

Into the Woods

Isaiah 43:19, Philippians 3:13-14

An unknown poet wrote to ancient Israel in their exile in Babylon. His poetry reflected Israel in the depths of their depression. He also spoke for Yahweh whom people thought had been defeated--destroyed by the gods of Babylon. This poet claimed that Yahweh God was promising to do "a new thing." In the middle of their exile, hope was springing forth like "a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

What was this "new thing" God was doing with Israel? What were the streams in the desert? The clue to this answer was really found 600 years later in words by the Christian apostle Paul. He illustrated that answer with an image from racing, the image of straining forward to reach the finish line.

For Israel, in the wilderness of exile, this was a push back against the malaise of defeat and shame. For the young, first-century Christian churches, the message was one of strength and resolve—pushing them to find their power through God in the face of persecution, in the face of an overwhelming Roman war machine. For us, yes, we have known defeat, shame, and malaise. Yes, we sometimes face overwhelming odds and powerful forces. But there is new life in the desert and, in the depths of despair, there is great reason for us to hope. The Spirit today is calling all followers to lean into our faith, calling the church today to lean in to life, calling each of us to step up to the challenge of following Jesus.

Crossroads Church was born eleven years ago after a painful split from Broadway Baptist Church in Westport in response to issues with their senior pastor. One result was that Crossroads became strongly congregationally led with all the direction and most of the teaching and pastoral care were performed by lay members of the congregation. There was a vision to build koinonia, community of the Spirit, by developing a system of decision-making that deeply respected each voice and the process of the body.

For many, this approach can today seem kind of cumbersome and time-consuming—lots of hard work. But it's the price we need to pay to build community the Crossroads way. We still practice a large measure of congregational leadership in our business decisions and direction. Our worship is all planned and led by volunteers. Our identity includes being open and affirming. From the outset, Crossroads has placed herself in solidarity with the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, and Transgender community. We have stood with women in ministry and with the freedom of each soul to explore and shape our own theology on the journey.

Crossroads has consistently identified ourselves with a passion for justice in our society--social justice. Despite what some extreme commentators have said, social justice is at the heart of following Jesus. We cannot follow Jesus faithfully without challenging and changing oppressive social systems—systems that perpetuate poverty, racial segregation, unequal pay, and ultimately undermine real security for our nation and our world. Lasting security only comes when all people have access to the opportunities and benefits of society. This was the vision at Crossroads' founding, a vision that has sustained our congregation for eleven years.

Now, the energy required for sustaining an effort to be a congregationally-led community of the Spirit has sometimes waned a little over those years. Attendance is not always great for community meetings, direction setting retreats, etc. And financial support for the church budget has tended to stay pretty flat over the years, struggling to keep up with all the costs of owning

and operating a building, paying two full-time pastors and a part-time office manager, and investing financially in community ministry and missions outside these four walls.

I've been the pastor of this congregationally.-led church for eight years. We've worked together to find the balance between congregationally.-led and the vital role of a senior pastor. We've clarified and focused the vision for this shared work that has led us to this building in this neighborhood. We've done some wonderful work together, work that has brought us to this time. We are in position to put feet to our faith. This is a time of opportunity, a time of choice.

Crossroads can be an instrumental part of creating a more inclusive environment in the Waldo community. We are soon to be hosting meetings of the Waldo Homes Association and, as a result, will be more deeply connected to the community. We will be having opportunities to teach other congregations how to do contemporary, creative worship involving body, mind, and spirit.

Even more, Crossroads can be a vital part in challenging and changing deeply segregated patterns in Kansas City by working with the Marlborough Neighborhood and helping to increase involvement in the Kansas City, Missouri school board elections to improve the public schools so that families will once again start choosing to live in the city! We can partner with other congregations to increase funding for public transit--more bus lines so that the working poor can get to work on time, make it to doctors' appointments, and even to the grocery store.

We can be working to make sure everybody has access to medical care, healthy food, education, and employment. These are tangible ways to put feet to faith because, if we believe the Bible, then the place to meet Jesus is in the "least of these"—poor, broken, lonely, and sick. The vision I see for Crossroads is the opportunity to take our game to the next level.

