



The Road Goes Ever On and On...

Acts 13:1-3

August 20, 2006

The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,

Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way,
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.

Those of you who have read J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings remember these words. It is the song sung by curious little creatures named Hobbits as they began a great adventure of sacrifice and salvation in a mythical land called Middle Earth.

It is a song about how just a little step from your doorstep onto the path can lead on and on and on into great adventures. It is a song about the difference between being a couch potato and being a courageous soul ready for adventure.

What on earth does Lord of the Rings have to do with the Church in Antioch sending Barnabas and Saul on their missionary journey? Everything, I think. J.R.R. Tolkien was a devout Christian. Great Christian themes saturate his fanciful tale of hobbits and wizards and good and evil. And one of the great Christian themes in his work is the theme of the journey.

So as I read Acts 13 of the believers in Antioch setting apart Saul and Barnabas for a great missionary journey, as I imagine those two men stepping out onto the road toward the harbor where the ship awaited them, it's not hard for me to imagine them singing...

The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger Way,
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.

Have you ever had a moment like that, when you put your foot out one step, fully knowing that it would be the first step in a journey that would change your life? Think of some of the key steps and key journeys in your life: the time you were a child and stepped through the door into kindergarten class on the first day; the time you stepped out of your door at home on your way to college or to work; the time you stepped into the sanctuary to get married. The road of your life goes ever on and on, and simple little steps become the beginning of great adventures.

I want to speak today about little steps and long roads and great journeys, for the church in Antioch, for Paul and Barnabas, for Tom Riley, and for you and me together in this church.

ACTS 13 IS THE TURNING POINT IN THE ROAD FOR THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH

Last Sunday we looked at what made Antioch into a truly great church: intense prayer and Bible study, great leadership, openness to the Spirit of God, and a ready response to human need and hunger. Now today we see that church take another step into greatness. The Holy Spirit finds them still receptive to its direction, and leads that great church to its next step. The next step is to become a missional church, whose members no longer just gather together. Antioch becomes a base from which its people are sent to the corners of the earth. Church no longer is just where you get saved. Church is from where you get SENT.

THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF A GREAT JOURNEY FOR PAUL AND BARNABAS

We call this moment the beginning of their first missionary journey. Their destinations sound exotic: Seleucia, Cyprus, Salamis. But actually for Barnabas it's just going home, only this time Barnabas is going home with a mission.

And this is a turning point for Paul also. Thus far, Paul's journey has been from his home in Tarsus to the classes of Gamaliel to the crowd that stoned Stephen. Paul's next steps took him on the Damascus Road, where he met Jesus, and then to Damascus where he was baptized, and then to years of sorting out what had happened to him, until Barnabas found him in Tarsus, and told him "I have a job for you." Together with Barnabas, Paul taught the new church in Antioch for a year. And then the student church became the master, and Paul became its student, as the church revealed to Paul that the next step of Paul's life would be a missionary journey. Paul's life would never be the same again.

TODAY MARKS A TURN IN THE PATH OF THE JOURNEY FOR OUR OWN TOM RILEY

The road that goes ever on and on has already taken Tom to some great places. One of the first key steps in Tom's life was the day he was a youth and stepped into the

gymnasium of Dunwoody Baptist Church and became involved in the recreation ministry of his church. He became part of a gang of boys who were growing into men in that church, many of whom are now serving in churches and on the mission field.

Ever since, Tom has stayed attentive to the Spirit that led him into that gymnasium that day. He has followed the Spirit's leading to missionary journeys to the desert hills of Israel, and the subways of London, and the skyscrapers and jungles of Malaysia. Tom has followed the Spirit's leading to training for ministry, first in the grand shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge and then in the gothic shadow of Duke Chapel. And then Tom's next step was to come to Wilson, where he has shared our sorrows and joys for eight years. Here he has grown from a recent graduate who dreaded doing a sermon, into a confident and seasoned pastor who is at ease in the pulpit. He has grown from someone who was challenged by the pulpit to someone who challenges us from the pulpit.

"But the road goes ever on and on...And I must follow it if I can...Until it joins some larger Way..." Tom has sensed the Spirit of God leading him to a next step, to Wake Technical Community College. There he will be teaching in the public sector. Tom will move from teaching the church gathered together on Sunday, to being part of the church scattered out into the world on Monday. And as the Antioch church sent Paul and Barnabas out with their blessing, so now we are sending Tom out with our blessing. Like Antioch, we are a blessing agency; we are a sending agency.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IS AT A TURNING POINT IN ITS OWN JOURNEY

And just as Tom is at a turning point in his journey, so our church is at a turning point in its own journey. In fact nearly all churches in our land are facing the same turning point at this very time. Some will choose to go forward, and others will choose to go backward before the same turning point, and here it is: We are all facing the turning point of moving from being a collection agency to becoming a sending agency.

Many churches see themselves as collection agencies. They see their job as collecting as many people and as many dollars as possible. They see their job to be getting people to come to them. And if people do sometimes come to them and visit, those visitors are seen as potential assets that the church can use, not as individuals that the church can love. I've said before: they are like vampire churches, always looking for fresh blood. Wise visitors are scared away.

But a New Testament church is not a collection agency; it is a SENDING agency. That was the turning point for the Antioch Church, when it became a sending church. The church prayed and studied and listened, and when they heard of famine in Judea, what did they do? They SENT relief. The Antioch church prayed and studied and listened, and when they heard the Holy Spirit say, "set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them," what did they do? They SENT them on that first missionary journey.

As you and I pray and study and listen, what is the Holy Spirit saying to us? I sense that one thing the Spirit is saying is this: the question is NOT “how many are showing up?” The question is “how many are being sent out?”

How many are being sent out prepared to share their story of how Christ has come into their lives? How many are being sent out to bring relief to the hungry and the hopeless? How many are being sent out to be leaders and missionaries for new churches in Wilson and the world?

If any church would take that first step from being a collecting agency to being a sending agency, then it will step onto the same road and the same journey that Antioch and Barnabas and Saul and, yes, even Tom Riley began. And for any person or church that has the courage to take that step and begin that journey, who knows where God will lead them? It will be just as Tolkien wrote:

The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,

Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way,
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.

-- Douglas E. Murray

(Benediction by Tom Riley, who will be escorted immediately to the reception)