**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“Words for Starting New Things”*

Ephesians 5:16

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Scripture teaches us to look carefully how we walk, not as unwise but as wise, not as foolish but in understanding, not in drunkenness, but filled with the Spirit. In scriptural terms how we “walk” is how we live, and what the church is called to first and foremost is to live in the fullness of life in Jesus. Some days that is pure bliss; other days that is a real challenge. Either way, this is our calling, to walk with the wisdom of the cross, to be imitators of God, walking in love, as Christ loved us. Let us all remember that as we walk through all the doorways we will walk through in the coming days.

This is a big week for a lot of us going back to school. What an enchanted season, these few days when summer lumbering along suddenly careens around the corner and squeals its tires into fall. Not really fall, as in autumn; for us that begins in late October. We mean fall as in time to buy school supplies, meet the teachers, first day on the front porch pictures, finding classrooms. For some it’s moving away from home for the first time, lugging boxes up to the fourth floor of your new home and getting ready for something totally new, something you’ve never done before.

You’re stepping across a threshold, opening a new door, and beginning a new part of life. You’re starting not only a new school year, but also a new school. You’re moving to a new city. You’re starting a new job. We’re proud of you. We’re so proud of you. And we’re excited for you. These are enchanted days when all the possibilities and new opportunities are laid out before you. With Dr. Seuss, we want to clap you on the back and say, “Oh, the places you’ll go.”

It seems like a Dr. Seuss moment. Dr. Seuss gives us hope . . .encouragement: “Today is your day, You’re off to Great Places! You’re off and away!” It’s also, let us take note, a St. Paul moment. St. Paul gives us something a little less dreamy, but nonetheless true: “make the most of the time because the days are evil.”

If we’re paying attention, it does seem like it could be like that. There’s a lot going wrong in the world right now, a lot of darkness and troubling things. What Paul is saying is that every day also has pressure, hardships, and dangers by which you will be hard pressed. These days can be a peril to Christian faithfulness. He was writing it to Christians at Ephesus, a city he had already fled in darkness because his preaching the Gospel had caused a riot. Paul knew something about pressure, hardships, and peril. He also knew that wherever he was, in whatever state, in prison or free, he could give thanks to God.

And yet: put an oversized backpack over the small shoulders of a child. Say “cheese!” and these days don’t seem evil, they seem enchanted, full of wonder and possibility, of joy and hope. God created this day and every day, and every day is an occasion to say, “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

What this is is wisdom. Only a foolish person wouldn’t prepare themselves for inevitable hardships and challenges, and this year, we know, will have hardships and challenges when you’ll need to remember who you are and that you are God’s beloved child. You’ll need to tell yourself that, because some days you can feel lost and alone if you don’t remember the one you’re walking with every day. That you are loved and God loves you and people like us, your church, loves you, too. Even Dr. Seuss understood it:

“You won't lag behind, because you'll have the speed.
You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead.
Wherever you fly, you'll be best of the best.
Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.
Except when you don't.
Because, sometimes, you won't.
I'm sorry to say so
but, sadly, it's true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you . . .

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.
Some windows are lighted. But mostly they're darked.
A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!
Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?
How much can you lose? How much can you win?”

In the day of failure, fear, or uncertainty, Dr. Seuss’ warning was that a person can end up in the waiting place. For Seuss, the waiting place is where people just wait for something to happen that will help them get out of whatever it is they’re in. And all they do is wait for something that never comes. Seuss wants us to be people of action, to be bold and confident, to be hopeful and not get stuck, and if you do get stuck, to strive boldly to get unstuck.

St. Paul’s wisdom doesn’t sound entirely different. “Awake o sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. Look carefully how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are full of hardships, perils, and all manner of things that can challenge your faith. Don’t be dead to your life or this moment either by anything that would keep you from being fully alive. Instead live; live wisely; live boldly; live with gratitude.

