

# Picking The Path

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There comes a time when you have to decide whether or not you are going to walk.

I was a college senior. The thesis I had been working on as a Political Science major was on the Cuban Missile Crisis – which, with the anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s death last month, has been in the news lately. I was concentrating with my thesis on the problem solving methodology that Kennedy applied to this crisis and how in one moment it brought us to the brink of nuclear war and then, in another moment, it took us away from it. My attention to these things heightened my sensitivity to what was at that point in the late 70’s an alarming and dangerous nuclear arms race. Still deep in the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union were building and installing nuclear weapons as fast as they could and had long before achieved a hundred fold level of what was called MAD -- Mutually Assured Destruction. In light of my studies this did seem to me to be madness—and so I responded to an invitation by my college chaplain to attend a Peacemaking Conference at the Riverside Church in New York City hosted by William Sloane Coffin. For two full days we heard from all the important peacemaking voices of the time and got ourselves whooped up about disarmament and political action and organization. And then on the last afternoon Dr. Coffin stood before us and said, “OK, for two days we have been talking about peace and we have been complaining about war, now it is time to walk. We are going to walk down Broadway Ave. and we are going to rally for peace.” “Walk?” I said. “Who said anything about walking? I thought this was a sitting conference. I thought we were going to take comfort in our sitting and complaining. I thought we were going to sit and study the issue and then go home.” No, the good Rev. said, We are going to walk. So quite to

my discomfort I – with a few hundred others walked down Broadway Ave. and rallied for an end to the mad nuclear arms race.

Now one can argue over the merits of such a walk and what difference, if any, it made to the crazy arms race – but the point of the story, of course, was that it was a moment that made a difference in me. I had been asked to walk, and before I had much time to think about it, I walked.

I do know that when I was thinking about walking I did have in the back of my mind the call that my mother received back when I was ten years old from my father. He was in jail. He had attended a memorial service for Martin Luther King days after his assassination and his fellow clergy had decided to lay a wreath down at the local municipal park. But it meant they had to walk. So they walked for Dr. King, they walked for Civil Rights. Not very far, just a few blocks. But in those parts you didn't walk for those things. You stayed put. So they threw them in jail. That made for an interesting Session meeting later that month!

In our text from Isaiah today the prophet dreams with us about the day when the ways of God would be known throughout the world. That the mountain of Zion and from it all the teachings of Yahweh – would rise to a point that all nations and people would stream to the commandments and precepts of the God of Israel – and as a result they would beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. And they shall learn war no more. It is a vision and a hope that 90% of humanity would ascribe to. Who doesn't want the day when there is no more need for weapons, for swords, for spears, for nuclear arms, because somewhere along the way we forgot about war? In this terroristic world who would not want that for their children and grandchildren?

Swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks, learning war no more. Such an important vision that two prophets of the Old Testament lay claim to it – Isaiah and Micah.

But then at the end this beautiful vision, this beautiful poem of peace, comes this little verse that I had never really paid much attention to – “Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

Let us walk in the light of the Lord. Come, let us walk.

There comes a time when you have to decide whether or not you are going to walk.

Because you see, the prophet understood something about visions – it is one thing to see them and it is another thing to walk in them. Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord. In other words—the first step toward the day when the lion lays down with the lamb – is the step you and I take to bring some measure of peace to the some portion of this world. The step you and I take to bring some measure of peace to some portion of this world.

But it all begins with deciding whether or not you are going to walk.

Now before you think that I am on my way toward insisting that you and I walk out of here this morning and march down Bee Ridge Rd. and rally for an end to war – though that wouldn't necessarily be a bad idea – it is important to know that the Bible is filled with invitations for you and me to walk in all sorts of ways. Over and over again, the people of God are being invited and challenged to stand up and walk. Abram, living in the land of Ur, hears the call of God that says to him, "Get up and walk. Go to the land I will show you." And Abram got up and walked. Moses steps aside in front of the burning bush and hears the voice that says, Walk. Walk back to Egypt and get my people and walk to the Promised Land. And Moses got up and walked. Elijah runs away from the wicked King and Queen of Israel and he goes as far as he weary feet can take him. He falls exhausted. But then the angel visits him, feeds him, and then says, "Rise and walk." The shepherds out in their fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. Minding their own business. And the angles come with their big announcement – to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior." And so they turn to each other and say – "Let us walk." Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee and catches a few fishermen sitting in their boats and says, "Get up and walk and follow me." The rich man comes face to face with Jesus and asks what does he need to do to inherit eternal life – and Jesus says, Walk. Walk with me. The apostles come upon a lame man outside the temple and all he wants is a little silver. A couple of quarter to buy a cup of coffee and Peter says, Get up and walk! Over and over again there are these invitations and commands to start walking.

Come, O house of Jacob, let US walk in the light of the Lord.

In other words, pick a path and start walking.

Remember good ol' Dorothy and Toto skipping down the Yellow Brick Road and they get to a crossroads and they're not sure which way to go and that's when they meet the scarecrow but the scarecrow isn't much help because the scarecrow doesn't have a brain. And he keeps pointing any which way to go and then they decide to just GO. They start walking. Sometimes your brain can keep your feet from doing what they are supposed to do. Pick a path and start walking.

It's what Robert Frost enticed us with in his poem about the two roads diverging in the woods. Which way to go? There is no perfect answer. So I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.

And that is the difference the prophet invites us into – the difference between dreaming the vision and walking the vision.

What is the place in your life, in your world, to which you can bring peace? That is to say the Biblical shalom. The state of wholeness and justice. The reconciliation between people. Maybe it is a walk into the interiors of your family, because there is peace yet to be found in your family. Maybe it is a walk into the interior of your soul, because there is peace yet to be found inside your soul. Maybe it is a walk into the canyon dividing you and another person in your life. Maybe it is a walk to Immokalee or to the Good Samaritan Mission, because there is peace yet to be found in the lives of migrant workers. Maybe it's a walk down the path of Advent that has you celebrating Christmas in a way that Madison Avenue would not appreciate. Maybe it is a walk to your congressman's office to insist that something be done about immigration, health care, drones, the environment. Maybe it is a walk to the Habitat for Humanity office or to the Food Pantry or to the Tutoring Hall, or ringing the bell because retirement is a terrible season to waste on yourself.

Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord. Pick a path and just start to walk.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20<sup>th</sup> century German theologian and martyr whose particular path led him to an active resistance to Hitler and then to prison and then to death – in his great book on *The Cost of Discipleship* put it this way – when Jesus calls us he isolates us. We become before him individuals. He pulls us from the crowd and gets us face to face and says, “What’s it going to be?” We are anxious, says Bonhoeffer, to lose ourselves back into the crowd. But when Jesus calls, he won’t allow it. Writes Bonhoeffer, “Neither father nor mother, neither spouse nor child, neither nationality nor tradition, can protect a person at the moment of his call. It is Christ’s will that he should be thus isolated, and that we should fix our eyes solely upon him.”

Frederick Douglass, former slave and great American abolitionist, once said, “I prayed for freedom for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs”.

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