

“Life’s A Trip”- Genesis 12, Psalm 121, Romans 4, John 3 Gordon Wiersma 2/17/08

It’s been great to welcome Ann Kansfield already this morning at Hope Church – Ann is Co-Pastor at Greenpoint Reformed Church in Brooklyn; she was with us at Early Worship and she’ll be sharing greetings with us at Life of Hope. But what I wanted to say about Ann being here is that I am placing the responsibility for whether you like this sermon, or not, on Ann’s shoulders: if you like this sermon, please thank Ann; if you do not like this sermon, please blame Ann! I didn’t check this out with Ann beforehand, but we’re friends and I’m sure she’ll be OK with that.

Ann is responsible for this sermon, because it is Ann’s visit here that got me thinking about the visit of our High Hopes youth group there to Greenpoint Church in Brooklyn last June – back when it was warm! And I’m sure that thinking about that trip there influenced how I looked at the lectionary texts this week. And I know it got me thinking about the idea of ‘Trip Theology’ – Trip Theology is something I’ve had some intuitive grasp of from quite a young age really, but it was a pastor friend who first expressed that term to me about 15 years ago – Trip Theology - and that gave me a helpful name for the concept. Trip Theology is the idea that what we often see happen in the Bible is that God sends people on a trip – God often calls people on a journey – sometimes big trips, sometimes small. But when God seeks relationship/transformation/learning/faith /commitment with or from a person or a group or a people – it often involves taking a trip; or even when it is not God who initiates the trip-taking, many journeys end up to be life-transforming, faith-transforming: Noah, Abram & Sarai, Isaac, Jacob, Ruth, Jonah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Israel/Exodus, Jesus’ disciples, Peter, Paul all involved with trips – just to name a few. There is something about a change in place, in context – something about the movement of trip, that is transforming – or at least opens one to transformation; something about a journey that can deconstruct you and reconstruct – that can disorient and reorient...and so what we find in our personal faith, and in our faith communities, is that taking a trip can be a very important and good thing – and we find God is at work in transforming ways.

Well – that’s just a summary of Trip Theology; but to hear more of it and to find different nuances to it, we need to look no further than all of the lectionary texts for this 2nd Sunday in Lent:

* in Genesis 12, God calls Abram to go on a trip – from your ancestor’s country, your home, to the land I will show you. There is talk of blessing and cursing – of blessing to all the earth – and it starts with God calling Abram to take a trip. And Abram went – and Sarai too.

* Psalm 121 is a song for a trip – the Pilgrim’s song traveling to Jerusalem. And the Psalm speaks of the promises held along the journey and in the destination – God is my help, my shade, the keeper of my life. It’s the song of those who have been called by God to take a trip – and they go.

* John 3 is the story of several trips – both literally and the image of a journey. Nicodemus takes a short journey, making his way to Jesus by night – it’s something of a covert trip – a hesitant step, but seeking, sensing an important destination. And Jesus tells Nicodemus of another journey: ‘you must be born from above’ – birth is a trip – Nicodemus knows it, from the womb to the world. And it seems to Nicodemus an unlikely journey for him to repeat. And did you notice another trip too? – God sent God’s only into the world – because God loves the world – and in the Son, God brings salvation – life. So many different journeys happening in that story.

* and then there is Romans 4 – which on the face of it is not the narrative of a trip at all, but the presentation of a systematic theology; not the account of a journey, but an intricate theological argument. But I have come to see this Romans passage as in fact very much about trip theology – it speaks of the journey of faith in a way that connects to, grounds, is the foundation for all those other trip stories. In Romans 4 it is not just the spiritual journey from seeing through the lens of the law to instead have the perspective of faith (that is, from judgment to grace); in Romans 4 it is not just the journey of seeing the Jewish people alone as the descendants of Abraham to the perspective of Abraham as the ancestor of all

who are faithful (that is, from exclusivity to inclusivity); in Romans 4 it is most of all *this* journey that is at the core of the story Paul's theology tells: the journey from death to life; the journey from nothingness to being – that is the trip Paul tells here.

