

Gettin' to the Promised Land: Packing Our Bags

Micah 6:8: *What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.*

Matthew 6:26-34: *There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds. Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The 10 best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.*

Well, we are in our second week in our annual Black History Month celebration. This year the theme is "Gettin' to the Promised Land." This theme is really an outgrowth of the stories in Exodus—the story of the Hebrew slaves being set free from the bondage of Pharaoh. These stories and this theme have much resonance with the story of black people in America: the

struggle to be free from slavery, the struggle for freedom from bondage of the soul and spirit.

What does it mean to “get to the Promised Land?” Of course, for the Hebrew slaves, the Promised Land was a literal place over the Jordan River where they were free from Pharaoh and would set up their new lives led by God. In the 1940s and ‘50s in the United States, and during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the Promised Land was a land free of Jim Crow and where there were voting rights and equal wages. The choir just sang a song called “Jordan’s Angels,” which refers to the Promised Land being a place we go when we die. Actually, this song was also sung by slaves in our country as a way of letting each other know that the people working the Underground Railroad were close by to help them get to freedom.

A Promised Land on Earth, Too

Many of us, when we talk about the Promised Land, talk about the going to heaven when we die. But in the Bible the concept of the Promised Land also refers to that place God brings us when we are free from the bondage of the pharaohs of this world. And we can experience some of that sense here on earth. So when we talk about Gettin’ to the Promised Land, we talk about crossing over the Jordan when we die, but also talk about the hope of a life of peace and justice here on earth that we, as God’s people, are called to work for with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength.

So, while the struggle of black Americans has been bound with those themes, and those of us who are not black cannot fully understand the depth and pain of that struggle, all of us, no matter what tradition or racial background we come from, are being called by God to a Promised Land—the one when we die, and the one that is a kind of Promised Land on earth. We can all find ourselves becoming enslaved by the values and lures and pains and the pharaohs of this world in such a way that we sometimes find ourselves unable really to be free. Unable to be free to receive the incredible love God has for each of us. Unable to be free to become all we are meant to become. Unable to be free to live into the meaning of beloved community, where all people are valued and are free to thrive.

So how do we get to this Promised Land? Today we are going to talk about how we get ready—what to pack in our bags for this journey. We will also talk about some things we tend to carry in our bags that keep us bound and enslaved and make living into the Promised Land of this life more difficult.

The Promised Land of Ida B. Wells

First, let's learn from someone. Let's talk about a person who seemed to be free from the bondage of the world and was able to keep her focus on the Promised Land amid tough times. Most of us talk about Rosa Parks during Black History Month. But did you know that there was another woman who is known for refusing to give up her seat to a white person—not on a bus but on a train?

It happened in 1884. Ida B. Wells refused to give her seat to a white man. She was dragged off the train. You see, in 1875, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875 that stated that no company could segregate on public facilities. Yes, long before black and white lunch counters and black and white drinking fountains, Congress passed a law banning this kind of thing. But the Supreme Court in 1883 struck it down as unconstitutional, giving the states the right to make those decisions. Have you noticed that often in this country civil rights take two steps forward and one step backward? So it was within the law for Ida Wells to be removed from her seat. But not in the violent way she was removed. Later, she filed a lawsuit decrying her poor treatment and won a \$500 settlement.

Let's learn a little more about this woman whose vision of the Promised Land burned in her heart. Whose vision of justice for all would not let her be still. Whose vision of a Promised Land where all people are free and loved and valued kept her working and loving even as she faced trials and discrimination. She was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862. Her parents were slaves when she was born but were freed in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation. She ended up helping to raise her six brothers and sisters after yellow fever took her parents when

she was about 16. She moved to Tennessee and went to college at Fisk University while raising her siblings. She also did some training at Le Moyne. She worked as a teacher, fought for voting rights and civil rights and was a writer. She is probably most well known for her research journalism on acts of lynching in the South. Her research showed that many, if not most, of the black men who were lynched for allegedly mistreating white women were really men who were threats to white men financially because they were successful. You may wish to look up her some of her work online.

