

**Lexington Presbyterian Church
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Good to Go

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Three boys in the schoolyard were bragging about their fathers. The first boy says, "My Dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he then calls it a poem, they give him \$100.00."

The second boy says, "That's nothing, My Dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a song, they give him \$1000.00."

The third boy says, "I've got you both beat. My Dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a sermon, and it takes eight people to collect all the money!"

A few years ago, I found myself stuck on a Saturday afternoon in a large electronics store. The store was thick with shoppers and salespeople seemed non-existent. I was there not as a curious browser or a casual shopper; I knew precisely what I wanted, knew precisely where the item was located in the store, and knew precisely that even on a good day it would take me a while to get out of the store!

I found the software I was looking for and incredibly bumped into a salesperson at a little kiosk in the middle of an aisle near Cell Phones/scanners. He asked me if I had found what I needed. I said that I had. He wrote down a few numbers; I gave him a credit card and signed the receipt. He handed my purchase to me, and said, "Okay, you're good to go."

I stared nonplused. "You mean I don't need to stop at the front cashier?"

He smiled. "No, you're good to go." He meant that I could shoulder through the crowds and slip through the door. I could leave with my small purchase and bypass the masses and be far from the madding crowd. I could cut to the chase, cut through the red tape, avoid the mess, make a clean getaway. I was good to go.

The "good to go" comment rang in my ears as I looked at today's text. The reading is about two good-to-go guys: Elijah and Elisha. One was getting ready to check-out, the other preparing to check-in. One was taking off, the other taking on; one giving up the mantle, the other putting it on; one crossing the Jordan for the last time, the other for the first time. Two good-to-go prophets, voices for God at a critical moment in Israel's history.

Elisha was eager to go with Elijah on the latter's final trek, but Elijah gave his disciple three opportunities to stay behind. "Stay", Elijah said to Elisha at Gilgal, and again at Bethel and yet again at Jericho.

Perhaps the offers were to test Elisha's resolve, and he came through with strength. On the far side of the Jordan River, his moment came. Elijah offered him a too-good-to-be-true deal just before his own sendoff. "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha quickly asked for a double dose of Elijah's spirit.

The church today also hears the offer to stay put when the real action is moving on. The church's resolve is tested too. We can stay where we are—or we can cross the Jordan and ask for a double dose. But when we have a vast network of tradition telling us to stay, telling us this is what the church looks like, this is what witnessing and mission looks like, this is what ministry looks like, this is where God has blessed us in the past—our first instinct is to stay in one or more of three possible places. They are: nostalgia of a small town, the bigger is better myth of a large town, and the irrelevance of a ghost town.

1. The nostalgia of a small town.

There is a population shift back toward small-town America. People, looking for the grail of a "simpler" life and a slower-paced existence believe they will find it in small communities that dot the American landscape. Increasingly, advances in telecommunications, telecommuting and the lower cost of living in small towns are making it possible for more people to migrate to the rural communities.

Nostalgia is frequently the motivation that pushes people to minor municipalities. But it's not uncommon for that sentiment to come crashing down when the newcomers discover that longtime residents aren't always delighted to see their town grow. Breaking into a small-town society ranges from awkward to sometimes impossible. And, ironically, sometimes the transplants try to change the town and turn it into what they left behind.

Churches, regardless of the size of the community in which they sit, can be ingrown, closed, one-dimensional—a difficult society to penetrate, one that freezes out newcomers and the culture. However, I don't believe LPC is a church that will stand idly by. As Drew Ditzel and his family make their transition to Lexington and LexPres, you need to welcome them with open arms and make them feel a part of the LexPres family . . . especially Amelia and the children. Invite them into your homes, to community events and so on.

The good-to-go church, moves on, even as the culture moves on. The culture in which the church is planted has moved from an agrarian economy to a product economy to a service economy to an experience economy. Kevin G. Ford, church observer and author of *Jesus for a New Generation*, makes the point about the changing culture using coffee as an example. In an agrarian economy, farmers grew coffee and traded the beans for other products. In a product economy, farmers learned to grind the beans, package the grounds and sell them at the local general store. In a service economy, customers could sit down at the five-and-dime and be served a cup of coffee for a quarter. In today's experience economy, however, a \$5 cup of cappuccino is served in pleasant surroundings with soft music, fireplaces, books, magazines and newspapers. People want an experience, not just a cup of coffee (see "The Mass-customized Church Experience" in *Current Thoughts and Trends*, January 1998, 2).

