

What Next??!

A sermon by Joe Hoffman 2nd Sunday in Lent and Annual Meeting Sunday February 17, 2008

Abram and Sarai stood at the end of their lives and looked out into nothing. There seem to be no future. They were old, she was barren. There were no kids to spend time with. No grandkids to play with. They faced a future in which their family would have no part. Their deaths would be the end of their family's time on earth.

Have you ever been in such a place? Where there was nothing new coming on the horizon. Where there was no hope that you could muster up within. A time when you came to the ending without knowing if or what the new beginning would be?

Into such a time came God. Calling forth from the edge a new beginning. From despair, hope. From death, life. From impossibility, new possibility.

As we listened to this text last Wednesday night in our first Lenten dinner, we heard in the text words like Go, go from ... home, kindred, country ... go, and I will bless you, and through you all families of earth shall bless themselves. God said go.

The new beginning requires only a word from God. God the promise maker. God the giver. God the lover. But a promise, a gift, needs someone who will receive it. That was the role of Abram and Sarai. To receive the promise. To dare to live the promise. Nothing else is required. This is God's thing.

What it takes from Abram and Sarai is faith. They do not bargain or even hesitate. They agree to take on the daring, dangerous journey from all that is known and familiar to go to a place that is not yet even named. They trust the promise maker to also be a promise keeper.

About 15 years ago a group of folk from this congregation stood at what looked to be the ending of a congregation's life. It was suggested they close and lock the doors. The vibrancy of the congregation had faded, most in the congregation were on the older end of life, there seemed to be little hope that anything new would come. But some of you heard a Word calling forth. You heard an invitation, a promise, to a new journey. To a new time. And you had the faith to say yes.

Since that time, the church has found new life. We have grown and been blessed with an abundance of children. We have found a voice in this community. We have found a place at the table to do justice work and to care for the members of this local community. We have become Open and Affirming, stating that we will do our best to be a community where all people are welcomed, loved, and invited into the full life and ministry of this church. We have discerned a vision that calls us to nurture the questions and to be

passionate and compassionate in our living. We have gone from our old beloved home on Merrimon Avenue to end up at a place we didn't know we would be – but what a wonderful place it is here on Oak Street – in this building built by the faith of our Disciples of Christ relatives. And as of a couple weeks ago, we have let go of the place we thought we would go – