

LIVING BY FAITH

Scripture:

Psalm 132:1-12 A song of ascents.

¹ LORD, remember David
and all his self-denial.

² He swore an oath to the LORD,
he made a vow to the Mighty One
of Jacob:

³ “I will not enter my house
or go to my bed,

⁴ I will allow no sleep to my eyes
or slumber to my eyelids,

⁵ till I find a place for the LORD,
a dwelling for the Mighty One of
Jacob.”

⁶ We heard it in Ephrathah,
we came upon it in the fields of
Jaar:

⁷ “Let us go to his dwelling place,

let us worship at his footstool,
saying,

⁸ ‘Arise, LORD, and come to your
resting place,

you and the ark of your might.

⁹ May your priests be clothed with
your righteousness;

may your faithful people sing for
joy.’”

¹⁰ For the sake of your servant David,
do not reject your anointed one.

¹¹ The LORD swore an oath to David,
a sure oath he will not revoke:

“One of your own descendants
I will place on your throne.

¹² If your sons keep my covenant
and the statutes I teach them,
then their sons will sit

on your throne for ever and ever.”

2 Samuel 7:1-7, 11b-13

After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.” Nathan replied to the king, “Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you.” But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying: “Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” ’... I will also give you rest from all your enemies. “The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you:

When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

MESSAGE:

Psalm 132 is one of a group of *Psalms* that are called “*Psalms of Ascent*,” or songs of “rising,” where the Psalmist describes how God has lifted him up spiritually. They’re also called “pilgrimage songs,” songs that describe the spiritual journey each one of us takes during our life, during which God draws us ever closer to Him.

Some of the journeys we take in our lives are not spiritual journeys. I took a couple of non-spiritual journeys earlier in my life which didn’t turn out too well. My first journey began when I was 19 years old and got kicked out of college and decided go bumming around the country. My hero during those days was an itinerant folksinger by the name of Woodie Guthrie who had written several folksongs that had become popular over the years: “*Hard Travelin*,” “*Pastures of Plenty*,” and “*This Land is Your Land*” were a few of them. So to my parents’ dismay, I took my cheap guitar and set out hitchhiking, mainly around the west. From Missouri to Colorado to Idaho to Utah to Kansas to Ohio—I slept under bridges and worked in factories and bussed tables in restaurants for three years. I ended up in Columbus, Ohio, where I put enough money together to buy a used motorcycle. A friend of mine and I decided to “double-pack” the bike out to Los Angeles. Neither of us had ever been to California but we were convinced it consisted of nothing but beautiful beaches full of beautiful women who were just waiting for us to show up. SO we took off with the clothes on our back and enough money for gasoline and a few cans of beans on the way. Unfortunately, our planning skills weren’t all that sharp, and we ran out of money and gasoline in Bakersfield, California, where I hocked the only thing I had of value—a used Norelco razor—for two dollars. That got us enough gasoline to get us into Los Angeles, where we slept on the beach, went to work in factories and starved until we got our first paycheck. Needless to say, the beaches we had been looking forward to they weren’t exactly full of beautiful women. The ones that were there were looking for movie stars, not two hicks from the midwest. About 12 paychecks later the motorcycle blew a rear tire on the Pasadena Freeway, and I ended up in the hospital. When my friend came to visit me, he said, “*Maybe we should have gone to San Francisco.*”

That was not a particularly successful journey.

My second journey turned out to be another exercise in futility. I thought I had some writing skills and decided I would become an author and write the Great American Novel. I hadn’t written much of anything yet, not even many letters to my own family who had pretty much disowned me at that point, but I still considered myself a budding young writer. So I went back to college and majored in English literature so I could learn how to write. Eight years later I landed a position in the English Department of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee teaching literature and linguistics. Unfortunately, (have you noticed how often I’ve used that word today?)—unfortunately I quickly became disillusioned with the college “scene.” Most of my colleagues in the English faculty were cynical, disillusioned people: they felt intellectually superior to the rest of mankind and didn’t think they got the kind of

recognition they deserved. They didn't like their students, they didn't like each other and they didn't like their jobs. Moreover, my attempts at writing had produced about 70 pages of drivel, so game up on writing the Great American Novel. After a couple of years, I bailed out of academia and ended up working in factories again. After two life-journeys and several side trips along the way, I was still wandering in the wilderness. I was 35 years old with no prospects and all I knew for sure is that I had given up on journeys of any kind simply because I had given up on the journeyer.

It was at this point that the Lord saw fit to pull me up out of the wreckage I had made of my life and start me on a new and very different kind of journey—a spiritual journey. Through the encouragement of my wife and the ministry of a Lutheran pastor the Lord sought me out and turned my heart toward Him, and I became a believer. I didn't know much about Christianity or where it would take me, but I figured it had to be better than where I was, so I set out on my third journey, this time as a Christian pilgrim. This was radically different from my first two journeys, because for the first time the road was going up instead of going down. Unlike the first two journeys which had turned out to be dead ends, this would be a journey of ascent, of rising, because God had built the road, God was supplying the fuel, God had set the destination, and God was in the driver's seat. I was on a journey again, but this time I was a passenger.

Tonight's *Psalms* describes another man's journey—the journey David took from being a shepherd in Bethlehem to becoming the greatest king Israel ever had. It was a road laden with pitfalls and detours—a lot like the road you and I travel every day. Throughout the journey David had one particular goal in mind, and that was to build God a temple, a house of His own in Jerusalem to replace the tabernacle the Israelites had been carrying with them ever since the *Exodus*. He said to Nathan the prophet, *"Here I am, living in a palace of cedar while the ark of God remains in a tent."* (2 Samuel 7:2) Our Psalmist for today describes David's plan this way: *"O Lord remember David and all the hardships he endured. He swore an oath to the Lord and made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob: 'I will not enter my house or go to my bed—I will allow no sleep to my eyes, no slumber to my eyelids, till I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob.'" (Psalm 132:1-5)* David's plan was a fine and noble one but there was one problem: it wasn't God's plan. And so God said to Nathan, *"Go and tell my servant David, This is what the Lord says: 'Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day....The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you...Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.'" David wanted to build a house for the Lord, but instead, the Lord built an eternal house for David, a house which we called the Church.*

David forgot that he was a passenger on the journey God had planned for him. He forgot the *Proverb* that we often forget as well: *"In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps."* (Proverbs 16:9) David wanted to build a house for the Lord but the Lord said, "No—I'll build a house for you." *"Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."* (2 Samuel 7:16)

It seems to be a universal human defect: we imagine that we choose our own journeys and shape our own lives, not realizing that it is the Lord who chooses us and shapes our lives. The Israelites of the *Old Testament* journeyed from the land of Ur to Chaldea to Canaan; then to Egypt, then to Zion, then to Babylon, and then back once again to Zion,

from which they were dispersed throughout the world. And it was always God who planned the trips, planned the dispersion, equipped them to make the journey, and led them to their destination—even when that destination was Babylon. It was only when they departed from God’s roadmap that they got into trouble, when they decided that they would be the navigators instead of passengers.

So it is with us. Our journey was planned for us by God before the creation of the world. God has set the path, God has set the destination, and God has shown us our leader—the leader who says, simply, “Follow me.”

Like you, I’m still on my journey. And sometimes I get off track and think I know better than God where I ought to be heading. And then I end up in a mess and I never seem to learn. But my leader always finds me and gets me back on track and starts me on my journey again. And every now and then, my ears perk up and I can hear the distant triumph song being raised up in the New Jerusalem by those who have gone before me, and I think: You know, it’s not only a glorious destination—it’s been a wonderful trip!

Amen.