



# Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter



2084 Wilson Pike · Franklin, TN 37067 · 615.794.2665  
Pastor Dennis Meaker: 615.794.2665 · djmeaker@gmail.com

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## The Discipleship Journey *God Opens New Roads*

*The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup> He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup> He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know. Ezekiel 37:1-3*

This is the last in this series of articles about our Discipleship Journey. I've described Christian Discipleship as part of the journey through life defined by the paths we choose to walk. We might walk many different paths through life and some of those paths will lead to places we don't wish to be. If we aren't careful, our journey through life can lead us to places of harm, to places where we cause harm, to places of despair and loneliness. Our Discipleship journey is a constant effort to discern the path through life that God would have us walk. It will involve many intentional choices and, from time to time, we will step off that path. The Good News is that Christ, and indeed our brothers and sisters in Christ, are always there to call us back.

I.

Where do you go when you have lost all hope? When you can't see that there is any possibility of anything new? Of anything good ever happening in your life ever again? It is at that point that God can show you a road you hadn't seen before.

Ezekiel was a prophet to the exiles in Babylon. The Babylonian army had laid siege to Jerusalem, eventually broken down its walls, and destroyed the city. More than that, the Babylonians had destroyed the Temple built by Solomon. Its walls were torn down and everything it contained was either destroyed or looted; carried off to Babylon. And, the majority of its people were also taken into exile. The only ones left when the Babylonians finished were some farmers to operate the farms for the benefit of the Babylonian Empire. The remains of the City of Jerusalem was governed by Babylonians. The countryside was garrisoned by its troops.

The people of Israel spent 75 years in exile in Babylon. What was it like for them to live as servants, as slaves? We don't have a lot of information about those years, but we can get a sense of their despair from one of the Psalms.

<sup>1</sup>By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
<sup>2</sup> On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.  
<sup>3</sup> For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
<sup>4</sup> How could we sing the Lord’s song  
in a foreign land? Psalm 137”1-4 NRSV

“How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” The people had lost all hope of ever seeing their homes again.

And then, just as God, through the prophets, had warned the people that they would be taken into exile, God, through the prophets, told them that there was still hope. Ezekiel is given a vision of a valley of bones. Note, not a valley of skeletons. All that appears in his vision is a valley of bones that are dry as the dust:

*37 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. Ezekiel 37:1-2 NRSV*

This was possibly an old battlefield where the victors had removed their own dead and left the enemy dead for the scavengers. This was possibly a mass open grave. But certainly, this was a vision of a place without hope. And God speaks:

*3 He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.”*

Ezekiel cannot see any hope, but isn’t ready to put anything beyond the power of God. And then God gives what may be one of the strangest commands contained in scripture. He tells Ezekiel to preach to these dead, dry bones. And, in this vision, Ezekiel sees these dead dry bones become the people of Israel, renewed by the breath of God. Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of Dry bones is a vision of God opening a new road that no one could have believed could ever be opened again, a road home to Jerusalem, a road of hope.

## II

The story of Lazarus in the Gospel of John is also a story of new hope in the face of hopelessness. Lazarus had been dead for four days. In the Jewish understanding of the time, the spirit of one who had died would linger at the grave for three days. So, much as it was with Ezekiel’s dry bones, there was no reason to hope that even Jesus could bring healing to this situation. Mary and Martha tell Jesus that they believe in Lazarus’ resurrection on the last day of history, at the end of time, but they cannot bring themselves to hope for anything in the present.

For many people the story of the raising of Lazarus is not only troubling but one that seems to mock our grief. For anyone who has lost a loved one before their time, taken tragically by disease, or accident or mishap, this story can seem to mock them. We want to cry out to God, to Christ, “Where is my miracle?” “Why isn’t

my loved one entitled to this second chance?" Seen as simply a miracle story, we can become angry that it's told at all.

Yet, this story contains two very important messages for us. Messages, I think, of hope in the face of hopelessness. The first comes in verse 11:35:

*35 Jesus began to weep. NRSV*

Here I think I prefer the King James Version: <sup>35</sup> *Jesus wept*. Why does the writer of John tell us this? Some pastors and scholars suggest that this verse emphasizes Jesus' humanity. We profess Jesus as fully human and fully divine and here is proof of his humanity. And that is true as far as it goes. But I think if we stop there, we miss the message the writer of John really wants us to hear. Recall that John, in the opening of his Gospel, identifies Jesus as the Word of God made flesh. It is the Word of God weeping for Lazarus; not just the human in Christ, but also the divine. God shares our grief. To God, we are not pieces in a game to be removed from the board of life without concern. God grieves over each of us; God shares our sorrow.

The second thing of great importance in this story is the promise of Christ found in verses 25 and 26:

*25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. John 11:25-26 NRSV*

Jesus is the resurrection and the life that Jesus brings is not in the future but in this very moment. God is always with us, opening new roads. God opens new roads when there is no hope.

