



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“Go Forward, Trusting God”

The Rev. Lawrence W. Farris

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The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Genesis 12.1-9, selections from Hebrews 11 and 12

It was awful when I moved to Atlanta from South Bend in 1978. I had torn myself away from friends with whom I had shared my life to go to a place where I did not know a soul. I left a job I had loved for a new job. The children were traumatized most of the first year. Anna Grace had trouble in school while Benjamin, who was only four, lay on the floor staring at the ceiling. Even the cat refused to use the litter box. I knew that all the decisions I had made around the move were right. Still I grieved, and I was full of guilt for my failure to live up to the ideals of security I felt I owed my children.

My experience wasn't unique. Moves are part of the fabric of modern life. Whether we work for corporations, follow spouses, teach, or pastor churches, an enormous number of us find ourselves moving, sometimes frequently. There is a lot of suffering caused by the losses that go with moves, wanted as well as unwanted. Moving away from old friends, losing our place in a community, leaving a beloved home – all are hard. Starting up again in a new place can be even harder.

So writes Roberta Bondi, retired professor of church history, in a recent article in the journal *Weavings*. It strikes me that her words may be echoes of what moved in Abram and Sarai's hearts as they went on this quintessential and paradigmatic journey of faith described in our lesson for this day. Like Dr. Bondi, Abram and Sarai traveled forth with some extended family members and personal possessions and, if not pets, livestock. Always still the reality of moving is daunting. Just look at what God names that Abram and company are giving up. Leave your country, says God. We have only to travel abroad to discover how profoundly does our nationality shape our identity in more ways that we can count. Leave your kindred, says God. In that culture where folks lived as clans and tribes, this is to sacrifice almost any sense of belonging, of being known and valued, of having a place in a community. Leave your father's house, says God. In a culture where folks were most often identified by who their parents were and where whatever wealth there might be was most often inherited, this is to mark oneself a stranger, an outsider, with limited prospects.

And all this is to be left behind for a promise from God. Oh, it's a good promise all right – land and many descendants and to become a blessing to all the families of the earth. But still. I believe it is novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner who whimsically wonders how many people God had to

approach with this amazing offer before Abram signed on. Talk about faith. Well, there it is. And this is why Abram is so prominent not only in Judaism, but in Christianity and Islam as well. Abram and Sarai are the very paradigm of what it is to live by faith.

It is by faith, by trusting and obeying God – for that is what biblical faith is – that Abram and Sarai set out, not quite knowing where they were going, certainly, and – like all of us in spite of our proclivity for certitude – not knowing what lay ahead of them nor what the future held for them. And yet they went forward, strangers in strange lands where they will be outsiders at best, seen as enemies at worst. And yet they went forward, not knowing if the God who had called Abram to this journey only lived back home or would ever speak again. And yet they went forward, not knowing if they'd ever see the folks they left behind, more than likely not.

And look what happened. Abram's caravan comes to a sacred place with an ancient oak tree near Shechem, and finds God there. And so he builds an altar to mark the place. And then on he goes to Bethel, and again builds an altar to the God whom he again discovered was with him. What Abram is experiencing is what Dr. Bondi and all of us who have moved learn again and again, that wherever we go, we discover that God and the people of God are already there. And at this time of year especially, this is our congregation's calling, to let the newcomers among us, who come hoping to find God and God's people in this new-to-them-community called Ann Arbor, that God is here, in this place, that we are God's people, and they are welcome here.

Our churchwide theme for this year is "Go forward, trusting God." It is really nothing more and nothing less than a call to live by faith. Over the next twelve months, there will be many changes in our life together. Some we can anticipate. We will soon call and install an associate pastor for pastoral care and congregational life. As well, I expect to conclude my interim ministry with you and a new pastor will be called. Our three fine resident ministers – Jenny, Matthew and Sarah - whom we have come to love and depend upon, will conclude their service with us and go on to bless other congregations with their many gifts. We will then welcome a new class of resident ministers. It is my hope and prayer that we will welcome many new members. Those are changes we can count on. And there will be other changes we cannot foresee - some we will experience as challenges or losses, some we will meet as utterly unforeseen blessings of the sort our God loves to surprise us with. And all of this we can embrace, because we live by faith. Indeed, we can courageously go forward, trusting God as people of faith have done, and are doing, in every time and place.

