

Journey of Discovery

On Sunday, we continued our sermon series on “the Genius of the Early Christians” by looking at a story that illustrates three key steps in life’s journey to spiritual wholeness.

1. Warm up question: On Sunday, Jeff told a story about a guy whose goal in life is to visit every Starbucks. So far, he’s been to 5,131 of them. Most of us have something in our lives that we do that others might regard as a stupid waste of time. What’s your favorite stupid time-waster?
2. A character in Windell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow*, says, “I can’t look back from where I am now and feel that I have been very much in charge of my life. I have made plans enough, but I see now that I have never lived by plan. Nearly everything that has happened to me has happened by surprise. And so when I have thought I was in [charge of my story], I really have only been on the edge of it, carried along.” Does that quote resonate with you? Give an example of a surprise in your life that seriously disrupted your plans.
3. As we navigate the unexpected twists and turns of life, many of us sense that everything that happens is meant to lead us on “a journey to wholeness” – the idea that life gives us the opportunity to discover what it means to live well, what the Old Testament calls “shalom” and others call “serenity.” For many of us, the journey begins with a need to face our “lostness,” i.e., that feeling that life is ajar, that something’s missing that creates an aching emptiness and longing for more. Lostness can take many forms. Ernest Hemingway got lost in pain. Others get lost in the hypnotic rhythm of life’s mundane activities; others in the pursuit of money, power, or pleasure; and yet others in addictions. As today’s Bible story illustrates, it’s even possible to get lost in “bad religion.” The lead character in this week’s Bible story, Saul, illustrates that kind of lostness. Read Acts 7:54-8:3, and Acts 9:1-2.
 - a. Try to imagine yourself as Saul. What do you think motivated him? How did it feel to be him at this point in his life? Do you think he was happy?
 - b. Have you ever known someone who seemed to be lost in “bad religion”? Tell us about him or her.
 - c. When in your life have you felt most lost – and what form did your lostness take?
 - d. Jeff said, “Many people look back on their years of lostness with regret. Don’t. I understand that, in our lostness, we may have done hurtful things to ourselves and others. Regretting the hurt is good. But we need to balance that regret with the recognition that lostness is often the necessary first stage in a journey to wholeness. So we should bless the lostness. Like the Rascal Flat’s song says, ‘God blessed the broken road that led me straight to you.’” What do you think of Jeff’s statement? Does it make sense to you? What brokenness or lostness in your life would you like to bless – name it aloud and bless it in our presence.

4. As we come to terms with our lostness, God constantly looks for opportunities to get our attention, to wake us up to the possibility of a better life. Let's read about Saul's "wake up call" – Acts 9:1-9.
 - a. As he made his way to Damascus, what kind of feelings and thoughts may have swirled inside Saul that caused him to be ready to experience his vision of Jesus?
 - b. As Saul's traveling companions picked him up and led him, now blind, the rest of the way to Damascus, what feelings and thoughts do you suppose Saul experienced?
 - c. For some people, a spiritual wake-up call takes the form of a single dramatic event. For others, what awakens them to spiritual life may be more gradual – like knowing someone who's faith inspires us. As you look back across your life, is there an experience that, for you, stands out as "an awakening call" from God? How did that experience affect you?

5. For the early Christians, the ultimate goal of life's journey was to reach a state of being they called "living in the Spirit." By this they meant a life characterized by deep personal connection to God expressed as a constant daily interactive dialogue with God's Spirit, who accompanies us, shares our pain and joy, leads us, comforts us, and gives us insight and guidance. In this week's Bible story, Ananias is an example of what it looks like to "live in the Spirit." Read Acts 9:10-22.
 - a. What can we learn from Ananias' example for what it means to "live in the Spirit"?
 - b. Can you think of a time recently when you felt like you were really "living and moving in the Spirit"? What happened? What did that feel like?
 - c. If a friend asked you to describe what it means to "live in the Spirit," how would you answer? For example, how does a person who's "living in the Spirit" grieve? How does she celebrate success? How does she solve complicated problems?
 - d. For the early Christians, baptism served as the first step by which we consciously welcome and invite the presence of the Holy Spirit into our lives. But that's just the first step in what then becomes an ongoing process of learning and discovery – with each day and each life experience offering opportunities to take our "life in the Spirit" to ever deeper levels. What are some practical ways we can open ourselves even more to life in the Spirit?
 - e. Saul's journey took him through three key steps: (a) lostness, (b) an awakening, and (c) learning to live in the Spirit. At this moment in time, where would you place yourself on that journey?