

canoes tradition and the spirit

SEPT 1
9:30AM

Sunday, September 1, 2024

“Canoes, Tradition, and the Spirit” | Mark 7:1-9 | Charlie Berthoud

Undaunted Courage is one of the best books I’ve read in a while. It’s a detailed and very readable account of the Lewis and Clark expedition—about which I previously knew very little. The group was known as the “Corps of Discovery.”

And discover they did—plants and animals previously unknown to white Europeans. On their long journey, they marveled at the beautiful terrain of what we now call the Great Plains. Now I want to spend a few weeks exploring the Dakotas and Montana!

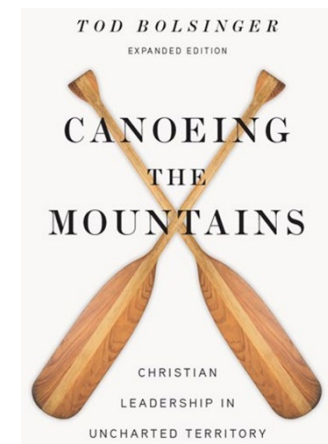
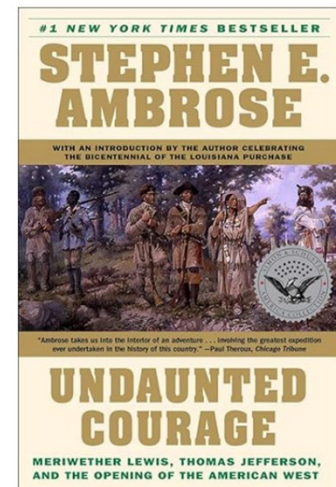
The purpose of the journey was to discover a route to the west coast. So they left St Louis, and paddled up the Missouri River, hoping to get near the headwaters and find a river going to the Pacific.

As they moved upstream, they sensed that the second half of their journey would be easier, paddling downstream, with the assumption that the western lands would be like the eastern lands.

However, instead of a river gently flowing to the ocean, they found the formidable Rocky Mountains.

This led to major changes in their plans.

I read the Lewis and Clark book because earlier this year, I read a book that many church friends recommended: *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*.



The author uses the Lewis and Clark expedition as a metaphor to help us in the 21st century. Just as Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery found themselves in new terrain for which they hadn't planned, we in the church are in new terrain, a new era, a new time.

The world has changed a great deal in the last 30 years. Just as Lewis and Clark's canoes were not helpful in the Rocky Mountains, the things that used to "work" in church don't necessarily work anymore.

So, the author makes a strong case that churches and Christians need to adapt and think in new ways about our faith and our church and our world.

When faced with the challenge of the Rocky Mountains, Lewis and Clark stayed focused on their mission—which was to get to the Pacific—but they were forced to change how the journey happened.

We need to stay focused on our mission—which is Learning God's Love and Living God's Love. And like Lewis and Clark, we might need to rethink how we take our journey.

The Session, the leaders of this church whose names are on the back of the bulletin, are reading and discussing *Canoeing the Mountains*, with the hope of inspiring us to think in new ways about Covenant and our community.

And we have several members of this church taking seminary classes, and four or five of them are in a class this fall called "Leading Thriving Churches" and the *Canoeing* book is on the syllabus.

I think it's a helpful book because too often, we're not good about thinking in new ways.

There's a story about a newly married couple preparing their first Thanksgiving dinner. The husband cut the turkey in half before cooking it. His wife asked why he cut it in half. He said "That's the way you're supposed to do it. My grandma always did it that way."

When grandma came for the meal a few hours later, they asked her why she had cut her turkeys in half. She laughed and said, "I cut it in half because I had a small oven."

Sometimes we just do things because “we’ve always done it that way,” and we don’t really think about it.

I love the Presbyterian Church, and I know and value friendship with countless Presbyterians. But we Presbyterians like our traditions, and we are notorious for being stuck in our habits.

Do you know how many Presbyterians it takes to change a light bulb? It takes ten. One to change the bulb and nine to talk about how good the old bulb was.

In our gospel reading today, the Pharisees (who sometimes sound like Presbyterians) didn’t like the new things that Jesus was doing. He was changing their traditions. But Jesus had strong words for them.

Jesus said, “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” -Mark 7:8

If we cling too tightly to our traditions and just go through the motions, we get stuck in a rut, and then we risk missing out.

Jesus calls us to follow him into new life, abundant life, a life of meaning and purpose where we are loving neighbors, leaving selfishness and foolishness behind, and working for the sake of God’s kingdom here on earth.

It’s important to remember our calling as part of the Reformed Church:

Church reformed always reforming, according to the word of God.

Our core identity is to be continually in the process of growth and change.