### III.

One of the most powerful stories about God opening new roads when there seems to be no hope was brought to me around two years ago by Rodger Klein. Rodger was consulting with Marquette General Hospital, in Michigan, when a young Iranian woman was brought into the ER. Her name was Sanaz (Sahnah). She was only 27 years old, newly arrived in the US to study Environmental Engineering. She had been assaulted by her husband and was brain dead. For her, there was no hope. Her family could not even be reached.



And it was here that I believe God opened a new road; an unexpected road. You see, Sanaz was young, healthy and a potential organ donor. But she had no family that could be reached. There is not even an Iranian Embassy that could be contacted because we have no diplomatic relations with Iran. Nurses at Marquette, using the internet and what little information they had, reached out and found her family. Using internet video chat technology, they brought the family the terrible news. They also brought the family to her bedside. Using the internet, over a period of days the family could talk to her doctors and nurses, could sit at her bedside and see the care she was being given. Most importantly of all, they could say goodbye to Sanaz. I see the hand of God at work here. God opened a road across cultural barriers, across religious barriers, across barriers of national animosity.

After several days, when they had said goodbye, her family consented to the donation of her organs. Seven other people, who were at death's door and who had lost hope were given new life; seven people allowed

to walk a new road that hadn't been there before. One of those was a twelve year old girl who received the heart of this young woman.

Did God trade Sanaz's life for the lives of these others? No. I don't believe that. But I believe God did have a hand in taking this hopeless situation, this terrible and senseless end of a young woman's life, to bring new hope and life where none before had existed. God also acted through those who cared for Sanaz in her final days to bring closure to her family. And, maybe more profoundly, was the road opened between people of two nations. Nations that are so divided that we cannot even share embassies. The people of the hospital and the town also saw to it that Sanaz was buried in accordance with her beliefs. An Iranian physician saw to it that the body was washed and prepared according to Islamic tradition. A funeral home in the area dedicated a portion of its cemetery for burial of people of the Islamic faith and she was buried facing Mecca.

Acts of mercy, of love, of compassion can open hearts that are shut. They can create new possibilities. God uses these tools to open new roads where none had existed. Where this road might someday lead is anyone's guess. But there is now a connection between people who were separated by oceans, by culture, by religion, by national animosity. And, I feel sure that it is a road that God will invite others to walk.

#### Conclusion

We are on a Journey through life, one that we can choose to make a Journey of Discipleship. Each day we can choose to walk the paths God would have us walk. God is always with us on this journey, and always opening new roads that we can choose to travel. If we can bring ourselves to trust God, we can be sure that the journey will be an interesting one and one that will bring us closer to God, closer to each other and closer to the world around us.

## **You Have Been the Body of Christ for Me and Many Others**

*<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 1 Corinthians 12:27 NRSV*

Each week when I close worship I remind you that you are the Body of Christ. Yet I am sure that more than a few of you are not yet convinced. For that reason I want to thank all of you for being the Body of Christ to me and many others over the last few weeks. Let me describe what I saw:

1. Faced with an open house of sorts that would have challenged a Church twice our size, you came together to make our 150<sup>th</sup> year (I can never remember that other word) celebration a success. Before the event, you saw that the Church was prepared and clean. On the day of the event you helped with the set-up, welcomed hundreds of people to the church and served them food, entertained them and cleaned up after them. You then set the Church up for a second event on Sunday, again welcoming many visitors. When that event was over you again cleaned the Church and prepared it for Nanette's memorial. I had no hand in any of this. For the most part people just saw what needed to be done and took care of it.
2. In the midst of your grief over the loss of Sarah, Millie and Nanette, you prepared the Church for Millie's service again cleaning up before and after. You organized yourselves to clean and set up the Church for Nanette's Memorial service, including welcoming and assisting over two hundred

attendees, more than half of whom were visitors to Our Church. You welcomed them with grace even though more than a few were unhappy about not being allowed into the sanctuary.

3. You have surrounded the families of Sarah, Millie and Nanette with genuine expressions of love, concern and support. We could have paid for fifty people to help with those services but we could not have paid for the love that those families needed and received. You received that from God and gave of it freely.
4. Finally, you have supported me. I don't grieve any more than any of you, and certainly I do not grieve as the families of these people grieve. But, to an extent, it is up to me to express our grief in a meaningful way that is hopefully a blessing to the families and a reaffirmation of the Gospel. I don't think I could have done that without the many expressions of support from you. I lost count of the number of you who came to me privately and expressed your concern for me as your pastor. I felt the love of God, the presence of the Body of Christ, all around me. That enabled me to be a pastor to these families and to all of you.

