

Summer Sermon Series: The Biblical Messages of Dr. Seuss
“Oh, the Places You Will Go or I will bless...”
Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 17:20-21; Ephesians 3:8-13
Salem United Methodist Church; August 9, 2015
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In our Summer Sermon Series we are taking the stories of the popular children’s author, Dr. Seuss, and flushing out the biblical truths in them. Theodore Seuss Geisel, the man who wrote these beloved classics, had a rare gift of sharing these truths with children using humor and without being condescending. At the same time his messages are not lost on adult readers. While he was battling cancer, Ted Geisel wrote his last book, “Oh, the Places You will Go.” It was published in 1990, one year before his death. Immediately it became a best seller. Many a graduate has received this book as a gift. Written as an allegorical walk through life, this book was Dr. Seuss’ parting gift to us.

When I was a child I looked forward to becoming an adult. For some reason, I thought when I became an adult; I would have life all figured out. Did anyone else feel this way? At some sort of rite of passage, whether graduation from high school, going to college, getting married, beginning a career, having children, etc., at some point in my life, I thought I would receive all the answers. Was I ever wrong! What I learned was life is a continual learning process. We never have all the answers. Each day is a new day to make new choices, to take the next step in our journey, to learn about ourselves and others. Each day is a new day to learn how to rely on, have faith in, and trust in God. Each day is a new day for awe and excitement. Each day is a day of discovery and celebration. Each day will have its challenges and require us to persevere. We can walk, run, turn, or wait, but each day is a new day for the places we are in and the places we can go. Whether we are in the beginning of our lives, somewhere in the middle of our lives, or nearing the end of our life’s journey, each day with its challenges can be met with awe and perseverance.

There are so many examples of this kind of journey in the Bible. One is Abram. God calls him to leave his home country with his family and travel until God literally tells him to stop. He had no idea where they were going. Abram had “brains in his head, feet in his shoes,” and faith in his heart that God would guide. And God did and fulfilled the promise to bless Abram. It wasn’t an easy journey. Childless and old, Abram had to wait and wait for a child to be born. In addition, there were conflicts within his family. Through it all, God blessed Abram with a new name, Abraham, children, and a new home. Another example is Naomi. She married and left her home country to live with her husband. Then he and her sons died. She reached that “unpleasant bump” in life, a “Slump.” “Unslumping” herself was not easy, but she persevered and returned to her home land. One of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, went with her and promised, “Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.” When Naomi returns home, her family accepts both of them and they begin a new life there. We can think of many in the Hebrew Scriptures who went places, made tough choices sometimes the wrong ones, lost their way, yet persevered.

Even the life of Jesus could be told in this context. One can almost imagine when God sent his Son into the world, saying, “Oh, the places you will go.” His journey began when he was conceived out of wedlock, and then born into a non-affluent family who became refugees shortly after his birth. When he begins his journey to share God’s message of love and wholeness with humanity, there were times when the “Boom Bands” were playing or the people were “ready for anything under the sky.” And there were times, Jesus “play[ed] lonely games too”- lonely games that ultimately lead to his Crucifixion. There were times in which he just had to wait, wait for us to “get it,” to understand all that he is. He also had to wait until the time was right for the big reveal, The Resurrection. And Jesus said to his disciples before he returned to heaven, “Oh, the places you will go.” And they did. They went to all nations baptizing and teaching about Jesus. Yes, even Jesus experienced the highs and lows of human life.

Dr. Seuss described the landscape of life as some neatly arranged and ordered places, some wide open places, some crossroads, some wonderful places, some dangerous, slumpy, waiting, and threatening places. We stand in awe, giving thanks and praise for the ordered and wonderful places. We can be excited about the adventure of the wide open places. But when it comes to the crossroads, we may have a look “up and down the streets,” and “look them over with care.” We may choose not “to go there.” We may choose to “head straight.” When we come to a crossroads, we can pray, listen to our hearts, and pray some more until we know which road to take. And all the time we know that God is with us on this journey. If we take the wrong road, and if we choose to follow, God’s grace will lead us back. Oh, the places we will go! We can be on the “way up,” be the “best of the best,” the “top of the rest,” but when the balloon bursts, when we come down with that “unpleasant bump,” when we are in “the slump” whatever that may be, when we get to that “waiting place,” that place where there is nothing to do but wait, where the waiting seems intolerable, we can know that God is with us, holding us and creating “the bright places,” getting ready for “anything under the sky” and beyond. Waiting is hard. It can seem like a waste of time. We think we should be doing something. We think we should make something happen. But waiting is about having faith, faith that with God mountains will move and a new way will be created.

The Apostle Paul had this kind of faith. He shared the love of Christ, the message of salvation not just to the Jews, but the Gentiles, the non-Jews. This was a new place in his time. Paul believed that the church would go places it had never been before. The church would share the love of God with not just the average people, but with the rulers and authorities, people in the seats of power. And it did. With faith Paul had a vision of the church moving mountains of the power hungry to becoming mountains spewing God’s wisdom of healing and love. Throughout human history we have been witnesses of where the mountains of the power hungry have towered over, having suppressed and destroyed those below. And we have also witnessed when these mountains have been moved into massive heaps of God’s wisdom, lifting up people and providing justice and mercy. Where are we today as a church? Do we have the faith that we can move the mountains of power that suppress and destroy into massive heaps of God’s wisdom, lifting up people, providing justice and mercy to them? Does the church have this kind of faith? Do we? Or do we feel alone? Are we scared “so much that we don’t want to go on?”

Dr. Seuss had faith that humanity would not give up, but persevere, “though the weather be foul,” “though your enemies prowl,” faith that we “would hike far and face your problems whatever they are.” No matter how discouraged we feel about life, about our faith, about the state of the world, remember that God has faith in us. We just need a small amount of faith, the size of a mustard seed, to move mountains of God’s wisdom to create a world filled with peace, justice, and mercy. Today is our day. Our mountain is waiting for us to get on our way. We are not to be a church, a people who follow Jesus who just wait, but we are to persevere; knowing that people like Abram, Naomi, Jesus, and Paul did not give up. They succeeded more than 98 3/4%. They succeeded 100% and more.

The book, “Oh, the Places You Will Go” is a mountain of wisdom. Remember Dr. Seuss wrote this book at the end of his life. No matter if we are at the beginning of our lives, somewhere in the middle, or nearing the end, there are always places for us to go. Just when we think we have lived it all, learned it all, God has just one more surprise, another place for us to go in this life time and the next.

Reflection Questions: What place are you in now? What places have you been in? What is the next place you think you will go? How is God helping you move your mountain?

Resources: *Oh, the Places You Will Go* by Dr. Seuss; *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss* by James Kemp; <http://www.shmoop.com/oh-the-places-youll-go/>