

Message: The Journey Ahead
Delivered at First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 10, 2016

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-4a, 9; Psalm 121; Gospel of Luke 11:1-4, 9-10

This is a poignant moment in the life of First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia. We stand at the beginning of a time of transition, a time of change, a time of journey. Even though you didn't choose this time, it has come, because all pastors and congregations have closings in ministries as well as beginnings.

I appreciate the opportunity to be with you which is part of a tradition among General Presbyters in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to preach following the departure of a pastor. In God's good humor, 22 years ago, I sat in this's place, as a member of this congregation, when a previous pastor, Charley Hasty, retired and a former General Presbyter, my mentor Charlie Cook, preached for such a time as this (Book of Esther).

The sermon text is the story of God's call to Abram which is the beginning journey in our whole faith narrative and tradition. The other OT reading, the Call to Worship, reminds us of God's continuing promise to protect and provide in all our journeys, to keep us in our going out and our coming in.

God's call has been heard again in the life of God's faithful people: Walter Glenn and Ginny Doak left here to embark on a further journey; and you too have been called on a journey to a place (not geographic, but spiritual) that God will show you. And being Presbyterians, we trust all this is within God's providential oversight and care – part of God's plan and purpose for your life, individually, and as a community of faith.

God called Abram, and God is calling you to leave the familiar. That word has the same root as family, "kindred." In the days of Abram, all one knew was family; all one had was family. It was the source of a person's identity and a person's security. God said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house." Leave everything and go out into the unknown, the **unfamiliar**. I'm sure Abram was afraid, unsure, and anxious!

But he was a man of faith: he trusted the One who called him to go into this uncertain future, toward the wilderness. Verse 9 reads, "...Abram journeyed by stages toward the Negev." Negev literally is "dry place" or "wilderness." Do you have a sense you're entering...a wilderness? When people of faith follow the call of God, it is not a familiar, comfortable, or safe and certain path. The call is to "die to self" as Jesus told his disciples to take up our cross and to follow him.

All change includes loss, and loss is a "small death" which means grief. Robyn McDonald talked 2 weeks ago about stages of grief. It's natural with a change in pastoral leadership there will be grief. For many of you it is the separation from a long-time relationship with a beloved pastor, preacher, and friend. For others, grief may come in that what you planned is now changed. Matt Bishop acknowledged last week that there will be some unresolved issues and conflict. You know that wherever 2 Presbyterians are present there are at least 3 opinions. And there will be lots to do, lots of decisions to be made, and more change! Being the church is not always easy!

"So Abram went as the Lord had told him." The faith of Abraham (you can read in Genesis 17 about the change of his name) is the faith that believes God's promises: "a land that I will show you...I will bless you...and you shall be a blessing...in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Abram went. He was obedient. He followed the call to break with the past, to leave the land and his kindred.

This same call and promise of blessing is here for us as well. We will be shown the way; and we will be blessed to be a blessing as we journey together. Knowing it will not be the same as before, for we are being called to something new. We will go in faith, in obedience, seeking God's will.

As Stephen Covington shared earlier this morning, trust the process which has been tried and tested for generations of Presbyterians: and Northeast Georgia Presbytery partners with you along the journey ahead. We have already begun the first stage of the journey: to find an Interim Pastor. Three weeks ago Diane Adams described your Session-appointed Interim Pastor Search Committee and its process. They are working with several candidates, and interviews are being scheduled.

I trust in a very short time the Session will hire an interim pastor who, with your Session, will lead you through the further stages of the journey: evaluating your mission and ministry and then searching for new pastoral leadership. Interim

pastors are trained, experienced, and specialize in helping and leading congregations in transition, a time such as this!

Once your Interim unpacks his/her boxes and you meet and begin to get to know one another, the middle stage of the journey begins: it is a time for reflection and evaluation by engaging in a congregational mission study which prepares you for your active search.

Just as Abram took time to prepare, so will you. As he prayerfully made plans, so will you. He couldn't go on his journey and take the land, his father's house and all his belongings. Abram had to decide what to take; and he had to let go of unnecessary things. So you will take time, a few months perhaps, to decide what to keep and what to let go of. The congregational mission study is the vehicle by which you make these decisions, as you prepare for the rest of the journey.

Let me share these wise words: "Few moments in the life of the local church are as important as those during which pastoral change occurs. These are moments for the congregation to pause, evaluate, and redirect itself, its life, and its ministry. What happens in the period between the exit of one pastor and the entrance of another, determines, in large part, the degree of stability, happiness, and progress of a congregation for many years to come." (Maumee Valley Presbytery)

During this middle stage, examine who you are, what you do, and who God is calling you to be. As you evaluate your programs and your worship, as you examine your traditions, and as you consider your habits, norms and customs, ask yourselves...Does this...still hold meaning for the future? Is it necessary to continue in the same way? Or... Is this holding us back? Should we try something new? Self-study is important to seeking God's will for the future.

When the Session and the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry (COM) approve the congregation's mission study, the final stage in the journey is to search for your next called and installed pastor. In our decent and orderly way, the congregation elects a PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE, a P-N-C, which is a committee of the congregation. It is not a sessional committee. It reports to you. The PNC will rely on your congregational study when they prepare the crucial document called a Ministry Information Form (MIF), which is their first task. You all did this before as part of God's call to Carol to be your Associate Pastor.

Along this final stage, your PNC will have resources available to help them from the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry and General Presbyter and from the

denomination. For those who don't know, Presbyterian pastors (Teaching Elders, Ministers of Word and Sacrament) are not members of a local church but rather have membership in presbyteries. But since the pastor will be your pastor, the PNC is primary and most important in the search; and because he or she will be a member of Northeast Georgia Presbytery, **the Presbytery** is involved as well.

At the end of the journey your PNC will reveal the identity of who they have discerned God is calling to be the next pastor of First Presbyterian Church. And the congregation **must vote to call** the PNC's candidate. But remember that you elect a PNC to search for that person, and much of their work must be held in complete confidence. Everyone must respect and ensure confidentiality as they meet, pray, examine and interview candidates. The PNC will need your trust, support and prayers. Remember the gospel lesson, Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given; search and you shall find" (Luke 11:9).

When God said, "Go...to the land I will show you," God's promise to Abram was a future promise. Just as God doesn't tell Abram where the land is, we don't know the identity of the person yet. God didn't give him a device with GPS and an address, God led Abram to the land. And God will lead us!

God's Global Positioning System is prayer. Your journey to find the person God is calling is the way of prayer of a faithful people. For people of faith such a time as this is an opportunity to follow with the faith of Abraham. Listen to the word written in the Letter to the Hebrews 11:8, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going." **So use God's GPS: pray for the Holy Spirit to guide** the PNC and the presbytery to the person God has chosen to be your pastor; for by faith, Abraham followed God's call and God's promises came true (Hebrews 11)!

Moreover, God went with Abraham and sustained and provided for him, his descendants, and all who are blessed through him, including our generation and those who will follow. This is a promise of our faith: ***know God's presence with you during the entire journey!*** Be assured and confident God watches over you and is your keeper: "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore!" (Psalm 121)

During your journey, guided by the wisdom of your elders and your interim pastor, in partnership with Northeast Georgia Presbytery, remain faithful as members to support this church in its ongoing mission and ministry, generation to generation,

as we will hear in a minute from Kim about the Youth Mission to Philadelphia.
And I will pray for you that each stage of the journey ahead will glorify God!
IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT,
AMEN.

