

God Is Moving—4th Sunday after Pentecost

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[Isaiah 66:10-14](#)

[Psalm 66:1-9](#)

[Galatians 6:1-16](#)

[Luke 10:1-11, 16-20](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

Although I don't think it is at first very obvious, our lessons today are about movement. All four actually, the very last chapter of the book of Isaiah, our Psalm, Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia, and Luke's Gospel—all show, in their own way, that God, and God's message, *moves*.

You've always got to remember that Israel, historically, imagined that their God was quite parochial, very little: Each nation had their god or gods, and Israel had theirs. And, naturally, the believers in this God knew that their God had created the universe, and not the others.

In the Old Testament there is always a distinct awareness though of other nations' gods and their practices and rituals. Even Genesis, scholars say, was crafted in such a way that it makes reference to other nations' creation stories, but shows the God of Israel to be more creative and tender, and more involved in all that was created.

There is also a distinct feeling, in our Old Testament as it tells the stories of God, that in the minds of the Hebrew people, God is always growing bigger and bigger, until at a certain point the biblical authors are not content for God to be just their own private God, but realize this God of theirs *loves all people*.

Now, of course, we believe it's not the biblical writers who *discover* all this... but it is God who reveals it to them. But the bible is about, if nothing else, the back and forth between God and God's people. It is stories of God's people trying to figure out how to have a good relationship with God and then... messing up. And it is stories of God giving God's people more chances.

God's first movement, in the hearts of God's people, is from small to big. And so, that leads us to Isaiah this morning. This is the last chapter of that sprawling book of prophecy. The prophecies of Isaiah span hundreds of years, actually, wading through all the times of great crises in Israel's history. When they were assaulted by the Assyrians, they had their *first* identity crisis. "Who is God, if God will not protect us?" they asked. And Isaiah prophesied as the Babylonians came near and did the unthinkable—destroying their nation, their autonomy, and

their temple. And as Isaiah tells it, this, and all catastrophes, were brought upon them because of their lack of trust in God's bigness. Israel, as a whole, didn't think God could handle the Babylonians, so they wheeled and dealt and bought big chariots and tried to fight and scheme alone.

And Isaiah also tells of the time when the people were brought home from exile, returned to their beloved city Jerusalem, and they began to rebuild their customs and their lives... That is where we meet Isaiah today. God is inviting the people to rejoice. Jerusalem is like a mother to them, which is a way of saying that the people, having returned from suffering, are reborn by their city. And their holy city will feed them, and love them. And by extension of course, God is saying: I am your mother, I will feed you, and I love you.

But even in the background of this little excerpt from Isaiah today you can hear the sense that God is moving, that God's love is bigger than just Jerusalem, or Israel. There is first a mention of other places and nations: Isaiah says that to Jerusalem will flow "the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream." And later on, it is written: "It shall be known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants." God will attract the best from all places, and to all will come the knowledge of God's love and favor.

But if you read on in chapter 66 of Isaiah it becomes even more clear. Here, through the prophet, God says: Even though they've seen me take them back from exile, some of my people still aren't sure and they use old customs or worship other gods just in case—and they are hedging their bets!

And so, God says a bold thing in Isaiah 66. God says, my people are not just Israelites anymore.

"I am coming to gather all nations and tongues," God says, "And they shall come and shall see my glory, And I will set a sign among them. From them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud.... to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the Lord."

Now if you don't know where any of those places are, that's ok! That's what study-bibles are for. Tarshish is in Spain, Put is in modern Libya, Lud and Tubal in Turkey, and Javan is Greece. To the imagination of ancient Israel, these places were the ends of the world. And it is sometimes astonishing to stop and ponder about it, that God's love really *has* come to the whole wide world. The message of God's love has come even to us here, in America, 3,600 miles from Tarshish.

But as you can see in story from our Gospel lesson from Luke, this spreading, this movement, comes with growing pains. Most important to note, God achieves this spreading and moving with people, ordinary people.

Here, in Luke, Jesus sends out 70 people in pairs. He sends them without any means to support or protect themselves. No credit cards or firearms or rain coats. All they are instructed to do is—

“Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”

God first sends Jesus to us on a mission of love, to say ultimately, “Hi! I’m here!” And Jesus, in turn, sends these 70 on a mission of dinner parties and health clinics! It’s wild, really, it’s so simple: be vulnerable, rely utterly on God, and when you meet people, share time with them and serve them. And tell them that *this* encounter is truly God’s kingdom come to them. This is the intended vehicle of God’s movement across the globe—walking, talking, eating, and serving.

And so, in Luke, these 70 come back reporting great success! And Jesus, basically, says shame on your sense of success. Jesus says, you have the power to walk on snakes and defy death, but don’t miss the point: you, and all the people you served, now belong to God, Jesus says with a poetic flair, their names are written in heaven. And that is what matters.

Now, as you know, this image from Luke of God’s movement is little. It’s only in Judea, a little sub-section of Israel. But it’s a model for us to follow and to learn from. It is the Apostle Paul who really has the heavy lifting to do. Paul is the servant of God who *does* actually go out to far flung places like modern-day Greece and Turkey, and Turkey is, basically, where Galatia is.

Ever since the Israelites went into exile, they developed ways of worshiping God that did not rely on their temple. and Judeans had indeed spread all around the Mediterranean. And so, as you might know, when Paul went on his way, walking, talking, eating, and serving, just like the 70 in Luke, he was visiting with Judeans first, he would go to synagogues. And going first there, he would then start serving and talking and eating with other, non-Judean people—the locals.

And Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia is an attempt to iron out very significant issues that come up as a result of God’s movement. You’ve always got to remember at this point there is no “Christian” and there is no “Jew.” Paul is a “Jew” who believes that Christ was the Messiah and has created a new relationship with the law of Moses for all.

And so, over the years, we all have gotten pretty familiar with Paul's belief: that our relationship with God does not depend on what we do—but, in Jesus Christ, we see that God makes the relationship with us, as a gift. In Galatia, there was a group of people who believed Jesus was the Messiah, but they felt that Moses' law needed still to be followed, that they must retain their old identity as Judeans. And, if God is on the move, then those new-comers, the locals, must be circumcised, just like Abraham, and follow all the customs!

This makes Paul very mad. Because in God's movement, Paul sees something fundamentally true about God—if God moves, that's because God comes to people, and God comes to people to love them and release them free of charge.

Paul is worried that these new Gentiles who believe that Christ is God's Son—who believe in God's movement to them—Paul is rightly worried that if they are convinced they need to *do* something to belong to God's people, then they will get the wrong impression: They will think that *they* moved toward God with their good actions, right customs, their generous gifts, whatever it is, and they can now boast that *they* have gotten closer to God.

And Paul says no, emphatically—that thinking makes Christ's cross meaningless. Paul writes,

“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!”

God moves to us. What Paul calls a new creation, is God's movement to you, it's the transformation of priorities and viewpoint. And it's always happening, we're always being created anew. New messengers come from God all the time.

I know you can think of people in your lives who have been sent to you—who have given you good news, and comfort, and joy in God's name. It comes by pastors and leaders, sure, like Paul. But it primarily comes in the most common of things, in regular people walking, talking, eating, and serving just like Jesus' 70.

Indeed, what Paul calls a new creation, is what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God coming near. And from Jerusalem, to Galatia, to Rome, to Asia and Europe, and to all the world, just by talking, eating, and healing, it has come near. God is not particularly interested in borders, Scripture says today, but God is very *interested in you*.

Amen.