If You Don’t Know Where You Are Going, Any Road Will Take You There

*Luke 4: 14-21*

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“If you don’t know where you are going, any road will take you there.”

It is one of my favorite sayings. It always reminds me that if you and I don’t have a plan of some kind, then we will wander aimlessly toward whatever. And generally, if we have not thought out where we are going, or where we would like to go, then other people, or life circumstances, will create the way for us.

I heard this catchy saying maybe twenty-five years ago and have thought about it many times. Although I did not hear it from this source, everyone seems to think it comes from a scene in *Alice in Wonderland* in an exchange between Alice and the Cat.

Said Alice: “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

Said the Cat: “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.”

“I don’t much care where –” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“– so long as I get SOMEWHERE,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

Back in the ‘90s, Stephen Covey taught us his *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. One of his principles is, “Beginning with the end in mind.”

I’ll edit and paraphrase what he says:
So, what do you want to be when you grow up? Are you--right now--who you want to be, what you dreamed you'd be?

Sometimes people find themselves achieving victories that are empty--If your ladder is not leaning against the right wall, every step you take gets you to the wrong place faster.

(Getting there) is based on imagination--the ability to envision in your mind what you cannot at present see with your eyes.

If you don't make a conscious effort to visualize who you are and what you want in life, then you empower other people and circumstances to shape you and your life.

Beginning with the end in mind means to begin each day or task with a clear vision of your desired direction.

One of the best ways to (do this) is to develop a Personal Mission Statement. It focuses on what you want to be and do. It is your plan for success.

Recently Daniel Pink has said something similar in his book Drive, which links our motivation with purpose. One of the stories he tells to illustrate his point is one that, I am sure, I have shared with you but bears repeating:

In 1962, Clare Boothe Luce, one of the first women to serve in the U.S. Congress, offered some advice to President John F. Kennedy. “A great man,” she told him, “is one sentence.” Abraham Lincoln’s sentence was: “He preserved the union and freed the slaves.” Franklin Roosevelt’s was: “He lifted us out of a great depression and helped us win a world war.” Luce feared that Kennedy’s attention was so splintered among different priorities that his sentence risked becoming a muddled paragraph.

Then Pink says: You don’t have to be a president to learn from this tale. One way to orient your life toward greater purpose is to think about your sentence. Maybe it’s: “He raised four kids who became happy and healthy adults.” Or “He cared for every person who walked into his office
regardless of whether that person could pay.” Or “She taught two generations of children how to read.”

What’s your sentence? He asks.

I am beginning to sound like Tony Robbins and though I am intrigued by what motivational speakers say, I am much more interested in what Jesus said and how our road connects with his.

I

Today, we find Jesus in Luke’s gospel at the beginning of his public ministry. Unlike gospel writer John, who is big on symbolism but not nearly as keen on chronology, Luke, a physician with a historian’s eye, presents the timeline of Jesus like this:

After Jesus’ birth, Jesus returns to Nazareth. We have the story of Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple at age twelve. Then Luke presents John the Baptist, who is preparing the way for Jesus with his fiery repentant talk, followed by the baptism of Jesus by John. Here God’s spirit, symbolized by a dove, descends on Jesus. After Luke inserts the family genealogy, we hear the temptation, where Jesus encounters satanic powers and temptations. In that story, I believe, we see how Jesus came to understand himself, what kind of Messiah he would not be, and the kind he would be.

Now today, we find Jesus at the inauguration of his public ministry. And where does Jesus begin? In his hometown of Nazareth, where he grew up.

Now, one of the mysteries in the life of Jesus is wondering where Jesus was in those years between age twelve and when he reappears to be baptized by John. We know that he was around age thirty and many have wondered where Jesus was, what he has been up to and what he had experienced in those eighteen years that led up to his public ministry.

Theories abound… which is all they are. But, it seems apparent that he has been away from Nazareth for some time. Luke says that stories about Jesus had spread and thus preceded his return.
Now this is a very interesting story for a number of reasons. Imagine the dynamics of that day.

