

Christ Church Cranbrook
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Sermon for June 30, 2013 ~ Proper 8C
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Spelunkers (people who explore caves for sport) frequently tie a rope to something at the entrance of the cave in order to find their way back. That's a very good idea for people who explore caves. However, some religious folk are like that...tying ropes to things so they can return to them, or trying to. But Christians are on a journey and there is no expectation of going back. The watchword of the Kingdom is not "backward" but "forward." And that is an important thing to remember, especially during a time of transition, when there are distractions, uncertainties, and anxieties.

Elijah tried to go back when he went and hid in a cave because he thought God had left him. Because a generation of Hebrews following Moses in the wilderness were half-hearted and kept longing for the stew pots of Egypt, they were never able to enter the Promised Land. Slavery had been too comfortable for them. They couldn't handle freedom and its responsibilities. They were not willing to trust the God who declared himself to be with his people.

When Lot's family left Sodom and Gomorrah, his wife was warned not to look back. She disregarded the warning and looked back. When she did, she turned into a pillar of salt. My wife has an interesting insight into the meaning of this woman's fate. Gay believes that Lot's wife looked back at what had been instead of facing the future and, overcome with grief, the salt came from her tears. She was a slave to the past and unable to imagine the possibilities of a brighter future.

The Galatian church also had trouble handling their new freedom. They kept slipping back into doing things the old way, the way they had done things before the influence of the gospel. Paul had to admonish them, "for freedom, Christ has set you free. Do not submit again to the yoke of slavery."

We're celebrating Independence Day this week. One of our great national symbols is the Statue of Liberty. When we see her, we are reminded that we must constantly pursue freedom and resist slavery...slavery to old habits, outworn ideas, and destructive influences. We are also reminded that this nation is constantly changing, becoming increasingly diverse, and facing new and ever more complex challenges as we live into the great egalitarian society that must be even beyond what the founders envisioned.

When we consider the inevitable changes that facing the future entails, it is very tempting to keep looking back over our shoulders. But if we do, we will only plow crooked furrows where we are and if we do that, we will miss out on the new life to which we are being called. As Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, so we who travel with him must also keep our vision fixed on the goal he has set before us, the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God, and we'll never arrive if we keep looking back at the old life we have to leave behind!

The preacher's task is to set God's way before God's people. It's not always an easy task because often we have to say things people don't want to hear. And, also because the world outside those doors has the attention of God's people quite a bit of the time to teach them a way of living and

working together. But God's way is different. If you want to be the Church, you can't have it both ways. Daily, we are called to seek God's way in the unity of God's Spirit.

Christ Church Cranbrook is not the only church in transition. In fact, the Church Universal is experiencing a global era of transition. Many are saying that the Church is at a pivotal point in its life. Some even describe it as a collapse. Certainly it is a time of wholesale reassessment. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps, as Christian theologians like Diana Butler Bass and Phyllis Tickle suggest, the Church is on the brink of a new Great Awakening. Surely, a congregation with the resources to offer an example in a time of transition can provide leadership and offer hope to others.

This congregation has been offered the opportunity and the resources to provide that example and that leadership. With the distinction of being the largest Episcopal Church in Michigan comes a certain amount of pride, but also responsibilities and opportunities to inspire, lead, and challenge the wider Church.

We've looked at the future and we've talked about radical hospitality, passionate worship, risk taking service and outreach, intentional Christian formation, and extravagant generosity. But talking about such things is only the first step. We now have to trust God and one another enough to practice them in our life together. When you are called to offer assistance in Vacation Bible School, to help shelter those who are homeless, to greet newcomers, to serve actively on a committee, you are being called to set an example of Christian discipleship and leadership that has implications far beyond this congregation. When you are invited to give of the wealth God has entrusted to you with greater generosity, to help this parish overcome its dependency upon the endowment that is the fruit of the examples of generosity from those who have gone before us, to invest in ministries that transform lives, it is a call to set an example of Christian discipleship and leadership that has implications far beyond this congregation. When you are called to invest yourself and your resources through the spiritual disciplines of working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God, it is a call to move beyond being a spectator or consumer into a life of discipleship in the Priesthood of Believers that has implications far beyond this congregation. If Christ Church Cranbrook or any community of Christians puts a hand to the plow and keeps looking back, it is not fit for the Kingdom of God – it is missing the mark, it is not living up to its potential, and it can't experience the abundant life because that life is not in the past, it is today and tomorrow and the day after that. The Church faces the future, scanning constantly for signs of God's hand at work, and joining our hands to God's in a divine partnership in the ongoing work of creation and redemption.

Now is one of our greatest moments to remember that we are called to travel with Jesus Christ on a journey that leads to life in the fullest sense. It is the most important thing we do. To be with him is to receive those good things he offers to each of us through the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Let us respond to his invitation by learning to be tolerant, willing to face the realities of the life he calls us to live, seize the opportunity before us, and always keep moving forward toward our high calling, trusting him, because he knows where he's going, and he desires our company.