

God calls us and the milestones that God marks in our lives, often come in ways and at times that we least expect it. Dr. Seuss knows better than most of us that failure and disappointment happens to the very best of us. There *are* those times when your best isn't good enough. For every winner, there *are* dozens of losers, and chances are you're one of them and I am too. Oh yes. . . in addition to the great places you'll go . . . these are the places you'll go too, like it or not!

Friends, the blessings of God are never a matter of good or bad results. They're never a matter of the right time or wrong time. They are never a matter of winners and losers. The blessings of God come when we realize that God is our Rock and our hope, no matter where, no matter when, no matter who you are on the journey or life and faith! The theologian Leonard Sweet notes the church's role in all this when he writes, "The quality that should mark the Christian church is not goodness, but grace, not merit, but mercy, not moralism, but forgiveness, not the enshrinement of success, but the acceptance of failure. Let us all say Amen to that!

Now, having said all that, I invite you consider what may be a milestone at this particular moment on your journey. I heard that folks at Temple Beth Zion in Boston recently have been sharing with one another their "Joys and Oys"! I ask you, what is some big joy or accomplishment that you have experience recently? Or, what is a big "oy" or concern that you have had occasion to mark recently. It could be a graduation, or winning a contest at school, or joining this congregation today. It could be a big decision you've made about your career or your relationship, or a decision that's been made for you. It could be an anniversary of a wedding, a reunion, a diagnosis or even a marker of the time you've been in recovery. Just think for a moment about what has been a recent moment in your life when you have realized in your soul the that God is your Rock and your Hope. What is a time recently when you have needed to cling that foundational blessing, to that soulful knowledge that you are precious and beloved in God's sight and that God will never ever leave you alone.

There are some of the more traditional milestones about which we are already aware. We would like to name a few of you and invite you up to receive a blessing. At the same time, we realize we couldn't name all of our milestones, and in some cases wouldn't even want to do so in public. So, when those who we will name have come forward, we invite others of you who are marking milestones to come stand in line behind them, and to tell me or Mary, or Sarah what is that milestone. We will be honored to share with you a blessing and give you a gift. Friends, no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey and the journey of faith, you are welcome to come forward now.



"Milestones"
A homily by Rev. Daniel Smith
First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
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Have you ever seen those clichéd motivational posters hanging on office walls? They typically have a crystal-clear photo of some intimidating looking natural landscape, or of an athlete in the midst of some grueling, superhuman activity. The photo is framed in a black background with some motivational word underlined by a supposedly inspiring quip. In one example, there is a climber standing atop a snowcapped mountain. Ambition is the word, and the quip is "Aspire to climb as high as you can dream." On another poster might be a picture of a crew team underlined by "Success: Winning isn't everything, but wanting to win is." Talk about different strokes for different folks. Thankfully, I'm not alone in being entirely uninspired by these sugar coated ploys to increase employee self esteem and company profits. I came across a website awhile back called Despair.Com that sells a similar set of posters in an alternative vein. These decidedly demotivational posters draw upon the same photography and layout, but check out their words and sayings:

Achievement

You can do anything you set your mind to when you have vision, determination, and an endless supply of expendable labor.

Failure

When your best just isn't good enough!

Defeat

For every winner, there are dozens of losers. Odds are you're one of them!

Ambition

The journey of a thousand miles sometimes ends very, very badly

The National Geographic quality photo is of a salmon jumping, up stream, right into a bears mouth.

And then, under a gorgeous shot of a shooting star there's the word....

Wishes

When you wish upon a falling star, your dreams can come true. Unless it's really a meteorite hurtling to the Earth which will destroy all life. Then you're pretty much hosed no matter what you wish for. Unless it's death by meteor.

Friends, its the season of graduations, end of the year parties and poetry contests, a time given to lifting up the fruits of our of labors, endless supply or not. It's a time for measuring accomplishments, a time of looking back over a thousand miles and for looking ahead, if only into the belly of the next beast. For some, this time of year can be one of sifting through our ambitions and wishes and of discerning where God is calling us next on our journeys of life and faith. Milestones and journeys, the blessings of God, indeed. And where else but at church will you get the truth that not of all milestones and not every step on the journey will be what your want or what you expect.

Look at our selection of biblical exemplars: Sarah cracked up when she first she was going to have child. And then, when the news settled in, God make this poor pregnant set out on a journey? Could it be the original maternity leave? Nice. Take, poor Jacob, for example, sure he wrestled an angel of God and won but he earned himself a bum hip. Ask our own Mark Obrien what that milestone feels like. Then, we have Jesus' shining moment as a twelve year old in the temple, reading the Torah better than the rabbis. That's a good milestone but you've gotta wonder why we never hear another word about Jesus youth. Could it be that he was grounded by Mary and Joseph until he was 29? Journeys and milestones, the blessings of God! Indeed.

If you've been coming to First Church for awhile, you'll know that week after week, we say no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey or the journey of faith, you

are welcome here. We really mean that. Its not only because we welcome you but more importantly its because we believe in our hearts that God welcomes you, no matter where you are on your journey. This salutation allows us to honor deeply not only milestones of personal joy and successes. We would just as soon welcome and honor personal concerns and failures, call them our milestones of despair. We want to welcome and honor whatever those milestones are on each of our journeys that bring us to the very foundation of our faith from which we proclaim with whole hearts "God is our rock, and God is our hope!"

Kids, in case I'm losing you here, listen up. I first gave serious consideration to honoring of failures and disappointments thanks to the no wiser wisdom of a doctor friend of mine. You may have heard this wisdom yourselves. You may even know the good doctor himself. He writes.

Oh, the places you'll go! You'll be on your way up!

You'll be seeing great sights!

You'll join the high fliers who soar to high heights.

You won't lag behind, because you'll have the speed.

You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead.

Where you fly, you'll be best of the best.

Where 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, its true,

that Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you.

You can get all hung in a prickly perch.

And your gang will fly on. You'll be left in a LURCH.

You'll come down from the lurch with an unpleasant bump.

And the chances are, then that you'll be in a Slump.

And when you're in a slump, you're not

in for much fun. Un-slumping yourself is not easily done!

Our journeys and milestones, these blessings of God, in the lives of our spiritual ancestors and in our lives, don't just happen because we want them to happen or because we make them happen. God doesn't just bless us when we are the leaders or the high flyers. In fact, it may be that God will draw us down from those thrones of success and raise us up just when we've hit the slump. To believe otherwise is just bad theology – the kind that would "just, just, just" give God thanks for full bank accounts, full garages, for high SAT scores, and for healthy children. If only Jesus said blessed are rich and the healthy, these false gospels of prosperity might have some traction, but we know Jesus did not say things. We know that the blessings of God can be more complicated, that the journeys to which