One of the really fun, important, and valuable things we do at Crossroads is our musical theater ministry. Right now, we are preparing the musical *Into the Woods* with performances right after Easter. This will be a great opportunity to invite friends neighbors to come with you to enjoy show, support the youth mission trip fundraising effort, and support and learn about Crossroads Church.

The story of *Into the Woods* includes some favorite fairy tale characters such as Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Jack with his Beanstalk, two charming princes, and others. Each one has a wish, a dream, but to make that dream come true requires that they go *into the woods*. Do you see the connection with the scripture? Jack goes into the woods to sell a milk-less cow for money to buy the food he and his mother need desperately to survive. He ends up with magic beans and then finds riches beyond imagination in the land of the giants. Cinderella goes into the woods wishing to attend a royal ball, but a prince falls for her and she becomes a princess giving royal festivals of her own. On and on it goes and, of course, they all discover later on that there is a steep price to be paid for wishes granted and dreams realized.

Into the Woods is a musical metaphor for the journey we have to take to be who and what we want to be. At the same time, the musical itself is an opportunity for people at our church to invite as many as 900 people into this sanctuary over the two weekends of performances to experience the Crossroads community. And we can invite many of them back to share worship and prayer here--to learn, to grow, and to share.

Crossroads Church is a powerful expression of being church--one that many people are looking for. *Into the Woods* is also the image of what it means for each of us, and us as a congregation,

to step up and experience the excitement, passion, and joy of making a difference in Kansas City for what we believe, for what we value no matter the cost.

Let us take our work serious, our work of following Jesus and of being church. At the same time, let's not be taking ourselves too seriously. We need to bring more people to be part of this community, to experience life of Spirit-filled community. Here they will find a place where they can grow. Here they can be part of an effort to make a significant difference in the Kansas City metro area--fighting poverty, racism, and discrimination according to sexual orientation. Here they can be part of an effort to fight destructive bigotry--to foster hatred and even violence between cultures and institutions of faith. Here we are seeking to change churches into bodies that foster inclusion, to find our shared interest, and to recognize our common existence within the life of God!

We need to bring people into this community and we need to make a significant step up in financial giving in this spring's pledge drive. Money can be a difficult subject for many of us to talk about, yet money talks and it speaks of commitment. How will you step up in terms of financial support for Crossroads? Will you maintain your current high level of giving, perhaps even tithing your income in these challenging economic times? Will you step up through increasing what you give to Crossroads, maybe even make a pledge of what you will give? Or, if you have been visiting here, will you come join your journey to ours and put feet to your faith through Crossroads?

Two weeks ago, I attended a national leadership training in St. Louis through the Gamaliel Foundation, in conjunction with our local affiliate organization MORE2 (Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity). I learned some important things, but none more important than a realization about my own life. My dad was in the army and we moved a lot as I grew up. I had a startling insight into the effect so much moving has had on my ability to form deep friendships of trust. I began to understand just how strong were the messages not to make waves--to follow the rules, be good, be smart, and eventually get rewarded.

Somewhere I also learned the importance of asking honest questions such as, "Why do I think *the powers that be* will reward me for staying quiet, for not pushing the envelope--just waiting for some fairy godmother to make my dreams come true? I finally realized that I'll be waiting forever for that promised reward. I have the responsibility to make my dream come true. As the church, we'll be waiting forever for our vision, our dream, to come true unless we step up act to, make it happen.

Our call to action is to *press forward*, step up, *go into the woods* to make our dreams come true. It is to change the world by stepping up to follow Jesus and working to be community in the Spirit. It is to be working for social justice and putting action in our prayer and putting feet to our faith. For our marching orders, let us hear these words by Ken Medema:

"This is our vision, life's in the sharing
Holding back nothing, dreaming and daring
Live this communion that breaks us and binds us
Holds us and heals us, frees us and finds us
God, give the courage to do what we say
Christ, give us strength for the living of these day. (Ubuntu, Ken Medema)