

Sermon: “Traveling On” **January 24, 2010**
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Hit the snooze button or get out of bed? Meet someone’s gaze or look away? Say what’s on your mind or keep quiet? We face decisions at virtually every moment of our lives.

Even these seemingly small decisions may have unimagined consequences. Our choices form a chain, each one a link to the one before and the one after. We don’t think about it much.

But once in awhile, we become aware that we are at a decision point that will change the course of our lives. We come to a fork in the road, a turning point, and we know it. This congregation is at such a point. Today we give thanks for the twenty years of shared life and shared worship, frustrations, laughter, grief and aspiration.

Today we find inspiration in the story of this church, a story of challenge and adversity, of survival and affirmation; a story whose theme is mutual commitment and care. We look ahead with determination, some trepidation, and with hope. We look around at our friends and at those we know less well, and make a decision. To remain connected. To speak our truths in loving ways. To accept both our limitations and our potential with grace and courage.

For embracing potential is not necessarily the easier way. To decide for the future demands resilience and the willingness to learn from mistakes and rise above them. It demands change and change means turbulence and discomfort. To embrace potential means there will be hard work involved, even sacrifice. It means inevitable risk and times of discouragement. Most of all, to decide for the future means breaking out beyond our cozy traditions and the natural temptation to look only inward. It means taking a chance on the stranger, the unknown; reaching beyond these walls, a willingness to touch lives blighted by want and despair and oppression; an openness to learn from and be touched by those who are not “us.”

These choices cannot be made from a position of fear. Fear keeps us doing the same old things; fear keeps us stuck in the same place. But how are we to overcome those fears – the fear of failure and the fear of success, and the responsibilities that success places on us?

An institution, a church, in crisis, is not that different from an individual in crisis, at a turning point. A congregation, like you and me, needs to reflect on the past and look for the patterns hidden in that story. What actions do we keep repeating to our detriment? And what have we done in the past to pull ourselves out of crisis? Where have we found our strength? And what confidence can we draw from these examples of our resilience, our effectiveness, our skills and our goodness?

Like an individual at a turning point, a church needs a vision, a plan. What do we want to be? What is the life we envision for ourselves and those we serve? Whom do we serve? What must we do, what steps must we take, one after the other, to make a dream come true? A person in crisis experiences a feeling of helplessness not that different from a congregation that is struggling. A plan – a vision and immediate steps to take – puts fear in its place.

An institution, like a person, survives in times of fear and uncertainty by turning back to its principles, again and again. Its core values will guide it through fearful decisions and change that disrupts and disorients.

And fear feeds on isolation and a sense that we must go it alone. Companions, together, can tame fear. Loving companions call us to account and protect us from the lure of soothing denial and avoidance when those tempt us. Loving companions assure us that we can get up when we fall. They restore our perspective when they make us laugh. Companions challenge us to turn outward, to remember others in our time of anxiety, and they hold us when we cannot see beyond our hurts.

The opposite of the decision made out of fear is not the cocky or brash or over-confident one, but one made from a place of curiosity. Must we continue along the same path we originally chose? What alternative plot lines might we develop in our collective story, and where might those lead us? What would that other story tell about us? Would it reflect who we are right now, or who we want to become, rather than who we have been? What do we want our story to mean when it's all said and done?

Our church has choices to make, some of which we'll be talking about together this afternoon. My own task as your minister is help you to discern what our story will be, to challenge you to create one that is worthy of your commitment, and to bring us back to it if and when we stray from our vision. My task is not to choose for you, or to know all the answers, but to help you discover them. To encourage your explorations, to hold you to your principles and to be that companion that holds the light along whatever path your choose; who reminds you of your ingenuity and toughness when you lose heart; who reminds you to keep moving forward when it's more comfortable to sit down where you are.

There is so much to do. So many possibilities. An after-school program for the neighborhood? Outreach to young adults? A literacy program? Prison ministry? A speaker's forum? Alliances with other organizations in the area of climate change, immigrant rights, or housing the homeless? I've discovered in my time with you that you may not necessarily want what you think you want or have learned to think you want because you wanted it in the past. The opportunities can feel overwhelming and it feels easier to keep doing what we've always done. We set goals that may no longer be authentic because you've changed; your story has changed. And striving for goals that no longer fit is a sure recipe for failure and frustration.

There is much that is authentic in what we choose. The proof of this is in the things that we are good at. We excel at caring for one another. We are good at listening to each other. We're good at celebrating, and good at being open to experimentation.

We're not so good at focus and follow-through, and I include myself in that observation. We're great at brainstorming; we're full of creative ideas, but a little weaker in summoning the time and energy and commitment to put them into practice. We're not necessarily sure of what we want and we don't like to limit our possibilities by setting priorities. But these are not bad deficits to have. Better to have too many ideas and choices ahead of us than none.

Our challenge in the coming years will be to keep our eyes on our larger mission, and this is hard to do when we don't know where we will be located or how we will pay our staff or keep the utilities turned on. Our immediate choices have to do with those utilitarian and essential matters.

But a larger challenge, as we assess our resources and decide where to invest those resources, will be to reign in our impatience. There will be no instant turnaround in our finances, no explosion of growth, no easy solutions. We will need the discipline to be patient with ourselves and with each other. And we will need to remember – always remember – why it matters. Why it matters that we have a building, and staff, and electricity. We will need to refer to our mission, again and again.

We are here to foster open minds – to insist on the role of both reason and compassion and to be a beacon of religious freedom and free thought, to encourage one another's spiritual growth and responsible search for truth and meaning. We are here to foster caring hearts – to teach our children and ourselves that everyone has worth, that all deserve respect, that all people are family, and that that conviction carries with it an imperative to act with compassion and equity. We are here as a community of helping hands – a church that does more than talk, a church that acts in the world to create justice and peace. With these principles to guide us, we will surely overcome fear and confusion. We will surely be called along the right path – not without some false steps and stumbles – but eventually and inevitably.

The way leads on. We cannot retrace our steps and begin again, nor would we want to. We give thanks for the past, good and bad; from the past, we grow in wisdom. Knowing that we do not have all the answers and that there is no certainty of success, let us adopt a spirit of curiosity, of openness, of possibility; from the future we draw inspiration. And knowing that the present is fleeting and precious and will never come again, we remember to stay awake, to feel, to love, and to listen, for out of the present moment and the choices it holds for us, we shape the quality of our lives.