

Meditation "Journey by Stages"
Sunday, June 11, 2023
Scripture: Genesis 12:1-9, Matthew 9:9-13
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Our first scripture reading is Genesis 12:1-9. After eleven chapters of "world history," we begin the story of the life and faith of Israel. Abram and his wife Sarai are introduced as the father and mother of Israel's faith. They are willing to reject idol worship and embrace monotheism as they venture from the security of what they have known into God's future on their faith journey. A journey that is traveled by stages. Hear now, God's holy word.

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. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot and all the possessions that they had gathered and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran, and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So Abram built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east, and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb. Amen.

Our Gospel reading for today is Matthew 9:9-13. In the story of Matthew's call, we see a willingness, not unlike Abram and Sarai, to risk a break with the familiar to follow Jesus on a journey of faith. Matthew's occupation as a tax collector makes him suspect in the eyes of the religious leaders who view him as unworthy of Christ's mercy, a mercy which they lack in their own lives. Hear now the word of God.

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And Matthew got up and followed Jesus. ¹⁰ And as Matthew sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when Jesus heard this, Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick (do). ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners." Amen.

The title of the meditation: Journey by Stages

The text: *And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb. Genesis 12:9*

Let us pray: Lord God, thank you for the stages through which we each pass on our faith journeys to becoming the people you call us to be. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This week I had the privilege of providing leadership in Vacation Bible School as the Master Chef who shared recipes for life from the Holy Bible. Although the Bible is not a recipe book, within the stories of the journeys of God's people, we gain insight into how to put the ingredients together to create lives of mercy and faith.

It was an utter delight to interact with the different age groups and to celebrate each unique stage of development within their faith formation. Once again, I was reminded of the many layers of meaning in the rich biblical phrase: *"They journeyed by stages."*

Today when we plan a long journey, either for a vacation or mission trip, we consider taking it in stages, going a certain distance each day. When we travel with children, older adults or in large groups, that pace changes and our need for patience and preparation grows.

When an athlete, musician or scholar prepares for a marathon, cantata, or dissertation, one also works in stages, building strength and endurance through routine and discipline.

Each time an infant is baptized in our congregation, another faith journey begins in this church family. Each journey lasts a lifetime and grows and changes through stages. Each moment on that journey is significant. Since our journeys begin at different times, we find ourselves in different stages. There is a richness in being a part of a faith community that understands and celebrates that we *"journey by stages."*

Over the years, Peter and I have taught a series on "Faith and Moral Development" as a helpful review of the stages through which each child of God journeys. Not surprisingly there are parallels among the stages of psychosocial, cognitive, moral and faith development. As we consider our own faith journeys this overview offers a framework for personal reflection.

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg outlines the stages of moral development and theologian James Fowler outlines the stages of faith development. Both the moral and faith development stages have interesting parallels with Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development and Eric Erikson's stages of psychosocial development.

For Kohlberg, the journey of morality begins in the stage of the very young (ages 2-6) being obedient to avoid punishment. Consistency in discipline is particularly important. Faith in this stage, according to Fowler, begins as a simple projection. "God is Like Mommy and Daddy." Young children develop a basic sense of trust and rely on those who provide them with care, love, and nurture.

Elementary children (ages 7-12) enter another stage on their journey as they begin to conform their behavior to obtain rewards and to have favors returned. Children in this stage are very

concerned with rules, what is fair, and who's getting what. During this stage of their faith journey, they are attracted to simple Bible stories, which they understand literally and usually only in terms of good and evil and justice and fairness. Their faith perspective sees good people receiving blessings and bad people punishment.

According to Kohlberg, as the journey by stages continues into junior high and high school, the adolescent's higher logical reasoning plays a role in their understanding of morality. Their motivation to be good now focuses on relationships and the approval of others. Friends and what they think become very important during this stage of the journey! In terms of faith formation, these young people are open to learning the conventional teachings of their church and the importance of mission through adults they trust.

With the foundation of their faith laid during this stage, older adolescents and young adults seek dialogue and new ways of looking at things. They are open to seeing other's viewpoints in search of deeper meanings and can be generous with their resources, talents, and time in giving back to the community. Differentiation from others and maturity deepen their understanding that one conforms to rules, not only to satisfy legitimate authorities but also for the welfare of the community. The rules they began obeying to avoid punishment as toddlers are now the principles they embrace and live by as young adults. The faith that began as a projection of mom and dad has grown into a thoughtful relationship with Christ who desires mercy and welcomes all.

Of course, each of us regresses from time to time into the feeling and thinking of previous stages and the journey continues into adulthood throughout our lives. William Shakespeare highlights our journey by stages in his classic play, As You Like It with Jaques' famous soliloquy "The Seven Ages of Man."

As we each continue to journey by stages, may we gather at the table of our Lord where we find nourishment and strength for the way. May we celebrate the unknowable God whom we know in the tender mercies of Christ which crown us all the days of our lives. Amen.