

## ***We're on a Journey*** (Genesis 12.1-9)

We're all on a journey. I'm excited to join you in this stage of yours at Shalom. I like your welcoming statement on the web: *"We at Shalom Community Church strive to fulfill a vision of shalom, to embody the love, compassion and justice of Jesus in our personal and community journeys."*

Here in this place at Shalom, our personal journeys come together in a collective journey as God's people. As I'm joining you today I've been asked to tell you about myself. So let me tell you a little bit about stages in my journey. And I'll hear bits of your story in the next hour.

My journey began in Goshen, Indiana. As a child I spent most of my free time exploring in the wild to discover what I could, and then present my findings to family and friends. Being in nature—God's first and great sanctuary—has always captivated me. I loved to spend time in the woods, around trees and wading in the creek. I collected crawdads, frogs, snakes, turtles. Some I kept as pets, and when they died I preserved favorite ones in jars of formaldehyde. These lasted longer than the bat I caught and gassed and lay on the shelf until our cat shredded to pieces. As a child I wanted to be a ranger, then a vet, and eventually a forester. While my journey didn't lead to any of these professions, I've carried my passions for exploring, discovering and presenting with me. They would later be clues for discerning my purpose: to explore, discover and present God's abundant life. I believe God uses our passions and experience to form a unique, personal call within each of us.

I didn't take to sports or music in school like many kids, so struggled to find my place among my peers. I was bullied a lot, dismissed back then as "boys will be boys." But this impacted me and led to more experiences of conflict and violence—which prepared me for peace work later in my journey.

I was raised in the Mennonite Church, but that didn't *seem* to mean much to me as a rowdy kid who paid little attention in church. I was baptized at 15 only because every one else did and I didn't want to stand out as the black sheep. Four years later my journey led me to a young adult group outside the church. There for the first time in my life Christian faith and life meant something. I had to take this side journey away from church to return to church.

When asked at Hesston College if I'd consider becoming a pastor, I said "Hell no, that'd be the last thing I'd do." But the next summer following a conversion experience my journey all the sudden went in a surprising

direction. Being playful with a sense of humor, God can transition from where you thought you were going to something unforeseen, as if to say, "Let's see what happens if we do this!"

I changed my major from forest engineering to Bible and religion and transferred from Hesston College to Goshen College rather than Purdue as I had planned. My home congregation called me into ministry—a journey from the back row chatting in worship to preaching from the pulpit—where I wet my pants the first time I preached!

I started pastoral ministry at Yellow Creek MC the day Linda Lehman and I returned from our honeymoon in 1983. After graduating from seminary at AMBS my journey took me to Bay Shore MC in Sarasota, FL. After 3 years my journey led me back to Goshen when I was called to be pastor at Walnut Hill MC, where I served for 20 years at 80% capacity and raised our family with Matt, Jeremy, Maria and Justin. This church provided a spiritual home that was wonderfully formative for our family.

During this stage of my journey a call to peace education emerged. Several things came together to bring this about: pain I suffered from bullying; the violence youth experience today; training I was doing in martial arts; and a mission group I was a part of seeking to extend the way of peace in our community. This led to the formation of Peacemakers, which I directed part time for 10 years with programs in our Peacemakers Academy, our public school system, and Oaklawn Psychiatric Center. This led to a call from Goshen College for me to teach a course on transforming conflict and violence for six years. I hope we can do some of this at Shalom.

At that stage of my journey I also became engaged in male spirituality and underwent a transformative male initiation experience with Richard Rohr in his MALEs program in 2003, which was like a rebaptism for me. As a co-founder of IN-MI MALEs, I continue in this work. In this journey I discovered who I am as a beloved son of God—my true identity and source of wholeness. You will hear me frequently refer to us as being beloved daughters and sons of God.

In the last decade of my journey with Linda we, along with others in a mission group, started Pathways Retreat, a spiritual retreat center in Goshen. It's here that God has brought me full circle in my journey back to the woods where I serve as land manager and get to play forester on our 16-acre property. More than being back with frogs, snakes and trees, I'm tending this

part of God's creation as a steward of the earth to promote biodiversity. You will also hear me as an arborist refer to lessons from trees.

