

*In Medias Res: What It Means to Begin*

Rev. Bruce Taylor

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Where to begin a story? It's a choice the writer makes. He or she may choose to put you, the reader, in the middle of things: *in medias res*. Without much explanation, you're taken right into the action. Some parts of the back-story will be revealed, some not. Some questions will be answered, some left open for you to ponder.

You may have read or watched the *Outlander* series, for example. It begins with Claire, the main character, falling through some ancient standing stones, and waking up two centuries in the past, in the middle of a pitched battle between English soldiers and Scottish rebels.

*In Medias Res*: it's not just for fiction. It's how we live our lives. We are born into this world, and eventually we leave it, in the middle of things. In between we face our challenges, seize our opportunities, live through countless beginnings.

For an example close to home, here I am – materializing in front of you, in the middle of a church year. Who are these folks? Who am I? There's a time of orientation as I become part of your story and you become part of mine. We're in the story now together, *in Medias Res*.

What does it take to begin, in the middle of things? The most obvious answer would be, to pay attention to what's happening here and now: become aware of all the forces at play; get ready for what may come next.

This past summer, my wife Loretta and I went white-water rafting. It was exhilarating to plunge into the cold, churning water and to witness all the beauty we passed by: much of it we'd never have seen, except from the water. At the same time, we had to watch the rocks, the currents, the shape of the shoreline up ahead. Forget about the past, and forget about the future: there wasn't any question about where we were going. That was determined by the mechanics of water and gravity. Our path was the riverbed, which was shaped and cut long before we entered it.

Life with a congregation is a different kind of journey. The past and the future both matter. They influence the present, as memories and dreams intermingle. The pace is slower. There's time to appreciate music, words, ideas, the people around you, their

concerns and their dreams. The path is voluntary. You may be pushed and pulled by currents around you. But every step you take is a choice you make, consciously or not.

As a congregation you've chosen to walk together, on a path of your own making. Although it follows the general contours of a free-faith tradition, the path is very much your own. It's the path of covenant. As church members you are here to support one another on the path, bringing out the best that's in each one of you.

It's a pilgrim's path: a journey inwards, as well as through time. By whatever name you call it, you are walking towards the Holy, which is more a direction than a fixed destination.

My brother-in-law, Norm, walked the famous pilgrimage route, known as *el Camino de Santiago*, that crosses northern Spain. The route ends at a great cathedral, Santiago de Compostela. But that destination is only a milestone in a journey that goes on.

What matters most is what happens to the pilgrims through all their walking: getting up every day, dealing with the demands of the weather and their own aching feet, finding food and shelter, Helping fellow travelers who may be sick, or injured. Times of quiet reflection, moments of insight, unexpected friendships.

El Camino is a physical journey, and the destination is a physical place, but the moment of ending is really a beginning. Because through all that walking the pilgrim has changed, become more resilient inside, more capable of love.

As a congregation, you're on a walk like this, together. I'm honored to join with you for this leg of your journey.

Certainly much of the time we'll be tending to the here and now: attending to changing circumstances; seeing to the health and well-being of our companions; finding ways to make the journey better for each one of us. Making sure we don't alienate or exclude those who would join with us, even *in medias res*, in the middle of things.

This isn't a time to walk faster. In fact, we will need to slow down, even take a side trip now and then: sit by a quiet pool of water, or rest on a sunny rock, and come to our senses. For many people, this is what church is about.

Other times, we will want to get off the familiar path, above the trees, to a higher vantage point. From there, we can see all at once what we could only see in pieces down below. We can see where we've been, where we're headed, and a breathtaking glimpse of what's possible.

Over the next year and a half, I will help you in this process of discernment you've already begun, building on a solid base of reflection, and deep listening.

Like many churches, you want to grow in numbers, and achieve financial stability, so you will be here for generations to come. The overarching question is: for what? Or more precisely, for whom? Because from this fundamental sense of purpose, everything else can flow: the vision you aspire to, what you hope to accomplish for yourselves and the community around you, and specific plans to make that happen.

Over the coming months we will set aside times to meet in the Parish Hall for structured dialogue, based on a method called *World Café*. I hope that as many of you as possible will participate, and that a few of you will help plan and facilitate the conversations.

I will invite you to keep a distinction in mind, between the external stuff – the activities, the milestones, the artifacts – and the inner work. For example, it will be useful to craft a mission statement. But this statement needs to be an outward reflection of what you've discerned together: Your conscious, shared sense of purpose; a knowledge of the gifts you have to offer, and the needs of the community. A useful mission statement depends on that shared understanding which comes from the inner work.

Like the pilgrim who walks every day, we will be developing some spiritual muscles: Virtues such as patience, perseverance and good humor; a holy curiosity that wins out over judging; and the habit of saying, what can we learn from this?

To close this sermon, I would like to leave you with a mental picture: the view from Mt. Pisgah in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. I've put a photograph on your order of service.

Mt. Pisgah is named after the mountain upon which Moses stood to get a glimpse of the Promised Land. Our Pisgah lives up to its name. It offers an endless vista towards the north into Quebec, and the high country to the west, the Green Mountains, and a glimpse of Lake Champlain.

But near view is no less inspiring. You're on a high cliff overlooking Lake Willoughby, 1200 feet below, a fjord-like sea hemmed in by mountains. The lake appears seems different up here, than it does at eye level. Things seem to move so slowly, on the surface, and their traces persist. It's as if you get to watch time happening.

When you paddle this lake, it can be a struggle to keep your boat steady through the whitecaps, and move ahead against a stiff breeze. But on these high cliffs, looking down on the lake, everything is still. Almost.

A kayak is visible by its wake – a long, graceful “V” like the migrating of geese. An impudent speedboat, pounding across the waves, leaves a graceful wake in the shape of a serpent – or the stroke of a calligrapher’s brush. These patterns persist grow and evolve, ever so slowly. You can see the past, present and future as a single gesture.

This is my hope: that I can help you to see things whole. The life of this congregation is like the stroke of a calligrapher’s brush, and you are the artists. May the arc be graceful and long. May you find the freedom and the courage to extend it, or veer off in unexpected direction, inspired by the spirit of love that dwells at the heart of life, and the heart of this fellowship.

So may it be.

