

# “Keep Moving in the Right Direction” by Elizabeth Gelfeld

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## The Third Sunday in Lent

Did you see the sky on Friday morning? It was amazingly, almost impossibly blue, absolutely clear, and the bright sunshine turned all the new snow into a sparkling bedazzlement of beauty. And the quiet. I felt the quiet on Thursday evening, around sunset, after I spent half an hour shoveling the walk and then took our dog for a short walk. The street felt like a cathedral as I walked under the high arches of snow-laden tree branches. I was drawn into prayer.

Psalm 19, our psalm for today, begins: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.” And then, it’s as if the psalmist is so overwhelmed that he can’t figure out which direction to go with the image:

19:2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge, the psalmist says, but in the next verse,

19:3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

19:4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth,

and then, this beautiful metaphor:

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

19:5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

Then the psalmist changes the subject, and in a series of parallel couplets praises the law that God has given us to direct our ways: God's law is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of God are sure, making wise the simple; and so on, ending with:

19:9 The ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

19:10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

When a Jewish or Muslim child begins to study the Torah or the Qur'an, the child is given a taste of honey, so the child will learn to associate the sweetness with the word of God.

The psalmist continues with a sentiment about God's laws that I suspect we all feel at times:

19:11 Moreover by them is your servant warned; . . . .

19:12 But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

And the final verse:

19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

In the Hebrew scriptures during this Lenten season we're reading the stories of God's progressive covenant. First, there was the covenant with Noah and his family, but not only with them. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God says,

9:9 As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,

9:10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.

Then, last Sunday we read about the covenant with Abraham and Sarah:

17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.

17:4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

17:7 I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you."

17:15 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, . . .

17:16 I will bless her, . . . and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

And today we read the crowning piece of the covenant, the giving of God's law to the descendants of Abraham.

20:1 Then God spoke all these words:

20:2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

20:3 you shall have no other gods before me.

The theme of our liturgy this Lenten season is "With All Creation." When we think of the covenant with Noah, we often forget this part. We focus on the rainbow and forget the wondrous beauty of God's covenant with *all* living creatures. It's not just about God and us. It's about God, us, all living creatures and, indeed, all creation—the soil, air, water and energy that sustain life.

I think that we're mostly convinced now that the earth's climate is warming

rapidly and that it's our fault. I know, you couldn't prove it by the weather here over the last couple of months. But weather is different from climate, and climate change drives extremes of weather.

In a Reuters poll last month of about 2,800 Americans, 72 percent of the respondents said they felt "personally morally obligated" to do what they can in their daily lives to reduce carbon emissions.

And, in many ways, Seekers Church has been moving in the right direction for quite awhile. Here are some of the ways; and thanks to Peter for giving me most of these:

- • We are a member of Interfaith Power & Light, and, through its group plan with the \_\_\_\_\_ company Direct Energy, our electricity comes primarily from wind energy. Also, those of us living in DC or Maryland, the areas Direct Energy covers, have the option to sign up for our homes.
- • Seekers is shifting its lighting to compact fluorescent lights, as a result of a survey we had done by the DC government. We use real dishes and cloth napkins.
- • Our chairs are made from surplus automobile seatbelt material. The wooden frames are fashioned from narrow strips of wood glued into their final shape on special frames. According to the designer, Peter Danko, this approach uses about 80 percent less wood than would be required in more traditional construction.
- • This building was designed with five different air temperature zones, enabling us to heat or cool only the areas that are in use at any given time.
- • We're pretty careful about recycling, and we have three large bins for mixed materials. (This would be a good item for a scavenger hunt; I've only ever noticed one of the bins.)
- • The toilets are powered by water pressure, which reduces the amount of water per flush by about half.
- • The Seekers who sought out this building worked hard to find a

location near a Metro station, to encourage our use of public transportation.

