

“The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss: On Beyond Zebra”

Rev, Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Genesis 22:1-8, 15-18

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.’ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.’ Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘Father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ He said, ‘The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together.

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, ‘By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.’

In what parts of your life do you simply accept that this is the way it is?

Today’s Dr. Seuss story prompts us to imagine life beyond the boundaries others have placed on us. And, beyond the boundaries we have placed on ourselves.

On Beyond Zebra was written in 1955. It’s actually the last book in our summer sermon series, *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*. Next week, we’ll wrap up with a final nod to Theodor Seuss Geisel and the ways in which this creative children’s writer still helps us to look at ourselves.

On Beyond Zebra is an alphabet book with a Dr. Seuss twist.

The A is for Ape. And the B is for Bear.
The C s for Camel. The H s for Hare.
The M is for Mouse. And the R is for Rat.
I know *all* the twenty-six letters like that . . .

So now I know everything *anyone* knows
From Beginning to end. From the start to the close.
Because Z is as far as the alphabet goes.

So far so good. But now the narrator, a slightly older child, continues:

You can stop, if you want, with the Z.
Because most people stop with the Z.

But not me!

In the places I go there are things that I see
That I *never* could spell if I stopped with the Z.
I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends.
My alphabet starts where *your* alphabet ends!

Do you see how we the readers are challenged to see beyond? Beyond the 26 letters that make up the English alphabet? Beyond whatever confines us or otherwise keeps us in comfortable, or sometimes uncomfortable, little boxes.

Just as we have 26 letters with which to spell our words, we also have certain mental categories into which we fit our experiences. We have, for example, a category for dogs. When we see dogs – schnauzers, Pyrenes, mutts – we fit them into this category. We have categories without any real instances, like when we imagine fairies, zombies and dragons but don't actually experience them. Sometimes though, we have events or experiences that are outside the categories we've set up. This is "beyond zebra."

A woman was driving in town with her teenage daughter. As they sat at a stoplight, they looked to the curb to the right of the car – and saw on the corner a mother hen and her chicks, just standing there. When the light changed, the hen jumped off the curb and walked across the street. And the chicks followed her. As they watched the moment unfold before them, the girl turned to her mother and said with some awe in her voice, "Mother ... this is not normal." And it wasn't; this was "beyond zebra" – an instance without a category.

Abram was challenged by God more than once to go on beyond zebra. He was pushed beyond his comfortable boundaries to travel 1000 miles to a different land and to make a new start.

I can't tell you how of the elders I visit have told me they're finished. They've served the church. They've done their time. Attended the meetings. Baked the cookies. Now they're done. Abram's story is a reminder to all of us that God will lead us beyond the boundaries we set for ourselves. There's still more life to go. And God has different ideas for us.

What is your response when God comes up behind you, just as the kids are transitioning to needing less of your time or as you're beginning to settle into retirement? Because, 'though you may try to ignore it, God is after you with her plans.

The apostle Paul writes that we can see in the mirror only dimly. There's truth here. Partly we can't see what's ahead. Partly we don't want to see what might conflict with our own understanding of how our live should go.

There is a story of a rich young man, a cloth merchant's son, near the end of the 12th century. He loved partying and riding on his fine horse. When he passed beggars on the street, he'd flip them a coin, mostly to show that he could.

One day as he was riding, he encountered a man disfigured by skin disease. Flipping him a coin, he kept riding. But this time, something "beyond zebra" compelled him to go back. He gave the man more gold and even embraced him. From that time on, he began to look at the least of these, as Jesus called them, differently. He worked at helping them, so much that eventually he and his

father parted ways. We don't have to Catholic to recognize that Francis in Assisi went beyond, way beyond, what was expected.

Millard Fuller made his first million in about 1960. He and a friend had formed a printing company while in college and made vast sums of money selling cookbooks. After college he went to law school. Things seemed good! But Millard's values had shifted as he earned all that money. His marriage was floundering. And his wife realized she needed some time away. But invited him to come to New York the following week.

When he joined her, they went to see a show on Broadway entitled, *It's Never Too Late*. After the show, they caught a taxi for a ride through Central Park. The driver told them, "Congratulations! You are the first ones to ride in my new cab." The two of them took all of this as a hopeful sign. They could create a new life. They took long walks, talked about what was wrong with their life together and how they really wanted to be. They realized that faith was something they'd left behind. And they committed to return to the faith that had been so important to them. They had to make serious changes but they chose to go beyond zebra.

Millard set his accountants to giving away his wealth. The couple moved to a community that would nurture their faith. They became involved in fixing up homes for people living in poverty, in 1964 beginning what is now Habitat for Humanity.

I hope you begin to see that going on beyond zebra is often (always) what God calls us to do. God sees a bigger picture.

Jean Vanier was a Canadian naval officer. Upon leaving the navy, he bought a home north of Paris, then invited Raphael and Philippe, two men with mental disabilities to live with him. When asked why he did it, he answered, "I think it is what Jesus wants me to do."

This was a new way of treating people with differing abilities. And it was found that when such folks were placed into or remained in family units, they could have fulfilling lives. Vanier's choice began *L'Arche*, an organization that now has communities in 30 countries. All of this because one person accepted a vision beyond what is normally expected in life.

Most people who go on, beyond zebra, will never be famous. They are important only in the lives they touch. God calls us to one seemingly small thing. We impact people's lives. The world changes. This is our call.

Several years ago, a group of students from backgrounds were discussing the question: "What are the minimal requirements for being Christian?" You can imagine all the rabbit holes they had to trace in order to come to an answer. And the conversation dragged on until at last one young woman rose and headed for the door. When asked where she was going, she replied, "I'm not in what's the least requirement for being a Christian. I came here trying to find out what's the most I can do for Jesus."

As families and individuals, and as a church, this is our call. Do we promote love and acceptance as Jesus did? Or do we let the world's barriers separate us from whomever the "others" might be? Are we satisfied with a getting-by kind of Christianity or do we accept God's call for an out-there, way-beyond-zebra, style of doing church and living in the world?

Some of you have been wondering about this MCCI thing. I'm learning along with you. But one thing I've learned is that if we choose to accept this resourcing, MCCI will equip us to live Beyond Zebra, out in those places we might not venture on our own, to other people with whom God resides. God is calling us.

Amen.