

Turning Point part 1

Acts 1:1-14

Do you remember studying about Lewis and Clark when you were in school? I know for me that was a long time ago. In the book *Canoeing the Mountains*ⁱ, author Tod Bolsinger uses the story of Lewis and Clark to illustrate an important lesson that connects to today's Bible reading and the modern parable we just heard.

President Thomas Jefferson had commissioned Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery with the task of finding a water route that would connect from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean for the purpose of establishing a trade route. Whoever discovered and made claim to the water route would own the trade route and control the resources of this great continent. It would be like owning the Internet today.

Lewis and a scouting party had followed the Missouri river to its source. Lewis believed that all he would have to do is walk up to the top of the hill, look down a gentle slope that would take his men a half day to cross with their canoes on their backs, and then they would find the waterway that would take them all the way to the coast.

They could not have been more disappointed. What Lewis actually discovered was that three hundred years of experts had all been completely and utterly wrong. In front of him was not a gentle slope down to a navigable river running to the Pacific Ocean but the Rocky Mountains. Stretching out for miles and miles as far as the eyes could see was one set of peaks after another.

There was no Northwest Passage. No navigable river. No water route. The driving assumption of the brightest, most adventurous entrepreneurial and creative leaders regarding this new world had been absolutely mistaken.

At that moment everything that Meriwether Lewis assumed about his journey changed. He was planning on exploring the new world by boat. He was a river explorer. They planned on rowing, and they thought the hardest part was behind them. But in truth everything they had accomplished was only a prelude to what was in front of them. Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery were about to go off the map and into

uncharted territory. They would have to change plans, give up expectations, even reframe their entire mission or fail. What lay before them was nothing like what was behind them. The real adventure was about to begin.

This story from history is a metaphor for our present moment in history. In every field, in every business, every organization, leaders are rapidly coming to the awareness that the world in front of us is radically different from everything behind us. And perhaps nowhere is that more evident than in the church. We too have entered uncharted territory.

Like Meriwether Lewis sitting on the crest of Lemhi Pass and looking at a landscape he couldn't have imagined, the Christian church must also face a brutal truth: what lies in front of us is radically different from everything behind us. We have left the map, we are in uncharted territory, and it is different than we expected.

Most churches are dying. According to Thom Rainer, "Somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000 churches in America will close their doors in the next year."ⁱⁱ

Extracurricular activities from music lessons to sports participation are considered by most parents to be more effective at forming good character in our children (and getting them accepted to good colleges!) than the church.

Spirituality has become wildly popular but so deeply individualistic that the fastest-growing "religious affiliations" among those under thirty are "none" and "spiritual-not-religious."ⁱⁱⁱ

The world in front of us is radically different from everything behind us.

I wonder if the disciples in our reading from Acts thought the same thing? Jesus told them they would receive the Holy Spirit (did they really even know what this meant?) and then they were to be witnesses telling people everywhere about Jesus. First in Jerusalem right in the very same place where Jesus had just been crucified, then in all Judea (the whole country) and in Samaria (among the despised neighboring country) and go to the ends of the earth. Then, Jesus ascended to heaven, leaving them behind wondering just what this new adventure was going to look like. They didn't

have map, no blueprint to follow, no one to turn to for answers just a mission – to witness to everyone, everywhere about Jesus.

And that is just what they did. When the Holy Spirit came upon them, they received “power” that filled them with courage, boldness, and confidence to go out and proclaim the gospel – everywhere, to all people. They went out to tell everyone the amazing news that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. That God who is rich in mercy, made it possible for those of us who were dead in sin to have life and purpose through his Son and it isn’t because of anything we do, but all because of God’s love and grace. (Ephesians 2:4-8, Romans 5:8) That is the gospel message we are called and empowered to go out and tell.

So where do we start? We start with returning to God and our focus on God’s mission for us – to be witnesses to those who are outside our building because God is on a mission to bless and save the whole world.

And God has chosen to use the church as the vehicle to carry out this mission. We are a sent people! Our purpose is just like that of the disciples in the early church = to be agents of God’s mission to the world.

Like Lewis and Clark we are in uncharted terrain, trying to figure out what it means to be church and disciples in a post-Christian culture that now considers the church an optional, out of touch and irrelevant relic of the past.

In the movie Moneyball, Brad Pitt plays Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland Athletics baseball team. Oakland is a small-market team that doesn’t have the revenue to compete with the major-market teams like New York, Los Angeles and Boston. His best players keep leaving to make more money for those teams. His owner can’t give him any more money, and now he has to replace three star players.

He gathers his staff together to explore what they can do about this problem. What does this highly trained, well-paid, experienced group of expert baseball minds do? They use the same thinking, the same approach, the same strategy they always use—which is not working.

Steve Yamaguchi, the dean of students at Fuller Theological Seminary, says that when his spiritual director took a flying lesson, he asked the

instructor why they use flight simulators so much. The instructor said, “In the moment of crisis, you will not rise to the occasion; you will default to your training.”

That was the problem of Billy Beane’s scouting staff and of most people in the church, we default back to the things we know, the way we’ve always done it.

But trying harder and still doing the same thing doesn’t work. In Moneyball, an exasperated Billy Beane looks at his manager and tries to urge him to think differently. “It’s adapt or die!” he says. Adapt or die. So what do we do to keep our churches from dying? What kind of adaptation is necessary?

This is a moment when most of our backs are against the wall, and we are unsure if the church will survive to the next generation. The answer is not to try harder doing the same thing but to start a new adventure: to look over Lemhi Pass and let the assumptions of the past go. To see, not the absence of a water route but the discovery of a new, uncharted land beckoning us forward.

The church is at an exciting crossroads. We are entering a new day, new terrain and a new adventure. It might be a bit scary. But we are not alone. The Spirit of God goes before us. The mission of Christ will not fail. A day will come when the *“kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever”* (Revelation 11:15).

And as we navigate this new territory together, it is an opportunity for us to express even more clearly what it means to follow and serve the God who is King of the entire world.

Today is a new day, so let’s not be afraid to ditch the canoe because we’ve got a whole world waiting to hear about Jesus.

ⁱ Bolsinger, Tod. Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. Chapter 2

ⁱⁱ <http://thomrainer.com/2017/06/six-stages-dying-church/>