Sometimes I am simply amazed at the tenacity, the faith and the courage of some of the people who have gone before us. Against great odds they kept the vision of the Promised Land burning in their souls. When many people would quit or lose hope, they had the audacity to hold on to hope and keep working, loving and praying. When some would let the messages of the world define them, they had the discipline and the gumption to keep believing that God is good and was calling them to a land of promise and freedom.

How Do They Do It?

As we think about people like Ida B. Wells or Dr. King or Rosa Parks and so many others; as we think about men and women—of all races and stations—who seem to be fueled by a fire of love and passion for justice for all deep within, do you ever wonder how they do it or how they did it? How they kept moving forward and didn't give up? How do they keep the vision of the Promised Land ever before them? How do they journey through life in such a way that they don't seem enslaved by the lures of the world?

The passage that Jean read from Micah surely has some advice for us about how to discipline our lives to keep the Promised Land in view. And whenever I hear this verse I think of our own Ken Rogers. This is the verse that has guided his life. Those of you who know Ken and Jeanine, know that they have given their lives to the care of others and the support of "the least of these." A number of years ago Gloria's daughter, Amy, and her friend, Ann, made a video of some of the ministries we do here at First Presbyterian. At that time Ken Rogers was weekly

taking three of our men who were on parole or probation to the local Habitat for Humanity worksite to help out and earn a little money. I don't remember the exact question the videographer asked him, but I remember Ken's answer: "It's really quite simple—do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." Ken would often say that in talking about life, about politics, about following Jesus: "It's really pretty simple—do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God."

So, amid all the things pulling on us in this world, maybe this is how people like Ida B. Wells and others keep focused and make it through. Maybe, though it isn't easy, it really is quite simple. Amid the myriad of voices and movements and messes, maybe one way we can keep moving forward, moving toward the Promised Land is pretty simple—do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God.

'What's in your suitcase?'

Today I've brought a suitcase. While most of us don't carry a suitcase around with us each day, we do carry things and values in our hearts and souls and practices that can help lighten our load so we are freer to receive the Promised Land gifts God has for us. Or sometimes we have things we carry around that weigh us down.

Capitol One says, "What's in your wallet?" Maybe we could ask this morning, "What's in your suitcase?" What do you carry around as you journey through this life seeking to get to the Promised Land?

All of us carry things that help us and also things that hinder us and weigh us down. Let's think about those things for a few minutes.

(Pastor Hartzell takes out of the suitcase a big rock and a sign that says "Fear.")

FEAR paralyzes us.

Fear gets us focused on getting and clinging.

Fear of what people think ...

Fear that we are not good enough ...

Fear of not losing what we've got.

Part of this journey to the Promised Land is learning to recognize these fears when they start overcoming us. And when we notice them, it can be a good practice to take them out of the suitcase and put them at the foot of the cross (she places the rock and sign at the foot of the cross), asking God to set us free from the bondage of our fears so we can travel more lightly to the Promised Land.

Cell Phone Goes to Foot of the Cross

DISTRACTIONS (Pastor Hartzell takes her cell phone out of the suitcase.) Ah, these phones can be such a gift, but they can be such a distraction, too, can't they? Since the election I've been addicted to the news. Now, it is important to stay informed so that we can do justice. But the news and the anxiety that comes with focusing on the news and all the changes in our country sometimes distract me from keeping my life centered in love and hope and justice.

But other things distract us too. Sometimes the focus is on buying lots of stuff. Or on our own beauty or lack thereof. Let's ask God to show us what distractions may be keeping us from traveling more fully with hope to the Promised Land. May we be free from distractions that so easily enslave us. The foot of the cross is a good place for these, too. (She places the cell phone at the foot of the cross).

BITTERNESS (She takes another rock and a sign with "bitterness" written on it out of the suitcase.) We have all been hurt by people we love. Some of those wounds for some of you are much deeper than others. When we hold on to the bitterness and pain, we weigh ourselves down. A good place for that bitterness is at the foot of the cross. (She places the rock and the sign at the foot of the cross.) Let's ask Jesus to help free us from the bondage of bitterness in our lives so we can be free to travel to the Promised Land.

