

2 Kings 6 & 7
X: YOU ARE HERE
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1-10-16

Where are we going? It's January, the beginning of a new year, a new semester. For some in here, your time as a collegiate undergraduate has come to an end (for some, it will soon to be coming to an end). Beginning a new year, we may have all sorts of goals we would like to accomplish. We've passed the winter solstice, so the days are growing longer, soon winter will release us from its cold, wet grip—even though in January, spring still feels a very long way off.

It's the beginning of a new year and many good things that are to come in the life of our congregation. And anytime you begin anew, it is good to ask the question, "Where are we going?"

Two weeks ago as we departed Wabash with Annie and Christian strapped in their car seats, with 11 hours of driving in front of me, I thought to myself: "This is a great opportunity for me to decompress, reflect, to enjoy a few caffeinated beverages, and think about where we're going as a church in 2016." Before I left, I looked at the traffic report and made the decision that instead of taking the well-worn path through Chicago, we would take the "scenic" Iowa route to Minnesota.

As we made our way on a much less familiar path, I realized that the metaphor for this series that had to that point alluded me was unfolding before me in front of my van windshield. Anytime we ask the question "where are we going?" it demands that we consider the possible routes to get us there. In my life, I have driven the Indiana-Illinois toll road 80 to 90 to 94 literally dozens of times getting home to Minnesota. It has become so second nature to me that I no longer think about where I'm going—it's autopilot. However, this time, with wintry weather bearing down on us, as well as a Bears game finishing about the time we were to pull through town, we decided to take the alternate route—one I've only driven once before.

Instead of setting it to cruise control, I needed to pay careful attention to where I was and where I needed to be. And as I sat there, I realized this is the image we need as a community to keep in mind. If we are going to get where we are supposed to go as a community of Christ's followers, we need to pay attention to where we are going. Setting the church on autopilot and going about it business as usual no longer works for us.

We are moving together. This is a church that is driven by its volunteers, and no matter if you are an elder or a nursery volunteer, a Sunday School teacher, a sound and video volunteer, or someone who sets up tables for church events, we need to know where we are going together.

So for the month of January, this is what we are going to be considering, the question: where are we going? Now, before we can begin to answer this question, we need to answer a different one: where are we now? If you have a destination and a map, it doesn't do you any good unless you know where you are now. At the mall when you look at one of those map kiosks, there's always a red "X" that says "YOU ARE HERE."

Now if you're at the mall, it's entirely up to you to determine where you are and where you're going. But I believe that as the church, it is the Scriptures that answer the questions "where are we and where are we going?" for us. The Scriptures tell us where we are going, and the Scriptures tell us where we are. We may think that we are one place in life, but the Scriptures may be saying that you are someplace entirely different. We as a congregation may think to ourselves "this is where we need to go," but the Scriptures may be calling us someplace entirely different. Instead of setting the auto pilot in 2016, maybe God is inviting us to the path less traveled, where we need to pay attention to what we're doing. This is what we are going to be reflecting on for the next three weeks.

But today, we're going to begin with the question, where are we now? And to answer this question, we're going to be looking at a wonderful story from the book of 2 Kings. I'm not going to read it all, but I am going to tell you the story, whose climax is that four lepers, four leprous men, experience good news. In this story, four leprous men are starving for food. They've not had anything to eat or drink in a long time. And when we meet them, they are standing on the boarder of an enemy encampment and there are tents as far as the eye can see. Inside those tents are all the food and water these men could need, and they're about to discover something better than they could ever imagine.

The enemy they thought was waiting for them was gone. Everything they need is right there for them, and the enemy that was standing between them and the life they were meant to live was gone.

This is where we stand.

Let me explain what I mean by this by telling you the back story of this passage—then I think you will see. The city these men came from was called Samaria. It was the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in its day. It was an ancient city built on a hill because atop a hill this city was at an advantage militarily. The only challenge was that if an enemy was savvy – which their enemy, the Arameans were – they could set up their tents around the city, effectively closing them off from getting the imported provisions they need. At first, it wasn't so bad, because the Samaritans had all they need, but pretty soon they ran out and things became desperate.

To give you a sense of how desperate it got, you couldn't buy a donkey's head or a pile of dove poop. Dove poop was what you used to start fires; a donkey's head was the lowest possible source of food. What the narrator is saying is that things were so desperate for the people that even with all the money in the world, you could not buy anything good to eat and you couldn't buy the stuff to start a fire to cook it. That's bad.

