of love and delight so by turning we come round right.'

The story continues here in America – in the 18th century dissident followers of Jesus, people who were not welcome in their own homeland because of their resistance to the Crown, came to a new country where they gave their villages and towns names like New Concord, New Haven, and New York. This nation was settled by people who believed God called them to North America.

In fact, the theme, metaphor and reality of journey is the paramount definition of what it means to be a believer, to be a "follower" of Jesus. The early church referred to our faith as "The Way." We sit here Sunday's in a building that looks like it's been here forever. We easily fall into the trap of thinking faith is a static body of information, a codified system of doctrine and to be faithful is a cognitive process of learning dogma. But the truth is God is constantly calling us, leading us to some new location – getting up to go there is what it means to be faithful.

When I consider my own faith journey, when I look at where I've travelled there are several trips that have made all the difference.

It was the people I met and the experiences I had in the places God called me that I started to "come alive" in Fred Buechner's terms: from a warm bed to a 6am Bible study in high school; from a huge suburban high school to my small liberal arts Presbyterian college I thought I went to, to play sports but found my life's calling and vocation; from the rarified academic world of Yale Divinity School to a UCC church on Long Island where we started an outreach ministry to half-way houses for former mental patients; from New Haven to Buffalo the first time which I had to think long and hard about but then met my mentor and dearest friend in ministry who shaped me as a pastor.

It's a long list and includes other journeys from thinking the Bible was a book of answers to life's problems to realizing it's a book about God and God's people; from seeing the church as a place where people get their needs met to seeing it as a community where people are equipped to serve. You have your stories; I'd love for us to hear them.

This past Wednesday we took a road trip to Chautauqua to hear The Reverend Dr. William Barber. There was a good turnout from our friends at the Elmwood Unitarian Universalist Church, Trinity Episcopal Church, and members of St. Paul's Cathedral with Dean Will Mebane, and Canisus College including President John Hurley.

Rev. Barber, you may recall, was one of the keynote speakers at the Democratic National Convention. But before that he was well known throughout the South as the visionary/founder of Moral Monday's that began when the legislature of North Carolina instituted new Jim Crow laws making access to the ballot box for blacks and poor white people unconstitutionally difficult. Barber organized and led weekly Monday morning rallies on the steps of the North Carolina State Capital to overturn those laws. And just a week ago, these racist laws were thrown out by a Federal Appeals Court.

Rev. Barber is what Hebrews refers to as a hero of faith; his ministry is one big road trip. The day before Chautauqua he was in Boston; he is now on a fifteen state preaching tour with Rev. James Forbes and a Gospel choir to encourage blacks and minorities to register for the fall election. He told us his speaking engagement at the DNC was a last minute invitation; he was there, he thought, to lead a march for poor people and ended up on the podium in the national spotlight. We don't necessarily know the full import or all the reasons why we choose to go to a meeting, a college, or a rally, but chances are good that God wants us there to use us in some way we never expected.

Let me say a bit more about Rev. Barber. His message Wednesday was the subject of his new book – *The Third Reconstruction*. His talk was a scholarly lecture on Constitutional law and American racial history.

I would love for us all to read and discuss his book as well as the other recently published, highly acclaimed work of Robert P. Jones *The End of White Christian America* – before November 6. Jones is the visionary founder and leader of the Public Religion Research Institute and is consulted by every media outlet for understanding these complex times.

Barber's and Jones' books are uncannily timely and profoundly insightful, hopeful statements for these turbulent times.

The clergy of the Unitarian Church, Trinity Episcopal and I along with Jerry Kelly and John McClive and Voice Buffalo are forming a coalition of white and black churches and community groups to bring William Barber to Buffalo next year.

Why? Because we are a poor and heavily segregated city; because Barber is calling for a reframing of the old left/right culture war language; he is putting our challenges in the language of moral imperative; moral imperative is the language of the Bible; it is the language of Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth – preaching good news to the poor, binding up the broken hearted, healing the sick, visiting the prisoner, welcoming the stranger.

The language of the culture wars, Barber says, is too puny for the challenges we face in our cities and nation – we need language big enough to understand and see the path to healing, justice and peace.

I mention William Barber because listening to him, meeting him afterwards it was clear to me that he fits the description of “one who sees and greets the promises of God from a distance.” There is a sense that William Barber is a stranger to our time, a person speaking truth to power in a way that few others in our time have spoken.

Barber yearns for a homeland, he has no interest in returning to the land he is departing – he trusts that God has prepared a better place where rich and poor, white and black, gay and straight, male and female and yes liberal and conservative not only co-exist but live together in peace and harmony.

When he is asked if this vision of a moral fusion of diverse people, religions and traditions works he tells the story of testing it out in a back-country county in North Carolina populated by military families, Republicans and white folks.

So Barber made a road trip from Raleigh across the state; he thought he was going to test the viability of his moral agenda for North Carolina. He went with trepidation to proclaim his vision for a new homeland. He said he was so scared looking out at that large white audience that he talked and talked, for an hour and forty-five minutes; he was afraid to stop talking for fear of what they would do when he stopped.

When he finally did end his remarks he said their faces were deadpan, expressionless; their clapping barely polite or audible.

Then it was Q and A; the first question knocked him over; “Dr. Barber,” the questioner asked, “can we start an NAACP chapter here?” Barber is the president of the North Carolina NAACP and he said, “Why, yes, we’d love to have a chapter here in your hometown.” Then the questioner asked apologetically, “Can it be all white? You see we just have white folks living here.” Barber said he was ready to cry.

Then they asked if he’d be willing to lead them in a march. Still somewhat in disbelief, he asked, “A march to where?” They said they wanted to march to their legislator’s home to present a petition for overturning the Jim Crow voting laws.

Barber said, “I’d be honored. When do you want to march? “Tonight!” came they shouted.” Barber with just a vestige of racial fear said, “Black folks don’t usually lead marches in white communities in the south at night. Let’s march tomorrow afternoon,” he said, “and I’ll have other chapters here to join us.”

Finally, someone rose to tell Rev. Barber that they invited him to come talk to them because they wanted to make sure he and his program were substantive and committed. “Does this moral fusion of people and faith traditions bridging all the social divides including liberal and conservative work?” he asked rhetorically at Chautauqua? “Yes it works!” he said, to a standing ovation of that nearly all white, conservative Chautauqua audience, “Yes, it works!”

The message today is this: faith is a journey; God calls us to places we may not prefer or choose to go; nor do we always know exactly why we are going. But we go with confidence and trust, searching for a homeland, greeting the promises of God from afar, going to unknown destinations with eyes wide open. Amen.