

“Space: The final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship, Enterprise. Its 5-year mission: To explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no one has gone before.” These are the words with which the 1960s TV series “Star Trek” opened, always promising to my youthful eyes an adventure into the completely unknown. Older and more sophisticated viewers no doubt recognized themes and references, but it was all new to me, and I bought the premise of “where no one has gone before” one hundred percent and found it thrilling.

Actually, the opening script for “Star Trek” matches life really well. We may have some idea from day to day where we’re going—if it’s Friday it’s laundry day—but from a 10,000-foot height, it’s harder to know. Again, as a child I remember thumbing through the existentialist writers in the university bookstore and wondering why they thought life had to have meaning. Didn’t life just be? Yet these weary French adults sitting in cafes and chain-smoking Gauloises were not satisfied simply to be alive; they had expected it to mean something, and were disappointed that it didn’t seem to. Where are we going, and why?

Today’s reading from Hebrews tells us two things: that we are on a path that has been opened up for us by Jesus, and that we can therefore tread that path *boldly*, with the expectation of mercy and grace in time of need. We are going where *we* have not gone before, but Jesus has, so we should go boldly in order to fulfil our mission.

The author of Hebrews suggests that Jesus is our high priest—that in Jesus, God was made accessible to us in a unique way. This high priest, although he has passed through the heavens, sympathizes with our weakness: he shares on a visceral level every aspect of human suffering, from fear to bewilderment to anger to shame, and all the rest. He’s been there; he gets us. AND he blazed the path to human wholeness, going through (not around or over) the full

experience of failure. We can live boldly because his pathbreaking move through suffering empowered people to move through our suffering to abundant life.

The author seems to be concerned that people are losing focus, and that hardships of whatever kind have become obstacles to faith. Like the French existentialists, he does expect that our lives should have purpose and focus; unlike them, he also thinks that it's gonna hurt. Stephanie May writes,

What *is* the point? . . . The point is to live with intention.

If you've taken a yoga class, perhaps you've been asked to 'set an intention' for your practice at the start of class. When I first began yoga, I found this weird. I mean clearly my intention was to not fall over, groan too loudly, or otherwise embarrass myself as I tried to keep up. Over time, I came to understand that we were being asked to approach our time in class not simply as a chain of exercises that we needed to muscle through, but rather as a way of moving and breathing and being with oneself, with others, and with the world for the next hour. How did I want to show up for the next hour? What was my intention for this class, this portion of my precious life? Setting an intention was an invitation to live mindfully, to live with awareness about where I was, what I was doing, and why.

What she's saying is that we need focus; we need a sense of mission to live meaningfully. Life has a way of calling our attention to some places that need focus, like when children grow up and you need to remember how to live as your own person, or when your cholesterol gets too high and you realize that you can't eat the way you did when you were eighteen. But there are other challenges that are so daunting that it's hard to believe I really have this mission. I'm sure Deb has already spoken about our participation in the action by Moms Against the Camps, so I won't go over it all. But let me say this about that: If we do not care about and act against the trauma and devastation at our border, we have no business calling ourselves disciples of Jesus. It is our mission as Christians to transform that appalling situation. AND for the foreseeable future, we are all going to have to live with the reality that no one thing we do will change what's going on down there. I could disembowel myself on the front patio of the Federal

Building, and Joni Ernst would not change one word of her standard response to this atrocity. It's a hell of a thing, discipleship, living with intentions we can't accomplish.

Chapter 5, verse 7 of Hebrews says, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission." We make a mistake if we think this is a reference to Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Let this cup pass from me," as if he were asking not to die. Because he did die, so if that was his prayer, God refused. No—what the author means is that in Gethsemane, Jesus was praying that God would not abandon him in the realm of death. And God did not abandon him, and God raised him from death. The author of Hebrews sees an intersection here, of the human Jesus and the divine God, in which God's not abandoning Jesus is simultaneously Jesus blazing a path for us, which is simultaneously God suffering *in Jesus*. I know, it's a lot. [repeat] When Jesus suffers, God suffers; thus God does not abandon Jesus; thus Jesus' suffering *is* the path blazed to God.

The author of Hebrews is working from a vision not of Jesus a long way from God in his suffering, but of God very close to us in suffering. What we see in the brokenness is God, and what we see on the cross is somehow also God in vulnerability and weakness. This is not one of those atonement theories where Jesus takes on the punishment for our sin; this is God, Jesus, coming together *through* suffering which is the only way to transcend it. It's not a neat theory, and I think that's because the early Christians had not worked out a neat, abstract theory of atonement, but had just experienced an abundant life that flowed from the crucifixion and resurrection and then tried to express it in words, which will get you only so far. The point is, God was not far from Jesus in his suffering, but right there with him.

That's why it's not surprising that our mission as disciples necessarily includes being

ineffective, weak, helpless, vulnerable. We are going where no man has gone before. Sure, there have been civil rights pioneers, there have been suffragettes, there have been abolitionists and prophets. We can learn a lot from them. But they were working in their time, with their opponents, under their conditions. We're doing this thing new, with our particular government, neighbors, social media. No one has gone before us on this mission, and we don't know how it's going to end up. The damage is already unthinkable; if God were going to smite the earth for its wickedness, that would have already happened.

So we incorporate weakness and vulnerability into our mission. We accept that success will not come the way it should, and we have to do this anyway. The day we went to Joni Ernst's office, we filled the room and the hallways with moms and small children. Toddlers lay on the floor or sat between their mothers' knees. Baggies of cheerios were shared. One mom broke out the coloring supplies. Diapers were changed, and infants nursed. People learned where the potty was, and congratulated each other on its successful use. In the presence of children, everyone spoke gently. Hours passed; Senator Ernst could not find the time to get on the phone with us. . . . We came back the next day.

None of this situation at the border should ever have happened. The refugees should never have had to leave their homes. You can track back a long way and never get done, but we're here now. I do not presume to theologize about the suffering of our sisters and brothers in the camps; we will hear from their own voices someday. But for you and me, there is a meditation attributed to Judaism [but I don't know for sure] that goes,

Do not wait for a miracle  
Or the sudden transformation of the world.  
Bring the day, closer, step by step  
With every act of courage, kindness,  
Of healing and repair.

Where we are now is living with the intention of using the thoroughly inadequate tools of kindness, gentleness, and sharing our cheerios, to transform the world. We are shamefully inadequate to the mission, but the author of Hebrews is here to tell us, “You can totally do this,” because God doesn’t abandon people when on a mission to go where no one has gone before.

Do not be discouraged by the darkness, Lift up every spark you can  
And watch the horizon  
For the coming of the dawn.

Look closely!  
It has already begun.

**Let us pray.**

God in Community, Holy in One,  
be with us in this and every moment. Give us courage and heart to carry through. Bless all those who despair, and give hope and grit to those who feel abandoned. Speak to those at the top and remind them of our common humanity, so that they may turn and have mercy on the helpless.  
Heart-keeping Spirit:

bear our prayers

to the throne of grace

when they are only whispers

in our souls;

unfold the road map

to show us the way to the Kingdom;

transform our stuttering words

into praise and wonder to our God. Amen.