Food For Thought: Are We There Yet?

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go”. 
~Psalm 32:8 NIV

Sitting in church on Sunday, Pastor was just hitting his stride when I heard a small voice from behind ask “if he was done yet.” His father politely said that he wasn’t and that it won’t be much longer. It brought back a lot of memories of when my kids were little and constantly barraged us with that one question that gets on every parent’s nerves – “Are we there yet?”

This summer, all over America, families will be packing up cars for road trips to national parks, beaches, mountains, and big cities in search of new adventures. And in the backseats of those cars, about 3 hours into their 36 hour drive, I am sure they will hear it for the first time, echoed all over the nation: “Are we there yet?”

You know what? There are a lot of Christians saying it also – “Are we there yet?”

I’ve heard Missionaries say it. If you listen, you can hear it in their prayers when they ask God for some kind of sign that they are where He wants them to be. They want to know that God is rejoicing in all the prayers and toiling that they have done. But all too often, if you look, you will see that to do this with their hands and heads hung down as if they were saying, “Am I there yet, Lord?”

I’ve read that discouragement is also a very common malady for ministers. They preach, they teach, they shepherd with the Word and Prayer and yet, they often see little fruit. You can see the frustration in their faces and hear it in their voices. They want to see immediate results and if they don’t see them, they often grow discouraged. Then downtrodden, they often can’t see past one week to what God may be doing for them in the long term. “Am I there yet, Lord?”

I guess you can say that we all say it. We seek to know God’s will about our jobs, our future spouses, what colleges we should attend, which church to join, or what car to buy. “Are we there yet, Lord?” We pray for lost loved ones and expect God to do something about it yesterday. “And, we grow discouraged if our prayers aren’t answered on our time and our terms.

One Christian worker I talked to, who works among the poor in Baltimore, said, “I see the same thing every single day. I hand out food and money to meet their immediate needs. I try to teach them learn how to earn a living and how to take care of their personal hygiene. But every day there seems to be more people coming to me for help. And often the same people I have already helped are the first in line.” She was saying it as we are all saying, “Are we there yet?”

I imagine that that could be quite discouraging. But not as discouraging I think as the trek out of Egypt for the Promised Land. If you close your eyes and think about it, could you imagine what just one day in that journey would have been like for Moses?

I picture a morning in the valley of Moab that dawned cold and clear. The temperature probably dipped into the low 30’s overnight, and a layer of fresh snow fell and covered the ground, and hung on the thin walls of their woven cloth shelters.
People probably huddled together for warmth around the dying embers of last night’s campfire. Parents roused their children from their sleep and sent them out to gather more wood even though they would come back hours later almost empty handed, as they had every morning in the preceding weeks, months, and even years. They’d stagger back into their campsite with their spindly arms wrapped around a few broken twigs and some dry underbrush. Just enough to strike a flint to, and be able to cook a meal that would get them through the night.

One more day – just like the last. One more stomach rumbling. One more bone chilling, everlasting night, in that God forsaken wilderness that had been their home for 40 years.

I am sure that they stopped complaining years ago. As the older people began to die off, the children learned to accept that this was how life was going to be. I imagine that after a few years, it wasn’t so new anymore. Now, it’s all they have ever known.

And throughout it all, there was Moses - walking before them, leading the way…..and giving them hope that one day, one day God’s promise would be fulfilled and they would finally reach their destination.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God instructed the generations of Israelites who were born after the Exodus to celebrate Passover as if each one of them has personally come out of Egypt. I think that God’s lesson here is clear: only by entering the story themselves can we truly understand its meaning.

Most of us don’t have to imagine what Moses must have felt when God told him he would not be entering into the Promised Land. We’ve live that same disappointment ourselves whenever we’ve had our heart set on something that never came to fruition; put years of sweat equity into a job or a relationship that seemingly never rewarded for our efforts; or lost something or someone that we thought would be with us for many years to come. In many ways we have known what it’s like to be brought to that precipice and be shown what we could have, only to be told that we never will. Are we there yet, Lord?

But as the writer Joseph Campbell so poetically said, “We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.”

I’m sure what got Moses through many of those cold nights was the images of what his life would be like once they reached the Promised Land: The clean, clear running waters, the rich, fertile soil, the abundance of milk and honey that God had promised him would be flowing from the land. He could smell it, he could taste it, and he trusted that God would deliver on His promise. He urged his people to live their lives as if they had already reached the Promised Land – to trust that food and water would be plentiful, to not gather more than what they needed for themselves, and to share amongst everyone without fear that there would not be enough to go around. Are we there yet Lord?

We too, are living in that now-and-not-yet time as well every time we make sacrifices with our time, our money, and our resources to ensure that we’ll have something even more valuable in the future. Whether it’s a secure retirement for ourselves, an education for our children, a clean and healthy planet, or a music program for our church.

As Jesus was fond of saying, the Kingdom of God is here, and it is yet to come. Which means, I think, that until the new world comes into being, until we reach the Promised Land, like Moses and the
people of Israel, we are to live as if we are already there. We are to treat each other, and love each other as if we’re living in a land that flows with milk and honey, and give to each other out of a feeling of abundance rather than hold onto what we have out of a feeling of scarcity.

Moses never made it to the Promised Land, and we might assume that he was deeply disappointed when God told him he would not live to see the fruits of his years of wandering. But in the end, I think that Moses knew what no one else did – that the land alone was not the destination. The destination was actually inside them – in their hearts where they lived in communion with God. We may think that it was cruel of God to show Moses the land he would never enter, but I like to think that when Moses stood on that mountain top looking at the land of milk and honey, I don’t think that he was even looking at the land. He wasn’t looking at the reward. I think he was looking where we all should have been looking - he was looking at God.

There was another great leader who led his people through the wilderness, and did not live to see the Promised Land. Dr. Martin Luther King said it so eloquently:

“...Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land.”

I heard a story about a little girl on her first trip to Disney World. In her mind, Disney World was only Cinderella’s Castle that sits at the front gates because that is all of the theme park she had seen up to that point in any of the ads for Disney World. So, after entering the park and taking the castle in with her family, the girl’s parents begin to move on to the rest of the park, but she resists. She wasn’t interested in going one step further. When asked why she isn’t coming, she says, “I’m done, I’ve seen Cinderella’s Castle there isn’t any more.” The parents of course insisted that she continue to come with them. Why? She hasn’t really seen Disney World yet, only a very small part of it. There is so much more to do and see.

I feel that way about my journey with Christ. As we grow in our knowledge of Christ and we become more like Him, we reach a point where we become stagnant and stop growing all together. We don’t demonstrate a lot of interest in continuing to move forward and act as if we have reached our final destination. But the reality is, we still have more growing to do. I think that occurs at that point where we feel that we can be called a “Christian.”

Like that the little girl, we think that we’re done and there isn’t any more beyond that point. God usually has a funny way of saying “No, we’re not there yet.”

He has already told us that until we reach our final destination, until we are in heaven with Jesus, we need to remember that the journey doesn’t end until our last breath.

Till then, we just keep walking.