

The First Year

John Ledyard went a long ways in life without ever arriving. He was born in Groton, Connecticut, in 1751 and went to school there in the meetinghouse of the Congregational Church. When he was ten, his father, a sailor, died of malaria, and that may have fixed in his mind a desire to see as much of the world as possible, for life could be brief.

So in his first year at Dartmouth, he did something that the college still talks about. He dropped out. With the help of a few friends, Ledyard felled a tree and dug out a canoe. He loaded his bark with a few provisions, then set off down the wilds of the Connecticut River, even though it was swollen with the floods of springtime.

His rough canoe must have been unsteady as he reached the first rapids. Navigating without a map, reading the current for signs of trouble, he paddled for almost a week – miraculously he escaped the fifty-foot Bellows Falls, and finally emerged from the river near his home in a bearskin cloak, looking less like a university student than a creature of the wild. He had just come down the longest river in New England. Back at Dartmouth, where he would never return, he was a hero.

And so his first year of studies turned into the first year of his journeys. He would be Ledyard the Traveler, and would go farther than any other man of his time..

In 1776 he joined Captain Cook for a four-year voyage round the world. Ledyard was the first American citizen to set foot on the west coast; the first to see Alaska and Hawaii; he helped open up Pacific markets to American trade; even brought back a tattoo from Tahiti. His best-selling memoir of those travels was the first American book to receive a copyright.

But he was just getting started. In Paris, he became friends with Thomas Jefferson, who encouraged him to pursue a truly impossible dream. Ledyard wanted to walk across Russia, across the Bering Strait, through Alaska, south and east through the North American continent all the way to Virginia. In other words, he wanted to walk around the world.

Good nature would be his passport. As he declared, “For no State’s, no Monarch’s Minister am I, but travel under the common flag of humanity, commissioned by myself to serve the world at large.”

Starting out in December 1786 from Hamburg, he took with him only an axe, two dogs, and a peace pipe, and trusted in strangers for his meals. Along the way, as biographer puts it, “he supped with cannibals and kings.”

Ledyard covered an amazing distance, from Copenhagen across Scandinavia to St. Petersburg and Moscow, all the way across the Russian Empire into eastern Siberia, where, under orders from Catherine the Great, he was arrested for traveling without a passport. Moreover, she recognized that this American’s adventures threatened Russia’s monopoly on the fur trade.

Deported to Poland, he made his way back to London, where he conceived a new adventure – this time he would explore Africa from the Red Sea to the Atlantic. Apparently none of his great journeys was ever to reach its destination. He died in Cairo and was buried in an unmarked grave.

John Ledyard lived on in the imagination of his friends. He had set grand itineraries and finished almost none of them, but he covered more miles than any other American of his time. Fifteen years after his death, Ledyard's dream of walking the continent inspired Thomas Jefferson to send out Lewis and Clark.

In some ways, the world in which we live and work is a world this dreamer helped to create.

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Every major biblical character travels. Think about it. No one wins God's favor by staying in place.

Consider Abram and Sarai in the first year of their call. They hadn't yet become Abraham and Sarah – that is, they hadn't yet become themselves; just the same, when they left Ur, whose very name now means beginnings, they weren't young anymore. Abram was already seventy-five. But that first year, when they faithfully answer God's call, made possible all of history for three world religions.

Consider the first year for Saul after his conversion on the Damascus Road. He hadn't yet become Paul, and wasn't quite sure where to go, so he sojourned in Arabia, then made peace with those he once meant to persecute in Damascus. In doing so, he faithfully followed where God was taking him, and made possible our being here today.

Best of all, let's consider the first year for the early church in Jerusalem. It could have turned out so differently. These followers of Jesus didn't have Jesus anymore; they could have returned to their former ways of life. They could have been resistant to change, suspicious of one another, alive to theological differences – but they weren't. Against all the odds, they lived out the ways of Jesus:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the Temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2: 42-47

In some ways, the early church went farther in its first year than it would ever go again, establishing a caring, classless, close-knit family. In other important ways, it was just a beginning.

Today we celebrate a church with tremendous possibilities, that has more going for it than at any other time in Christian history. I really mean that. We have learned so many things the hard way, and can offer our neighbors a message of hope that is free of self-righteousness, that is all about the grace and goodness of God. We have resources our ancestors never dreamed of. We face needs that call us urgently. The church today can embark on its very best years.

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You welcome a very modest traveler today. My recent explorations have been limited to red leaves and orange highway barrels. Really, this Sunday is not so much about my journeys as about ours.

We are embarking on a long, wild, wonderful discovery.

But the first stages won't be too wild. In the first year, there won't be a lot of dramatic changes. Instead this relatively new staff will do a lot of listening and learning. Once we get to know each other better, we'll all know better how to manage the inevitable changes and embrace them enthusiastically.

How to build on this church's commitment to Christian outreach – locally, nationally, internationally. How to provide terrific adult education for our sakes and the sakes of the kids watching us. How to call upon the talents of our youth; how to bring everyone into ministry.

There will be changes – but not too many big ones in the first year. If some things seem like big deals to you, trust me, those aren't the big ones. As a pastor, I can do small things only. The most important matters are really up to you – welcoming new friends, making disciples, living generously.

To be sure, in our best efforts and biggest prayers, we may see few things fully realized. John Ledyard, “the man who dreamed of walking the world,” went quite a ways without ever getting somewhere – and yet look at the ways he opened up. That's how it is in the church. We will not see everything come to fruition, but we can make extraordinary progress on this journey of faith, personally and all together.

As one of the UCC's greatest theologians famously observed:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes completely sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.

Here's what I'd like us to do in our time: let's make sure that this church is known as truly progressive, biblically literate, and generous; a place where we follow the way of Jesus – even if it runs counter to the prevailing ways.

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One of my colleagues observes that over the years, a pastor gets introduced in different ways. First members may say, "This is the new pastor." Then, "This is our pastor." Then, "This is my pastor." And finally, "This is my friend."

Earlier this week, as a latter-day John Ledyard, I ventured out into the wilds of Darien and made a wrong turn. Already lost, I just got lost and lost as I tried to find my way back to Brookside.

Really, I should have consulted the map, but instead I steered my wheezy car down a leafy dead-end lane. The car was still caked with dirt from the thousand-mile journey east, with a dirty blanket in the back seat for the dog. I mean, it must have looked suspicious. Two women out for a walk paused as I came to a stop.

Vicky Nolan said, "That's my pastor!" and dashed around the driver's side to give me a big hug.

Hey, listen to that, and this is only the first year, the first *week!*

Think of the possibilities if we can build the kind of community where *all who believe are together...distributing our proceeds as any have need...day by day spending much time together in the temple, breaking bread at home and eating our food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.*

Who knows where we might go? We have so many things to discover together.

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