And that is the journey which is woven in and through all the stories of these texts; the journey woven through the broad scripture story of salvation – this journey: from death to life – from nothingness to being. That is a good trip – that is a remarkable journey – that is the place from which and to which each person and all things are called. And it is also a difficult journey – it is a painful journey – it is a call from which each person and all things can and do turn away.

It's a good thing, this journey from death to life – but it does mean we have to talk about death. Death is a painful thing – a difficult reality; painful in its obvious manifestation of life ending, life lost – human life limited and lost in the finality of death. And death is also difficult and its pain real in death's countless other manifestations: in all the places of brokenness and loss, in all the places of hurt and diminishment, in all the places of violence and injustice, in all the ways of squandering and darkness. Death lives in those places too, and is an affront to the life God gives in me and you, in all of us, in this world. It becomes clear God has good reason to call out for a journey – for a trip from death to life; and it becomes clear that not only the starting point of death is painful, but the path is difficult too. I imagine Jesus uses that birth image for a reason, if we can give Jesus some feminist perspective points – because becoming alive, birth, is a marvelous, dangerous, mysterious, messy, exhausting journey. It is a challenging path.

So you know, if the journey is so difficult – I think maybe I'll take a pass on this trip from death to life; yes, death really stinks, but it has its benefits – for those in power for now, for those too scared to move, for those too comfortable to budge, for those too tired to try, for those too confused to follow, for those too cynical to care, for those too hurt to travel – maybe it's easier just to stay with death. But the journey from death to life doesn't

begin with you or me or anyone else choosing to set out on the trip – or not; it begins with God taking the journey in Jesus Christ: God taking the journey to a world of death- Jesus Christ embracing, enfolding death in all its manifestations – God in Christ the journey of proclaiming, bringing, creating new life – new birth. Paul speaks of the GOD who brings life out of death and being out of nothingness: we are called on a journey made possible by God’s grace – God’s love – God’s life-giving journey in Jesus Christ. It is in the call and journey of Christ first to us, that control and fear and comfort and weariness and confusion and cynicism and pain are pushed aside for us to move toward life.

* this morning we sent our 8th-9th graders on a trip – to Grand Rapids – at a Quaker worship service; why would we do that?

* for the past years and decades Hope Church has sent it’s youth on Mission trips to the East and to the South, to big cities and rural communities; we’ve sent youth on hikes in the mountains – and we’re going again this year – why?

* Hope Church has sent adults and families to Mexico and to South Carolina to work and learn and serve – and there’s another group scheduled for this Spring Break – why? and other kinds of journeys too..

* this afternoon Hope Church will show a movie about Mother Teresa and her long journey of faith – through struggle and service and doubt – why?

* this afternoon a group of people will meet at Hope Church to hear about ‘Room for All’ - sharing together ways that can encourage our church and community and denomination to move toward fully including and embracing people of all sexual orientations into the life and ministry and leadership of the church of Jesus Christ – why?

* I could go on with other sorts of journeys – so many – and I would eventually get to this story: that each week, day, moment, people from Hope Church are seeking to walk in faithfulness – to live out their faith – to be a blessing to others...why?

It is because we believe and receive the good news that God calls us on a journey from death to life – and because we know about death, too, in all its manifestations – in us,

through us, around us. And in that tension of life and death, we have been called in the journey of Jesus Christ to believe in a step toward life - believe that God out of emptiness is creating the things of life: hope and justice, reconciliation and healing, faith and love – along the way.

I love a good road trip – I like taking trips a lot...but I also like coming home. Does it sound a bit tiring for faith to always be a trip – always journeying? – toward life, yes, but knowing death? It is a challenging trip – the journey from death to life takes faith and courage...but on this trip let us remember something: it is God who carries – Jesus Christ who gives, who is, life; and held by this God, on this journey we are always home. AMEN.