Let me say a few things about this faith of ours. First, as Jenny reminded us in a sermon last month, our faith is founded upon God's faithfulness to us. Amidst all the changes wrought by place and time and circumstance, God is omnipresent and ever faithful. As Sarah said in staff Bible study this week, 'When I moved to Los Angeles, God was there. When I moved to New York City, God was there. When I came to Ann Arbor, God was here.' And it was Matthew who gave us the words for our theme for this year out of his life experience of journeying with God. Just so. God is faithful to us.

But more than this, God has faith in us, faith that we will not forget who we are and whose we are. Yes, lots of identity bestowers change when we move, but always we remain the children of God,

even if we are far parted from earthly parents as Abram and Sarai were and from all the other markers of who we are. Always the God who is with us, Emmanuel as we term Jesus at Christmas time, is believing that we will continue the work of building God's kingdom. There's work to be done on that task always and everywhere, even in the program year stretching out before us here at First Pres. God has faith that each of us will find a way to use our gifts to serve God's kingdom through the work of this congregation.

"Faith," says the writer of Hebrews, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith is the assurance that God will accomplish that for which we hope and long – peace and social justice and compassion and blessing for all. Faith is the conviction that reality is not just accessible to the eyes or other senses, but to a knowing of the heart that may be trusted.

As I have shared with you previously, Richard Rohr, the founder of the Center for Contemplation and Action, has observed that it is painfully strange to him that in our time faith for too many people has come to mean its very opposite - certitude. So many believers today seem to think faith means having an explanation for everything, an answer for everything, closure, resolution, utter clarity. My beloved in Christ, that's simply not biblical. Abram and Sarai, the very paragons of what it is to live by faith, had none of those. What they had was a promise and presence. And so do we. And it is enough to go forward on.

By faith, Abram and Sarai set out. By faith, little David went to meet the giant. By faith, Jesus turned his face to Jerusalem and the cross that awaited him there. By faith Paul went all over the Mediterranean basin preaching Christ. By faith, Ann Arbor Presbyterians, in the very depths of the Great Depression which dwarfs our present recession, laid the cornerstone for this lovely sanctuary we call home. By faith, we will go forward in the coming year. It's what we do.

Faith is no insurance policy against suffering. Faith has room in it for doubts as they often give birth to the very questions that will help us mature in faith. Faith means to live with expectancy for what may yet be rather than rehashing what has always been. It is a wonderful way to live.

I'm not just preaching to the choir today although I think many of you know whereof I speak. I'm preaching to myself as I often do. I believe it was poet and priest John Donne who commented that he preached to himself for eighteen years and let his congregation overhear. My tenure here will be closer to eighteen months, but I share the sentiment. Several of you have thoughtfully inquired as to what Pat and I will do when my work here concludes. And I can only answer, I really don't know. We will go forward, trusting God. That's what I've endeavored to do for the last eleven years since a whopper of a midlife crisis at age fifty. Those eleven years haven't always been easy, but there have certainly been wonderful moments as we've sought to be open to the Spirit's leading. We have been deepened in faith. We've found our God in all sorts of interesting people, opportunities, and places, even here in this church and community that was home to us so many years ago, to which we never thought we'd return.

And so each evening after supper, Pat and I say the prayer I shared with you in a recent pastoral letter.

Eternal God,
You call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
By paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with courage,
Not knowing where we go,
But only that your hand is leading us
And your love supporting us;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen +

My beloved in Christ, a year of newness and wonder and mystery opens before us. Let us go forward, trusting God.

Amen +

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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