Please take a few minutes over the next week and read 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 again. Hear Paul tell the Corinthians that what affects one of us affects us all. What hurts one of us hurts us all and what helps one of us helps us all. We are bound together with a love as real as exists in any family. You are, we are, the Body of Christ.

## **The Poverty and Justice Bible**

*The Poverty & Justice Bible* is a bible that highlights each passage of scripture that deals with the issues of poverty and justice. There are more than 2000 references in scripture to poverty and justice, as opposed to four or five on such controversial subjects as homosexual acts or marriage. Yet many Christians seem to think that helping the poor is a pointless and even harmful act. As an on-going part of this newsletter, I will be providing citations to passages from the Old and New Testaments each week that deal with what scripture tells us about poverty and justice. If you are interested in learning more about *The Poverty & Justice Bible* you can check on Amazon.com or go to [www.Justicebible.org](http://www.Justicebible.org).

*<sup>15</sup>More cedar in your palace  
doesn't make you a better king  
than your father Josiah.  
He always did right—  
he gave justice to the poor  
and was honest.  
<sup>16</sup>That's what it means  
to truly know me.  
So he lived a comfortable life  
and always had enough  
to eat and drink.*

*Jeremiah 22:15-16 CEV*

In this passage, Jeremiah is still speaking to the Royal Family of Jerusalem, heirs of the righteous King Josiah. What he says, however, could apply to many of those who enjoy good lives in our own society, especially our politicians. Yes there are many wealthy people in our nations, but their wealth does

not make them better than the poor in our nation. In point of fact, a lot of the wealth in this nation is inherited wealth, having little to do with the hard work of its current owners. Jeremiah reminds the Royal Family that one can, like the late King Josiah, lead a comfortable life and still help see to the needs of those less fortunate.

*25 Abraham answered, "My friend, remember that while you lived, you had everything good, and Lazarus had everything bad. Now he is happy, and you are in pain. 26 And besides, there is a deep ditch between us, and no one from either side can cross over."*

*27 But the rich man said, "Abraham, then please send Lazarus to my father's home. 28 Let him warn my five brothers, so they won't come to this horrible place."*

*29 Abraham answered, "Your brothers can read what Moses and the prophets wrote. They should pay attention to that."*

*30 Then the rich man said, "No, that's not enough! If only someone from the dead would go to them, they would listen and turn to God."*

*31 So Abraham said, "If they won't pay attention to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even to someone who comes back from the dead." Luke 16:25-31 CEV*

In his story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Rich Man speaks to Father Abraham from his place of torment asking him to warn the man's brothers to act with justice and charity to the poor. Abraham suggests that the message is a hard one for us to hear, even when it has been given to us by one "returned from the dead."

## **Prayer Ministry**

The following persons are part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

|                 |               |                  |                 |
|-----------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Elva Beard      | Mac McAfee    | Kenneth Stevens  | Judy Richardson |
| Larry Eastwood  | Rachel Newman | Patricia Stevens | Charles Wilson  |
| Leslie Eastwood |               | Sam Richardson   |                 |

The members of the prayer ministry of Trinity United Methodist church covenant with one another to pray daily for:

- Those concerns on the prayer list of the Church and for healing of body and spirit for all persons listed;
- For each ministry of the church that each ministry would work to bring the Gospel to those within our community and most especially to bring the Gospel to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- For all the members of the Trinity UMC community that they be led and enabled to live as the Body of Christ;
- For our local community and all its needs, especially for those who are struggling with the burden of poverty;

- For our nation and our world that God help lead the people of the world to live in peace with God's Kingdom.

If you would like to be a part of this ministry (or if you have already spoken to me about it and were inadvertently left off the list) please let me know and I will see that you are added.

## **Up-Coming Sermons**

**June 21<sup>st</sup>: Sibling Rivalry Can Get You In Trouble.** Most people think David and Goliath was all about, well David and Goliath. There was more to the story. My text is are Samuel 17:1-49

**June 28<sup>th</sup>: Is Jesus Insane?** People really suggested that about Jesus. We know what the writers of the Gospels believed. What do we believe? My texts are 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1 and Mark 3:20-35.

## **Worship Leader's Schedule**

### **June 21**

Hal Newman, **Liturgist**

Jan & Stacy Bell, **Greeters**

Maurice & Joyce Edwards, **Ushers**

### **June 28**

Nancy Conway, **Liturgist**

Tommy & Jo Cotton, **Greeters**

Jeanne Rybolt & Linda Robinson, **Ushers**

## **Announcements**

The "Companions in Christ" Sunday School class has begun a study, "Knowing God." We have extra books and extra chairs if you would care to join our class. All are welcome at 9:45 each Sunday Morning.

## **June Birthdays**

**Lynn McGill, Jo Cotton, Mike Fetting, Richard Stevens, Nancy Conway, Kenneth Stevens, Larry Eastwood, June Pollard**

**Happy Birthday to each of you!**