Next week we celebrate the 70th anniversary of this congregation. Thanks be to God! From what I’ve seen and heard in my eleven years, we here at Covenant do a pretty good job of being open to changes and new ideas.

Some of you longer time members remain Tom Arbogast, a charter member of this congregation. He died several years ago, and a couple years before that, I remember chatting with him in the beautiful narthex, just outside the sanctuary.

He was in one of the comfortable chairs, enjoying the morning light and the buzz of

activity. And he said to me, “You know Charlie, when the idea of spending all that money for this space came up, I was dead set against it, thinking it would be a total waste.” He paused and said, “Boy, was I wrong.”

I really appreciated him saying that as it reflects a willingness to learn and grow and see new things.

Please realize I’m not sharing this message because I have some big expensive idea that I want to make happen. I don’t. But I do sense that we can’t just keep doing the same things that we did decades ago.

I want to see us find a solid and faithful path into a new future.

As I’ve pondered the Canoeing book, I’ve wondered what might be the Rocky Mountain-type challenges of our day. I suppose there are many. One of them for sure is our increasing isolation and loneliness.

The trend of isolation and disconnection started many years ago and was noted by sociologist Robert Putnam in his year 2000 study called *Bowling Alone*, which documents the decline of social engagement, which has only gotten worse since then.

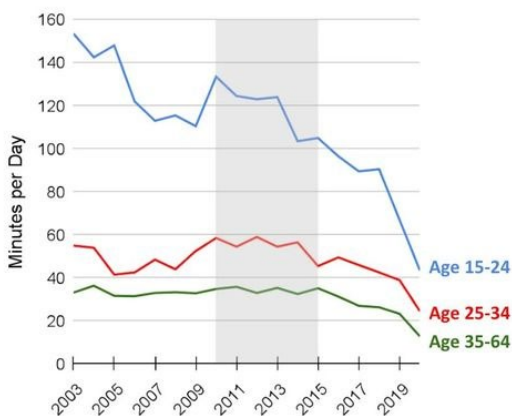
I wrote about this in our weekly CONNECTIONS email, sharing this graph which shows the rather drastic drop-in time spent with friends from 2003 until 2020, and then Covid hit, so I’m sure the next set of statistics will look worse.

A big part of this decline in time with friends is because of our connection with technology.

You might say we’ve gone from bowling alone to scrolling alone.

When handheld devices first became a thing, many of us parents were worried about the impact on our kids. We’re still worried, but now we parents are too often doing the things we scolded our kids for doing ten or 20 years ago.

Daily Avg Time with Friends (minutes)



SOURCE: Kannan & Veazie (2023) analyzing the American Time Use Study.

There are countless benefits to technology and I'm a big fan, but it is dangerous as it makes us more isolated and more divided.

We are sometimes more connected to our devices than we are to other people.

In response to this situation, Robert Putnam, the author of *Bowling Alone*, has a new documentary movie out, called "Join or Die."

I really want to see it, but its only showing in certain areas. So I've read about it, watched the previews, and listened to a podcast about it.

<https://www.joinordiefilm.com/>



One big idea is that isolation is bad for our health—our spiritual and social health for sure, but also our physical health.

In the video promo Putnam says:

“Your chances of dying in the next year are cut in half by joining one group.”

I don't know if that's a scientific fact or just hyperbole, but it got my attention about the importance of being active with other people.

Another point in this documentary is that our isolation has intensified our divisions and led to weakening of our democracy.

So, as we face this Rocky Mountain-like challenge of disconnection and isolation, we need to think of new ways to connect.

Back in the 20th century those connections happened more easily. We have to be more intentional about them now.

We have prioritized this idea of connection here at Covenant. Obviously, we connect

with God and each other in Sunday worship. And we have a variety of other ways to connect, as I mentioned in our weekly email and as you heard in the announcements at the beginning of worship. Coming up in September:

Potluck lunch on Wednesday
Big celebration next Sunday
Small groups starting

And your presence at events like these isn't just good for you. It's good for other people. We really are on this journey together. We need each other. You matter. We matter.

As we stand on the cusp of the 70th anniversary of Covenant Presbyterian Church, we can celebrate the past, but we can't repeat it. We're in new terrain now. The canoes won't work here, so to speak.

We have to stay open to new thinking, new ideas, especially in terms of connecting with God and connecting with each other.

Let's try for the spirit of Lewis and Clark, to be a 21st century Corps of Discovery and follow Jesus on the journey, seeking to

- love our neighbors, care for people who are hurting, listen to each other
- build the kingdom of God—a new reality of justice and righteousness,
- welcome the new life and share the good news of God's love

I want to close the sermon with a prayer today, a sung prayer, asking God's spirit to come and guide us this day and in this new terrain. Let us sing and pray together:

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me; mold me; fill me; use me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.