Jesus has returned to his hometown with some acclaim…with stories that have spread about him. Perhaps these stories elevated him as a teacher or a healer. And he returns to his small town where people have known him as a boy, as the son of a carpenter and his wife Mary.

We don’t know how long it has been since they have seen Jesus.

But we do know that sentiment that you have to be from out of town to be recognized as “an expert.” Right?

And we wonder how Jesus felt going back among family, cousins, friends, people who had known him. How did that feel for Jesus?

Yet, I am not surprised that the first step in his public ministry takes place in his hometown. It reminds me that if you are running for state governor, and you grew up in Lillington, Asheboro or Lexington, you’d go to the courthouse in those towns and make the symbolic announcement.

Jesus was not running for anything, but he did announce something important.

It is the Sabbath day, and he goes to the synagogue. There was only one temple, that being in Jerusalem, but communities all over Israel had synagogues. They were places, not of sacrifice, but of teaching and worship. On the Sabbath, a congregation would gather; there would be prayers to open the service, and then readings from scripture – from the Torah, the law and the prophets. There were no priests in synagogues but there were lay leaders and lay readers. However, when a distinguished teacher or person happened to be in attendance at the synagogue, it was customary to invite him to be one of the readers, and for him to teach or lead the discussion after the readings.

Jesus is in that role. With his reputation preceding him, he is invited to read.
But then what he reads is telling…and if we are paying attention, we will see that what Jesus does is announce his mission, his agenda. He reads from Isaiah.

Listen again to what he reads:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*  
*because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*  
*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives*  
*and recovery of sight to the blind,*  
*to let the oppressed go free,*  
*To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*

Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

We can feel the tension as the congregation looks at Jesus and he says: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Wow! There it is…Jesus’ inaugural address. This is who he is and what he intends to do. This is his purpose, his mission statement. Looking back, we get it!

He had been anointed and has the fuel of the Spirit to preach  
Good news to the poor,  
To proclaim release to the captives,  
The recovery of sight to the blind,  
To let the oppressed go free,  
To proclaim the Lord’s favor.

Any road was not going to take Jesus to fulfill God’s purpose. Jesus began with the end in mind. These words from Isaiah were his sentence, his mission statement.

II

At First Presbyterian, our sentence is that we are growing disciples and our vision/mission statement has guided us for a number of years. It reminds us that if you don’t know where you are going, any road will take you there. One of the things I believe we should start thinking and praying about in this time of transition
is our next mission statement that will guide our church for the next decade. What will First Presbyterian look like in 2023?

Not just any road will take us there.

We often learn from the corporate world. For instance, I like this mission statement: (See if you can guess the company.)

> Our mission: to inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time.

That’s from Starbucks.

But I wonder what difference it would make if you and I pondered and prayed about our own personal mission statement as we shape it through the lens of faith.

Here are examples:

I… will live every day with integrity and vow to consistently make a positive difference in the lives of others utilizing my knowledge for the good of all people.

And,

My mission in life is to serve God by being:

A beacon of light,
A bridge of understanding,
A tower of integrity and,
A castle of realized dreams.

Recently I was talking to one of our members who had a grandfather who died when he was two; therefore, he never knew grandfather. But when his family talks about his grandfather, they say, “He never had a bad word to say about anyone.”

Well, that was his sentence. He never had a bad word to say about anyone.

So this member of ours told me that as he and his wife have daily devotions, they began to talk about this grandfather who never had a bad word to say about
anyone. And they decided, they would try it that they would consciously, as followers of Jesus, try to live their days not saying a bad word about anyone.

He said to me, “Do you know how hard that is?”

But what a sentence, what a mission statement, what an elevated spiritual road….and imagine how that kind of spiritual thinking and living could really change the climate of a relationship, in an office, in a home and how it would change us.

I am not saying that should be our sentence or the basis of our mission statement, but this is what I do know – and know it with absolute certainty –

That if you and I don’t know where we are going, any road will take us there.

So what road are we taking? What is our sentence that guides us, or our personal mission statement that keeps others from defining who we are and who we want to be?

That Jesus began his ministry with a clear statement of who he intended to be is a reminder that unless you and I are out-front, clarifying our faith and values, any road will take us there.