- • Individual Seekers are caring for creation in a variety of creative ways, including but not limited to these: converting a rooftop to a solar farm that supplies electricity to the house; sharing housing so that living space is fully used; and taking home this building's compostable kitchen waste, which nourishes a thriving backyard earthworm population.
- • Seekers Church shares this building with many other groups who need meeting space, and by doing so we encourage a community of communities in this energy-efficient space, and reduce the environmental impact of all.
- • And, very soon, our master gardener Larry will again lead the children in the annual cycle of planting, tending and harvesting our garden.

The gospel we read today is often called the "cleansing of the temple." I want to share with you some insight into this gospel passage from a book titled *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, by Marcus J. Borg, a Christian scholar who, sadly, died recently. [1]

Calling Jesus' act the "cleansing of the temple," implies that Jesus set out to purify the temple by getting rid of the money changers and vendors. But, as Borg points out, this interpretation doesn't really work historically. The sellers of animals for sacrifice and the money changers were only providing necessary services for the traditional acts of worship. Pilgrims traveled many miles, sometimes hundreds of miles, to Jerusalem; it would hardly be practical for them to carry their sacrifices from home. And there is historical evidence that prices and exchange rates were closely regulated, so it's unlikely that pilgrims were being cheated by the money changers. And, Borg says, there's no evidence that Jesus opposed animal sacrifice.

Jesus himself interprets his prophetic, disruptive action, in his teaching that immediately follows it (and I'm referring to some parts of the story from the synoptic gospels, as well as John):

The teaching combines two passages from the Hebrew scriptures. The first is Isaiah 56:7, which says that the purpose of the temple is to be “a house of prayer for all the nations.” The second is Jeremiah 7:11, part of what is called Jeremiah’s “temple sermon.” Standing in the gate of the temple, Jeremiah warned that the temple would be destroyed unless those who worshiped there began to practice justice [Jeremiah 7:5-7].

Then, speaking in the name of God, Jeremiah said, “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?” The phrase in Hebrew suggests not just thievery, but robbing with violence. In Jeremiah’s time, the temple had become the center of an unjust, oppressive system that exploited the society’s most vulnerable people and enriched the powerful and wealthy elites who ran the monarchy and the temple. As Marcus Borg puts it, “Their everyday injustice made them robbers, and they thought of the temple as their safe house and place of security. . . . Thus, when Jesus called the temple ‘a den of robbers,’ he was not referring to the activity of the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals. Rather, he indicted the temple authorities as robbers who collaborated with the robbers at the top of the imperial domination system. They had made the temple into a den of robbing and violence. Jesus action was not a cleansing of the temple, but an indictment of the temple.”

And the authorities asked, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”

Jesus’ answer—“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up—is a Resurrection image. Megan McKenna, in her commentary on this, says:

What happens to Jesus’ body happens to the body of Christ, the temple of God now—in us, individually and collectively. We must be destroyed, purified by the zeal of God, intent on making all holy. . . . The signs that Jesus was performing—teaching, preaching the good news, healing, forgiving, forming community, destroying any institutional practices or social behaviors that undermine hope—fulfilled the Law given on Sinai. [Performing] outward signs and devotional practices that conform to dominant cultures and majority power opinions is not the way to live out God’s commandments. [2]

How do we—how do I—still conform to the imperial domination system?

“By God’s laws is God’s servant warned,” the psalmist says. “Clear me from hidden faults.”

Sure, I buy locally grown produce and fair trade coffee, and I reuse plastic bags, but I also run too much water washing dishes, and my house has empty rooms, and I pay taxes, which go to fund my nation’s wars and subsidies to factory farms. It’s so easy for me to turn following the way of Jesus into a competition, and complain that I’m not big enough, strong enough, cool enough or sustainable enough to make a difference. But I think that’s missing the point.

In my day to day life, I feel far away from the tropical rainforests being destroyed, the seas being overfished, the livestock being tortured on factory farms, the children working in sweatshops and mines.

The worst drought in Syria’s history, brought on by five consecutive years with no rainy season, was immediately followed by that country’s descent into civil war. A groundbreaking study published last week in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* shows climate change to be the likely cause of that drought, which became part of a cascade of events that have killed and displaced millions, given rise to Islamic State and left a country in ruins. [3] The Pentagon regards climate change as a threat multiplier that poses immediate risks.