In the last four years of my journey I've been doing transitional ministry in Mennonite churches in Middlebury and Indianapolis. I have a renewed appreciation for churches as communities of faith through which God's shalom is embodied in the world. I love this work of joining congregations to envision how to be engaged in God's great project.

Turning now to this congregation, Shalom is entering a new stage in its journey. As we enter this stage, let's locate our story within God's Story going all the way back to Abraham and Sarah. In Genesis 12 we read: *Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred...to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'...So Abram [and Sarai] went, as the LORD told [them]... and journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.*

There's a purpose to the journey: to receive and extend God's blessing in the world. But there's no plan, just the word "Go." God says "Go... and I will show you." When Jesus called his followers, he said "Come and see." God's people come to know as they go, learning along the way what God has for them to bless them and be a blessing to others. So it is with the journey before us. There's no set plan, no canned program, no fixed destination. Some prefer that we move on, straight away to the next stage with Shalom's called pastor. Like many people, I prefer a strategic plan that would take us straight from A to B. But, Ecclesiastes 7.13: "Consider the work of God; who can make straight what God has made crooked?"

Consider the circuitous journey of Abraham and Sarah through Canaan to Egypt and back. We repeatedly read that they "journeyed on by stages" (Genesis 13.3; Exodus 17.1; 40.36; Numbers 10.12; 33). Likewise with Israel's journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Rather than leading Israel straight along the King's Highway to Canaan, "God led the people by the *roundabout way* of the wilderness" (Exodus 13.8). God led them by a roundabout way, a winding journey stage by stage through the desert not four months or four years, but forty years! I made a long trip through the Egyptian desert to Mt. Sinai and it's not where I'd want to be for 40 years! Being present to the journey rather than focused on the destination is what God intends.

I love to travel. On each trip I have to relearn this lesson: to be present to the journey rather than preoccupied with the destination. Traveling though the Holy Land I discovered that a pilgrimage is about the journey more than the destination. Then on a Celtic pilgrimage to Iona Abbey (bulletin image) off the coast of Scotland I learned that the journey is about encountering people and shared conversation. On a kayak trip in Alaska I found that I can be so focused on getting there that I can miss being here. I was so focused on reaching a Yukon Island that I didn't enjoy the journey through Tutka Bay flanked by snow capped mountains, lush vegetation, and bald eagles perched in the trees. Then I noticed the jellyfish. God lined the way with jellyfish like ones I saw at Iona—floating in the current with slow, rhythmic pulses; not set on a certain destination but flowing along the way. Here was a call to enjoy the journey by moving with the grace of a jellyfish, carried in the Spirit's Current. When we returned to our kayak outfitter I "just happened" to find a tee shirt imprinted with "The Journey is the Destination" to remind me of this truth.

Last week I had to recall this lesson when I was in California on a pilgrimage to the oldest forest in the world to see living Bristlecone Pine trees over 4,000 years old. I was driving fast through Death Valley focused on getting to this ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest that I missed much of the beauty of Death Valley until I remembered that "The journey is the destination" and thought of God's people passing through a desert wilderness like this. Then I slowed down to notice what there was along the way.

So... we enter a new stage today on Shalom's continuing journey. We cannot "make straight what God has made crooked." God will likely lead us in our transition by a "roundabout way." What's there to notice along the way? The stories we tell. The conversations we have. The questions we ask. Looking at who we are, where we are, what God is calling us to. It's a time to get our bearings, discern God's direction, and chart a course with vision for the next stage. There will be certain outcomes from our work. But more important than tending transitional tasks is being present to one another and God. In our business meeting I will describe the process for this, which begins with lots of conversations with you.

In closing, let's return to your welcoming statement, which concludes with: *"...we are committed to pilgrimage simply, peacefully, together."* Let us make this pilgrimage on this stage of our journey together—being present along the way to what God will show us.