

Oh, the Places You'll Go

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Graduate Sunday

05 02 2010 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

*Congratulations! Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places! You're off and away!
You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
You're on your own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go.*

Oh, the Places You'll Go was one of the last books written by Ted Geisel under the pseudonym of Dr. Seuss. The book was published in 1990 just a year before the author's death. The story describes the adventures awaiting a young person venturing out into the world. It became an instant classic, and no doubt many of our seniors will receive a book—or two or three—as a graduation gift.

However, the book is for children of *all* ages commencing something new. Kindergarten, high school, college, medical school, a new job, marriage, parenthood, empty nest, retirement . . . maybe even death itself. The author advises in verse:

*Step with care and great tact
And remember that Life's a Great Balancing Act!*

I. Life is a Journey

At first glance, the children' book seems, well, rather childish. But as the pages turn, the reader discovers a profound philosophy that recognizes **life is an adventure**. To borrow a line from a Rascall Flatts' song, "*life is a highway*;" and we ride it all our days long. Along the way, we experience ups and downs, highs and lows, victories and defeats. We encounter unexpected twists and turns along the way.

In The Lord of the Rings, Bilbo Baggins warned Frodo: "*It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door. You step on to the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.*" We should take great care in the paths we choose.

The **Christian life is also a journey**. Disciples walk in the footsteps of Jesus. We are pilgrims traveling through this world to the next, seeking what Hebrews 13:14 calls God's "*enduring city.*" 1 Peter 2: 11 says we are "*aliens and strangers in the world.*" An old hymn by Isaac Watts proclaims:

*"Then let our songs abound, and every tear be dry;
We're marching through Emmanuel's ground to fairer worlds on high.*

*We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion;
We're marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God."*

The Lord invites us on a lifelong pilgrimage in the kingdom of heaven. Like a proud parent staring misty-eyed into a newborn's crib, our heavenly Father declares to us: "*Oh, the places you'll go!*" Then we begin an exciting adventure together.

II. Milestones

The **Roman Empire** was noted for its accomplishments in construction. Latin engineers designed and built amphitheaters, aqueducts, and roads that still exist today. The main Roman roads were engineering masterpieces. The roads were marked in 1000 pace sections called "*milia passuum*" from which we get the English term "*mile*." These milestones served as markers to gauge progress along the way.

Dr. Seuss reminds us that **life is a journey with milestones** marking the way. By definition, milestones are memorable. We celebrate life's "firsts" as red letter days in our lives. Parents keep "Baby Books" that commemorate a child's first word, step, birthday, Christmas, school day, and lost tooth. We vividly recall these inaugural moments of life as times of joy and celebration.

On **Graduation Sunday**, we recognize another such milestone in our young people's lives. In the next few weeks, they will graduate from high school, college, and beyond. We celebrate with them these great accomplishments in their lives.

For the parents of high school seniors, the past eighteen years have flown by. The babies you held in your arms and rocked to sleep are now graduating from high school and stand on the verge of adulthood.

On the other hand, I recall a more experienced parent who had been there, done that, and had the scars to prove it. She told me, "*God has a way of preparing parents for the empty nest syndrome—it's called adolescence!*"

Children go through predictable ages and stages of life. We recognize and celebrate the "firsts." However, we also realize that each transition marks a "last." Milestones are both beginnings and endings. Wise parents would have it no other way. Yet the gain is shadowed by a sense of loss and the joy accompanied with a bit of grief.

First and lasts—perhaps the best part of milestones such as today is that they give us the opportunity to recall the past and anticipate the future. By definition, they define the ending of one stage and the beginning of another.

III. Detours Along the Way

Life is a journey but even the best laid plans often go astray. Plan the journey, mark the map, set out on the journey, but then we encounter unexpected **detours** and delays along the way. After all, none of us planned yesterday to be where we are today.

In the first pages of Oh, the Places You Will Go, Dr. Seuss appears to have his head in the clouds with a mindless optimism of positive thinking. But then the book takes a darker turn.

*You'll be on your way up! You'll be seeing great sights!
 You'll join the high fliers who soar to high heights.
 You won't lag behind, because you'll have the speed.
 You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead.
 Wherever you fly, you'll be the best of the best.
 Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.*

*Except when you don't. Because sometimes, you won't.
 I'm sorry to say, but, sadly, it's true
 That Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you.
 You can bet all hung up in a prickly perch.
 And your gang will fly on. You'll be left in a Lurch.*

We live in a fallen world, and stuff happens to us all. And if it hasn't happened to you yet, then just wait. It will. Milestones can also mark **crisis** times in life.

Crisis normally carries with it a negative connotation, but crises can be good or bad; however, crisis times always signify change. We tend to become “frozen” into one form. During crisis times, however, our lives thaw and then refreeze. We have the opportunity to assume new shapes and forms. And saints through the centuries have testified that it is in the dark times when Christians endure that the most growth occurs.

Milestones mark times of transition and change. God is with us in the milestone and crisis moments of life. The Holy Spirit calls us to assess our lives and anticipate the future. We are given the opportunity to rededicate our lives as Christian disciples.

II. Journey

Memory is such a strange thing. We tend to remember the milestones and crises of life, but we forget much of the events in between. Scientific studies suggest that adrenaline is the “glue” of long-term memory. Unforgettable events are accompanied by a release of adrenaline that helps the memory “stick” in our minds. This is why we seldom remember the ordinary, humdrum events of life. BUT if you think about it, most of life is lived BETWEEN the milestones in the here and now.

I suppose it is human nature to constantly be **looking forwards or backwards** towards milestones rather than focusing upon the moment. Young people tend to look to the future: they anticipate turning 13, 15, 16, 18, or 21. They look forward to graduating from high school and college, landing a job, getting married, and having children.