It gets worse. People are so desperate, that they are driven to madness. Infanticide became an option. There's an encounter between two women who make an agreement that one day they would cook and eat one child, and on the next they would cook another. It was horrible for the people because nobody had what they needed, and so they were driven to horrible circumstances.

This is a picture of the world in which we live. This grizzly story actually does a pretty good job illustrating the condition of the world in which we live, right? Not only does it remind us of the physical needs that people have, but it also illustrates how even people who are wealthy and well fed don't have their spiritual and emotional needs met.

We live in a culture in which people are cut off from one another relationally. Our society has become so isolated and impersonal that people don't have the emotional connections they need. People are told that they do not have any value in the working world and so they are unable to work, effectively cut off from their vocational value. We have become so greedy and desperate that we're literally willing to consume one another to get what we need in order to get ahead in the world.

In this story, things are very bad. The outlook of the city of Samaria is literally hopeless. When the two women go to the king to mediate their problem, the king literally throws up his hands and says, "What do you want me to do about this? I can't do a thing," then he curses God and cries.

The next characters we meet in the story are four lepers. These four men live on the outskirts of the city. They're not allowed inside because they're lepers. The irony of this story is that under normal circumstances, their lives would have been far worse than the others, but in these conditions they are no worse off than anyone else. What the narrator is trying to convey to us is that things are so hopeless for the people of the city that if it is up to people, they are lost.

These four lepers look at one another and say, "Well, it doesn't really make sense for us to try go back to Samaria, because all we'd have there are donkey's heads. But perhaps if we go out to the enemy tents, they will give us food. If we go out to them, they'll probably kill us, but we're already as good as dead, so really what do we have to lose? But maybe they'll give us food and we'll survive. Maybe they'll invite us to be a part of their army." That's their plan.

I want to bring us back to the question, where are we now? We are in a world that is as broken as the world of these four lepers, and we're also in a world in which if it's up to us to fix it and change it, we have about as much hope as they do to make it right.

How many of us have ever tried to change ourselves only to find that we were right back where we began? Maybe it's with your health or weight, maybe it's a habit you're trying to kick, maybe you're trying to become a more patient, compassionate, attentive spouse or parent. And every time you think you're making progress, you slip right back to where you began. If it's up to us, we're lost. It's why the self-help section of the bookstore makes so much money. But I want now to turn to the part of this story that is so full of hope, so full of promise, so full of strength and courage that it can give us the starting point for us as a community as we begin this next year.

As those lepers make their way to the enemy encampment, God does something that changes their outcome. The thing that is ruining life for the people of Samaria is the enemy in their tents. As long as they have power, the city is hopeless. But God causes a sound to be heard in the ears of the enemy in the camp, it was the thundering sound of horses and chariots. And what

happened when the enemy heard this sound was they got up and ran for their lives. God caused the enemy to flee so they were gone and had no more power over the people of Samaria.

Everything in the city of Samaria had changed, but no one there knew it yet.

This is where we are. God has done something that has truly changed everything, and there are lots of people who don't know it yet. And as long as they don't know it, the people of Samaria stay behind closed doors and they keep starving.

But now we have these lepers, these four hopeless men, walking up to the camp where they will discover all the food and drink, all the safety and security, all the good things they could ever want or need. Everything they could ever want or need is there for them. God provided it and has given it to them freely.

This is where we stand. This is where you and I stand in this broken and discouraged world at any given moment. We stand like these lepers, who have all they could ever need right in front of them. We stand because God in Jesus Christ has come into the world and given us all that we could ever need. When Jesus gave himself on the cross, reconciling the world to himself, God chased the enemy off into the night. The enemy no longer has any power, except the power we allow it to have by imagining that it is still encamped around us. And as long as we keep imagining it, we allow the enemy to keep us prisoner like the people of Samaria who didn't yet realize that God had defeated the enemy and was giving them every good thing they could ever need.

This is where these lepers stand, and when they see the massive store holds of good food and drink, abandoned by their enemies, literally there for the taking, do you know what they do? They rush in and they start eating as much and as fast as they can. We are like these lepers in a way, because we have found the good food and the good news, that the enemy no longer has power over us, that he is vanquished once and for all and now we have all that we could need. This is always where the church finds itself.

We don't need to go on trying to do it ourselves because Jesus Christ has won the victory. He has given us our identity. We don't need to be enemies with those around us because God has freed us and conquered fear and hatred and sin, so we are free to love those around us. We're liberated to be fully alive. We can walk out of the jail cell, the door is open. If you are lonely and lost and discouraged and alone, you are free because Jesus has conquered the enemy and now you can walk in new life in freedom and in joy.

This meal tells us where we are and it tells us where we are to go.