

Faith Mennonite Church  
January 27, 2013  
Desiring God's Coming Kingdom  
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### **Where is God calling us to go?**

*Revelation 5:9-12; Luke 4:14-21*

*...you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation...*

*He has sent me to proclaim release...recovery of sight...to let the oppressed go free...  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Two weeks ago we examined the question: Who is God calling us to become as a people? The identity statement for Mennonite Church USA says that “God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.” In summary, Jesus is the center of our faith; we are called to live this faith in community; and reconciliation—God’s healing and hope—is the center of our work.

Today we ask: Where is God calling us to go? You may be familiar with the Dr. Seuss book *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* We're a culture on the go. It is estimated that the average person works from between 7 to 10 different jobs during their life-time and makes around a dozen geographic moves. Yet often when we talk about where we are going, we talk in fixed terms: we go to work, we go home, we go to the store, and we go to church. In each of these places we have expectations of how things will be. Granted, depending on our personality types, some of us like more change and innovation while others of us like patterned, predictability. But for the most part we all function best when expectations are clear, things are in the places we expect them to be, and our work and living companions act generously and collaboratively.

What comes to mind for you when we speak of “going to church?” Worship... fellowship... Sunday School...perhaps this building. When researchers track religious participation, they generally ask people whether they have attended a religious service during the past week. But our question today is not about “going to church” but rather where is the church going? Where is God calling us to go as a church, as the collective body of Christ?

Our scriptures this morning provide answers from two very different perspectives. In the book of Revelation we have a view of the final outcome: *saints from every tribe and language and people and nation...serving God and ruling on earth*. There is no longer any “they” and “us”...no warring...no struggle....no peoples oppressed by others. Everyone is together, a multicultural, multilingual community entirely at one with God. This vision, received and written by an exiled apostle in the midst of socio-political upheaval in the first century, defies fear or defeat. Jesus’ apparent defeat, his death, makes way for this new ultimate reality. Where is God calling us to go? Toward the other! Toward this vision of many peoples living and serving God together.

From this wide-angle view in Revelation, Luke’s camera zooms in on the particular moment of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and offers clues for how Jesus began making the way toward this larger vision. The first thing we notice as this passage opens is the phrase “filled with the power of the Spirit.” Throughout the gospel of Luke and the books of Acts, which is

generally attributed to the same author, the Spirit is the driving force. Jesus isn't a Lone Ranger going his own way; he follows the directions of the Spirit. If we are to begin to answer the question of where God is calling us to go, we too need to be attentive to the Spirit, to nurture practices of discernment.

The preceding and following sections of chapter 4 give us a couple clues about how Jesus did this. The section immediately preceding Jesus' arrival in Nazareth is the account of Jesus' temptation. Luke begins that account in a similar way: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit,...was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where...he was tempted by the devil" (4:1-2a). We're told that Jesus fasted during this time as he was, evidently, contemplating the shape of his ministry, answering the same question: Where is God calling me to go? He was tempted to go to a place of ease, to miraculously fill his physical hunger by turning stones to bread, and to go to a place of power, ruling over others through smoke-and-mirror miracles and collaboration with the dark forces.

Rather than being depleted by the fasting, Jesus' mind is brilliantly clear, recalling scriptures that he knew by heart. He did not have a Gideons pocket-book Bible to take with him. Later in the chapter, after Jesus has been active healing, he again retreats to a wilderness place. To discern the Spirit, Jesus spent time away, time in silence and prayer, time memorizing, metabolizing scripture so that it would form and guide him. And then, more time away. This was a constant rhythm throughout his ministry...action than prayerful rest....more action, more prayerful, discerning rest. Jesus invites us to this same rhythm in our individual and in our collective life. This asks for more of us than an hour on Sunday morning. But it's an invitation from God! It is the way we find the answer to the question, Where is God calling us to go? We follow the Spirit's lead.

The second thing we notice in this passage is that the Spirit doesn't inspire Jesus with a wholly new vision, but leads him to proclaim and fulfill a prophetic vision received many years earlier. Jesus reads the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of The Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (61:1-2a). The Spirit led Jesus—and leads us—to go in the ways that our biblical record shows God working in the world from earliest human history: responding as a liberating God to those who cry out from situations of misery and captivity...bringing good news to the poor and healing to the blind...and radical equality in the "year of the Lord's favor" or the Jubilee, which released people from financial debt and redistributed land, the source of wealth, in the community. All of this, Jesus said, was where God was sending him. He understood his direction as a fulfillment of Isaiah's vision.

Where is God calling us to go? We will remain vital as a congregation and a denomination and as individuals as we continue to ask this question and follow Jesus toward the answer.

While "going to church" is not the same as where the "church is going," our gathering here on Sunday is certainly rehearsal for the ultimate vision of worship we find in Revelation. Dare we dream that the multicultural nature of that ultimate worship could become reality in our time?

As a congregation we have gone through various discernment processes, the most recent one being our discussion of family, singleness and marriage and the clarification that our welcome of LGBTQ persons includes the blessing of marital commitment. Several years ago, Michael Bischoff led us to discern ways to connect more deliberately the inner life of our church with the outer life of the community around us. This month during the adult education time, we

have been discovering and discerning the scriptures that have shaped us and that we want to shape us as a community. And in two weeks the newly affirmed church council and commissioners were gather for a Saturday morning to consider the direction the Spirit is leading us in the year ahead. Different ones of us practice individual disciplines of prayer, contemplation, scripture reading and study, artistic expression, fasting, and conversations of trust, as we seek to discern the Spirit's leading.

No doubt we all feel that we come up short, certainly less than anointed when it comes to bringing good news to the poor, releasing captives, offering healing, and living into the jubilee of economic sharing. But if, as we pass the peace each Sunday, we were to implant an electronic chip in the palms of one another that would track our activities throughout the week and be made visible on a master monitor, I think we would see a powerful picture, a network of teachers instilling hope in their classrooms and through family visits, of medical professionals offering healing, of social and community workers guiding people toward stability in their lives, of engineers, accountants, drivers, artists, chefs, gardeners, grocers, writers, editors, parents, friends, each one of us listening and treating others with respect and compassion. Any new directions that God may call us to go as the church will build on where we have been and where we are, on the gracious ways that God is bringing healing and hope through us.

In closing, I invite you to stand and read together the verses from Isaiah that are included in the reading from Luke. Imagine Jesus standing in front of you, anointing you with oil for this ministry.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”