As technology allows us to function remotely (Internet shopping, telecommuting, pay-for-view, etc.), people yearn for something, anything, that offers authentic experiences not rooted in the past, but stretching to the future. The church that's aware catches on that people crave experience and then thinks about how to help people experience the presence of God on the deepest levels. If we are going to be a good-to-go church, we will need to address the fact that four, perhaps even five

generations, are sitting in the pews at any given time. The church is situated in a unique moment in history; it is able to offer what it does best—authentic experiences of the holy and the divine!

2. The bigger-is-better myth of a large town.

The bigger the city, the more it has to offer. But we can get easily lost—literally and figuratively—in large cities. Modern symbols scream at us from all sides but what life-guidance do they provide?

Is the church that pushes "more" and functions "busier" attempting to syncretize cultural symbols with the ancient symbols of the faith?

According to some, we are already in a post-Christian age and the peril awaiting Christianity is the perception that Christianity is less a life-empowering faith as it is an intriguing myth of the past. As such, what use is it in the personal search for meaning? Author Cees Nooteboom's in his book Context summarizes his view as "that of a man of the late 20th century wandering among survivors of a world that can still, to an extent, be read and understood, while simultaneously projecting himself in his imagination into a not-too-distant future when Christian traditions of symbolism will have died out entirely—in other words, into a future in which Christianity will have crossed the line separating religion from myth" (as cited in Context, December 1, 1997, 7).

The good-to-go church avoids being "mything-in-action" by not pandering to a multicultural milieu. Instead, it holds up a distinctly Christian ethos that serves the present age—and helps the individual find faith in the God of every age. That ethos must reassert and renew its essential character as a faith of salvation -- the salvation of body, soul and spirit.

3. The irrelevance of a ghost town.

The United States, especially in the West, is littered with the remains of once-upon-a-time towns that rose with economic booms and sank with busts. Even parts of some functioning towns have ghostly boroughs, where the economy hinged on only one product or service for which the demand has dried up.

Ghost-town churches are like that too. They are not necessarily ghostly because of sparse attendance but because they linger at the scene of early victories, still peering through the glory of what once worked, and wondering how to make it work again.

The good-to-go church moves beyond the irrelevance of the past and reinvents itself in a multi-dimensional way. Crossing the Jordan means leaving old ways of thinking and embracing new constructs for ministry. The *alive* church must be set free to move on from stale victories to a new self-understanding which sees itself, not as already invented at Pentecost, but rather born there, and now an unfinished, evolutionary work in progress.

There are signs that LPC is a good-to-go church. We have young adults serving on the session as well as more tenured folks. Teenager Ainsley Carter served on the PNC. And offered much to the group and process. We just called Drew Ditzel as pastor who will no doubt bring fresh perspectives and fresh ideas . . . be receptive to those ideas . . . He is young and vibrant and ready to do great things here.

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

The challenge is not for the church alone, but for all of us who struggle to be faithful along the journey. God, like Elijah to Elisha, comes to us with a unique offer: "What would you like me to do for you?" What an incredible offer! The check is blank and God suggests that we fill it in. Elisha asked for a double dose, and Elijah gave it to him. Elisha was good-to-go and when Elijah had receded from view just as God often seems to do, Elisha slapped the mantle of Elijah upon the waters of the Jordan River, and they parted for him as they had for Elijah. Elisha then embarked to the towns of Israel in light of his post-Jordan, trans-Jordan experience.

We, too, can ask God for a double dose of his Spirit. Let's face it; a lot of times we feel stuck at the small towns, large towns and ghost towns of our life. But when we feel bad-to-go, or good-to-stay, God's double dose will empower us to go beyond the nostalgia of yesterday into the opportunities of tomorrow, beyond the myth and into the reality, beyond the old ways of doing business to new, inventive ways of faithful discipleship.

God asks us, "What do you want me to do for you?" Think about that for a moment . . . perhaps, we can respond with the second Elisha answer: "Give me a double dose of your spirit."

Wearing the mantle of the Holy Spirit, we all can be good-to-go Christians.

The message is from sermons that I preached over the years that I have been in the pastorate. I have compiled them from the notes I made before they were preached. I do not know where I found some of the material contained here. I may have borrowed it, as a whole or in part, from others. I simply do not remember. If this is the case, I apologize right now, and that our combined efforts will glorify God.