It is the “wise” who see that a new day has begun in Christ (Ephesians 5:14), and who live that out in their lives. A new day has dawned in Christ and you are free. If we are truly alive in Christ, we do not walk trance-like, but with purpose, with joy, with hope, with love. Those alive in Christ walk different. They don’t stride with the gait of the arrogant, neither do they slink with the slither of the cunning. They walk, humble and confident in God’s provision, God’s presence, and in the knowledge of their salvation by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

But sometimes they walk into middle school for the first time, and they are a little nervous.

Sometimes they walk into a new high school, and they don’t know whether they’ll fit in.

Sometimes they move into a new dorm room, and wonder if they are cut out for what’s ahead of them, or even if they have any idea what’s ahead of them, but mostly, at least at first, if they can find their Monday morning class.

If you feel this way at all, I think I know a little of how you feel, because last week I did something I’d been nervous to do for a long time. I went to New York City. Now some of you think that’s ridiculous to be anxious about going to New York. I quite agree. I’m not saying it’s rational, I’m just saying it is. I’ve been to big cities all over the world, but something about New York seemed foreboding to me, inhuman: all those huge buildings, all those people, all those horns. It just seemed overwhelming and a place I didn’t belong. But I did it, just like you’ll take the step across your threshold into an experience you’ve never had. I did it.

What I remembered on that journey is what we learn all along, is that days can be hard and enchanting at the same time. Days can be full of pitfalls and troubles and also full of divine possibility. It’s true of every day in every place. The days are not just evil; they are also sacred. Yet some days can be full of troubles. Christians are not immune to it nor are they in denial. Christians can look reality—middle school cafeteria reality, high school hallway reality, college party I’m not so sure I should be here reality, new job with new boss reality, we can look reality straight in the eyeballs. And not blink.

Only a con man would tell you that everything is going to be great every day. You’ll have some lonely days. You may have a day when you’re sitting alone at a lunch table. You may have many of them. You may have a day when you’re not sitting alone but someone else is and you let them go on being lonely. May you not have many of those days. Make it right. Love someone.

You will have days of hurt and sorrow, questioning yourself. You will have some hard decisions to make about whether to go along with the crowd or do the right thing. Always do the right thing. Let the crowd decide if they’ll follow you. Being alone isn’t the worst thing that ever happened to anyone.

St. Paul writes that the days are evil. He doesn’t mean they are evil in their nature, but that some days are full of trouble, hardships, testings. That’s what that word means, and of course it’s true. It means that a new day may have dawned in Christ, but the sun doesn’t shine on the same dog’s rump every day and some days you can’t find a ray of sunshine. That’s life. Those are the days we’re told to redeem the time.

To redeem the time is not to let the circumstance of the day control you, but to keep your eyes on Jesus who is with you. Your worth is not determined by the grade on your test or by the whims of the group. You are precious in the eyes of Jesus and in our eyes too. You are lovely and beloved and what we want most of all for you is that you wake up to awareness of just how loved you really are. You are not alone.

Eberhard Arnold (*Salt and Light*) wrote: “Your life willhave a kind of perfection, although you will not be a saint. The perfection will consist in this: you will be very weak and you will make many mistakes; you will be awkward, for you will be poor in spirit and hunger and thirst for justice. You will not be perfect, but you will love. This is the gate and the way. There is nothing greater than love. There is nothing more true than love, nothing more real. So let us hand our lives over to love and seal the bond of love.”

God’s Word encourages us to “walk in love, as Christ loved us.” That means on your first day -- tomorrow is it? The next day? -- walk through those doors in the knowledge that you are loved. Walk on the solid ground of love and let your feet be guided by compassion, hospitality, mercy, encouragement, and righteousness. Walk in love over to someone all by themselves and be a friend. Walk to someone who is left out and bring them in. Find someone lying in pieces on the ground and pick them up. Walk in love with your teachers: they’re working hard for you, so hard. Walk in love with your parents, even if you think they don’t understand you. Walk in love with your friends. Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us. You are embraced in the Trinitarian love of God in whose image you were created, in the Son who gave himself for us, filled by the Spirit who puts hymns and songs on our lips and hope in our hearts in the days of sunlight and in the moments when it seems the darkness is closing in.