Older people, on the other hand, tend to look backwards into the past. We recall when we were in our teens, twenties, and thirties—and given the chance, would do it all over again—with the stipulation that we could know THEN what we know NOW. I'm not sure where the tipping point occurs from looking forward to looking back, but most experience it at some point in our lives.

But here is the danger of living for the future or in the past—you miss the **present**. Tomorrow's anticipation and yesterday's nostalgia borrow from today with no promise of repayment. We can misspend the present by getting lost in the past or living for the future.

The only time we have to live is **here and now**. The only time we have to love is here and now. The only time we have to serve God is here and now.

The Scripture lesson today comes from **Ecclesiastes 3**. It is a familiar passage describing the ages and stages of life. Those of a “certain age” will recall that it was put to song by *The Byrds* in 1965 with the title, *Turn, Turn, Turn*. The Old Testament book is traditionally associated with King Solomon who was renowned for his wisdom. The author introduces the section by writing: “*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.*”

When we are tempted to look backwards or forwards, consider this: we are in the time and place that God intended us to be. This is God’s time and God’s place for our lives. Every season of life is a gift from God. If this is the case—and I believe it is—then we are pressed to ask and answer two critical questions:

- *Where is Christ in our lives and world?*
- *What is the Holy Spirit calling us to do?*

For the Christian, our best day is always today, and then it only gets even better! Remember the old ads for *Loving Care* that declared, “*You’re not getting older, you’re getting better?*” In the Christian faith, this is always true. And we are invited to cherish and employ EVERY age and stage of life for God.

In a book on church growth, Ken Callahan wrote that the critical question each church must answer is whether its best days are in the past or the future. I think this is a question we also struggle to answer as individuals.

Life begins with limitless potential. If you could graph life, then two lines diverge at birth into ever widening arcs. At some point in midlife, however, future possibilities begin to narrow. The lines finally meet again at the point of death when all potential dies.

However, the Christian faith believes that death is simply another stage of life which opens life back up to endless possibilities. If you can imagine the shape formed by these intersecting lines, then they providentially form the Christian sign of the **fish**.

III. Graduation

On **Graduate Sunday**, our youth help us to recognize an important truth—life is a journey with milestones that mark the way; but most of life is lived between the milestones. And God is with us every step of the way.

When we look at the graduates’ photographs, we see promise incarnate. These young men and women represent our past, present, and future. They possess the potential to change the world with the gifts God has given them. Commencement marks the start of something new.

I have already begun to receive **graduation invitations** in the mail. I’m SURE it is not the case today, but when I was a teenager, we used graduation invitations as a not-so-subtle request for a gift! The only problem was that most of my invitations went out to

older family members who had no clue what an 18 year old boy might like. I received more than my fair share of handkerchiefs, gift books, pen and pencil sets, and ties.

However, I have a special gift for our graduates that I KNOW they will appreciate: **advice!** Now I realize that graduates seldom listen to anything you tell them. For those who are a bit older, how many of us remember who our commencement speakers were at our various graduation ceremonies? And even if you remember WHO spoke, do you remember WHAT they said?!?

Advice is often ignored; however, allow me to offer these three thoughts any way:

- ❖ **Cherish your past**—your family, friends, and church give you roots that provide faith. Celebrate your triumphs and forget your failures. Ask God forgiveness for those things you said and did that you shouldn't, and those things you didn't say and do that you should have. But don't live in the past or play the losing game of what might have been. And don't blame the past for who you are today—God gives us the power to be something more than our yesterdays.
- ❖ **Anticipate the future**—if we truly believe what we believe and practice what we profess, then the future is so bright that we have to wear shades. Regardless of whether you are 8, 18, or 88, your best days are ahead of you. God holds all of our tomorrows firmly in his hands.
- ❖ **Live in the present**—yesterday is the past and tomorrow is the future, today is a gift and that's why it is called the present. Here and now is the time to love and serve God and others. You cannot undo the past or live in the future—this is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Conclusion

A few years ago I went to Chicago for a seminar. On the final morning before going to O'Hare for the plane ride home, we enjoyed some sightseeing in the city. Lake Shore Drive is a spectacular road that parallel's Lake Michigan to the east and downtown Chicago to the west. When we came to an intersection, however, I was surprised to discover that we were on **Highway 41!** The same four lane road that travels through Cartersville also goes through the heart of Chicago!

Some research revealed that Highway 41 is one of the longest roads in the United States. It begins (or ends—depending upon your point of view) at Miami Beach on the Atlantic Ocean. The road travels through Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and then Michigan. It ultimately ends (or begins—depending upon your point of view!) at a state park on the shores of Lake Superior.

Highway 41 is an odd numbered highway. In theory, this means it runs north and south—which it generally does. Yet in southern Florida, it is also marked 41 East and West. It takes many twists and turns from Miami to Michigan. Parts of the road are under construction. Detours and delays are common. At times it joins other routes for a while. And it would take a long time to go from the south to the north terminus.

But if you get on Highway 41 in Miami and stay on it, sooner or later (okay, later!) you will arrive at its final destination.

The Christian life is a long, meandering road with milestones along the way; but most of life is lived between the milestones. As pilgrims in this world, we are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Our Lord promises to walk beside us in every age and stage of life—both now and forevermore.

And will you succeed? Yes! You will, indeed! (98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.)

KID, YOU'LL MOVE MOUNTAINS!

So . . .

Be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray

Or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea,

You're off to Great Places! Today is your day!

Your mountain is waiting. So . . . get on your way!

"Oh, the places you'll go!" In this world, AND in the world to come!