But I am far away from Syria, too, and frankly I don’t give it a thought when I get into my car to drive to work every day because taking public transportation doubles my commute time and I need that time to do my important work.

We are halfway through Lent, halfway to Jerusalem, to Passover and death, and resurrection draws nearer. Lent demands that we take a hard look at ourselves, that we repent for things we have done wrong and then *stop doing them*.

To repent means to stop, turn around, and go in a whole new direction.

That makes me uncomfortable, because I tend to see it as an all-or-nothing proposition. If I were truly to turn around and go in a new direction, well .

. . where would I go?

But repentance, change of mind and heart, is a lifelong process, and it's not just for Lent, though the season is a good annual reminder.

This is not easy or quick or pleasant. But I need to take a hard look at my participation in a system that benefits me at such a high cost to others and to all creation.

For some time now I've been wanting to break up with my megabank. I can't do that entirely, because it's a polygamous relationship, which I share with my husband, who has no intention of breaking up. But there are ways I can at least cheat on my megabank, so that less of my money is going to fund projects like sweatshop factories and fossil fuel development. So, Friday afternoon, instead of working on this sermon—or maybe it was working on this sermon—I picked up the phone and called City First Bank of DC, which is a community development bank, dedicated to strengthening underserved communities in Washington, DC.

It was not easy or pleasant for me to make that call, though I have to admit it was pretty quick. It was out of my usual box; plus, I dislike calling strangers, especially institutions. Which is why I've been procrastinating on this for years. But I made the call. Stop, turn around, take a step in the right direction.

I don't know if City First Bank will be where I end up, because they don't offer personal credit cards, and one thing I want is a credit card that's not tied to a megabank. But after I made the call, I took one more step: I actually printed out the forms I need to reinvest some money in Oikocredit, a cooperative a social investor that provides funds to the microfinance sector. Keep moving in the right direction.

I leave you now with some suggestions and then a prayer, from a ritual to welcome spring, offered by the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual. This written by Diane L. Neu and is titled "Let the Winter Go!" [4]

Suggestions for action:

- Let go of fear, anger, jealousy, judgmental statements, and negativity.



Welcome friendship.

- Notice spring alive in your neighborhood – flowers blooming, birds nesting, children playing.
- Clean up litter in your community.
- Buy foods grown locally when possible and eat lower on the food chain.
- Reduce – energy, trips, trash; use cloth bags for shopping, use cloth napkins instead of paper, buy secondhand clothes, and donate used items.
- Plant – an herb, vegetable, flower, kindness.
- Spring clean – and renew yourself.
- Cultivate a mindset of thanks.

And one more suggestion, from Karen Maezen Miller: “Thank the garbage man. Be patient with the postal worker. Light a candle for the power company and the snow plows.” [5]

And Diane Neu’s prayer:

Source of Life, Divine Providence,  
One who brings forth crocuses and daffodils,  
Praise to you for blessing Earth with beauty.  
Renew us with flowing water, blooming flowers,  
Singing birds, and spring light.

May I notice the renewal of Earth.  
May my eyes open to new life peeking out of the soil.  
May my ears hear the singing birds.  
May my feet touch Earth gently.  
May I return blessings to Earth, sea, and sky.

May Earth be renewed.  
May waters be clean.

May air be pure.

May we be whole.

May all be well again.

Amen. Blessed be. Let it be so.

Sources:

1. *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, Marcus J. Borg (HarperCollins, 2006)
2. *Lent: The Sunday Readings*, Megan McKenna (Veritas Books, 2009)
3. "Climatechange in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought," *PNAS* 2015; published ahead of print March 2, 2015, doi:10.1073/pnas.1421533112
4. WATER February Ritual ([www.waterwomensalliance.org](http://www.waterwomensalliance.org))
5. Karen Maezen Miller, "15 ways to practice compassion today," blog post 1/27/2015 ([www.karenmaezenmiller.com/blog](http://www.karenmaezenmiller.com/blog))