I was anxious about going to New York. And, wow, is it big. We walked around like hayseeds all weekend looking up at the top of those buildings wondering how they could stack so many people into each one, over and over and over again. Despite all the people, it’s an almost inhuman place, nothing is to scale, everything is too big, too impersonal, too rushed. Like a lot of places, it’s almost an inhuman place. Almost, but not quite.

One evening we descended the stairs from the sidewalk to an underground subway station. I won’t tell the embarrassing story of just how hard it was for us actually to find the subway station which was pretty much right in front of us. We were in search of an Italian restaurant we’d read about. In Brooklyn. I didn’t know what a Brooklyn was. Now that we’d found the underground subway station, it was my role to figure out which train, how to buy the tickets, how to get there, and when to get off. So we found the subway, bought the ticket, got on the train, or at least a train, I was pretty sure it was the right one, and pretty sure it was going the right direction. You know they go both ways, right? I was pretty sure I knew where to get off, but all these questions were swirling around in my head when I felt a tap on my shoulder. A young man, late teenager probably, baseball cap, gold chain, tank top shirt standing there with two other guys who looked just like him.

I was about to just hand over my lunch money when he surprised me: “Yo, are we near downtown?” What? Downtown? You’re asking me? How was I supposed to know if we were near downtown? If we were above ground I wouldn’t know if we were downtown. Downtown is where all the big buildings are. Isn’t New York just one big downtown? “Sorry, I have no idea.” I replied, a little embarrassed that not only did I not know if we were near downtown, but also I didn’t know if we were headed that direction, or what downtown even was. If there are freshman subway riders I was one of them, but then again, so, apparently, was he.

He turned away. When the train stopped and the doors opened, he leaned out of the train and yelled to someone on the platform, “Are we near downtown?” I’m thinking by now, “Tourist!” I couldn’t hear the muffled response from the New Yorker on the train platform, but I don’t think he got his information. Doors close, train rumbles again. A few minutes later, the doors open again, and a woman gets on. She was not a tourist. She was not a freshman subway rider. She looked tough, like probably what made me nervous about New York. She looked like she could take my lunch money if she wanted it. Pale skin, black pants, small backpack, combat boots, gray shirt, ear buds in both ears, dreadlocks down past her shoulder blades. If Brooklyn had a personification, here she was. I gave her space. He saw his opportunity.

“Excuse me, are we near downtown”

‘What?” Uh-oh, I thought, welcome to New York buddy.

“Are we near downtown?”

“Where are you trying to go?” “To see the statue.” “What statue? The Statue of Liberty?”

She took out one ear bud. She looked him up and down. Then she pointed to a map on the wall, a subway map. You need to get off at this station. She pointed. Then you need to transfer to this line, she pointed again. How do I do that? Just follow the signs. Then you need to get off there, and walk to the ferry. Then you can see the statue.

I listened to the whole thing. This guy had no more clue how to get around than we did, less really. A big tough guy probably in his other life, wherever that is, brought to nothing by New York. He tried to take in everything she said. Finally, he said, “Thanks. I’m not from here.”

And she said: “None of us are. We’re all in this together.”

And there it was, a moment of human kindness, from someone unlikely to someone who needed it.

“None of us are from here. We’re all in this together.”

Remember that tomorrow. Remember that when you cross your next threshold into the unknown. Remember who you are, and remember, in the words of Desmond Tutu:

“Goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death; victory is ours through Him who loves us.”

O God of light and love and life, bless us this day and in our tomorrows. Set our feet on the solid rock of truth. Let us see the world with your eyes of compassionate love; fill our minds with divine promises and blessed assurances of our identity in you. As your beloved children, let us now have life and life abundantly, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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