There are more “weights” of bondage than these, of course. You may want to ask Jesus to show you what you are carrying around that makes your road to the Promised Land more difficult. What else are you being invited to put at the foot of the cross?

What *Should* We Carry With Us?

So, those are some things we don’t want to be carrying with us. What do we need in our suitcases? What is some good stuff to carry with us?

Well, first, let’s carry this question with us: “Is this the ‘right’ thing?” (She takes a sign out of the suitcase that has this message on it.) I’m not speaking of the politically right thing, but the right thing. Is it just? Is it fair? Is it moral? On the way to the Promised Land we must carry this question with us and ask ourselves this question as we make choices. Dr. King said, “It is never the wrong time to do the right thing.” It is always right to try to respect people, even if they are disrespectful to us. It is always right to be honest, pay our bills, smile at people.

Second, I have some “glasses” in this suitcase. (She takes out a huge pair of toy glasses with heart-shaped lenses.) These are meant to be glasses that see through the lenses of love and mercy. On the week after the election, Dr. Shannon Kerschner from Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago invited every member of her congregation to try to see every person they meet—friends and enemies and everyone in between—as a “child of God.” Her congregation, like ours, has some significant political diversity—people on both sides of the huge political divide.

Dr. Kerschner admonished her congregation to be a community like Jesus and stay united in love—recognizing that some people may be working on opposite sides of issues—but that in church we love. We see each other first as children of God. Can you imagine how different the world would be if each person thought, “I’m talking to a child of God” before they opened their mouths or posted on Facebook or Twitter? So bring with you glasses that seek to see every

person as a child of God.

Pack Your Walking Shoes

Also, bring some walking shoes with you. (Pastor Hartzell pulls walking shoes out of the suitcase.) Micah invites us to walk humbly with God. So we need walking shoes—notice these are not running shoes. They are walking shoes. This journey to the promise land is not a sprint. We don't get there quickly. We must pace ourselves. Walking WITH God. "With" is a cool word. It connotes that God is present beside us, behind us, underneath us, ahead of us.

I met a woman this week whose knows about walking with God. I went to visit Jim Errant at his assisted living facility and met a wonderful woman who lives in the facility. Her name is Otelia and, like many people from Benton Harbor, she was born and reared in Arkansas. She has six children, and I'm guessing she is in her 90s. As I walked in, she was sitting at the table reading her large-print version of the King James Bible, which she called "My Living Word." Her eyes were sparkling with joy. I asked her what she was reading and she told me that she reads her Bible all day long. When she can't sleep, she gets up and reads "my Living Word." When she is bored, she reads her "Living Word." This Word, she told me, will always tell you what you need to know when you need to know it. She told me that Jesus has helped her more times than she could ever count and always has showed her the way. This woman shone with a glow of one who has spent her life—the good times and the bad times—walking with God.

Keeping Your Balance

And finally, for today let's talk about keeping balance. (She pulls out from the suitcase a small vertical sculpture of rocks glued together.) This is a church of hard workers with full and rich lives. The journey to the Promised Land is long and treacherous, and it is important that you eat right, get your rest, and are gentle with yourself along the way. An older man I knew in Georgia used to say, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away, and a game of checkers a day keeps the mind sharp and the soul happy." That man knew a little about keeping balance.

So this week, as we ponder this long journey to the Promised Land, think about what you are carrying with you. Is there something heavy in your suitcase that is weighing you down and keeping you from traveling lightly? The foot of the cross is a good place for those things. And sometimes we need a friend to help us keep it there. And this room is full of friends who might help you out.

And when in doubt, and when you get discouraged on the way, don't worry. Because so often in this life and on this journey to the Promised Land things are two steps forward and one step backward. Getting discouraged is part of the journey.

And when you do, remember the words of Micah and remember Ken Roger's advice: "It's really pretty simple—'Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.'"

Amen.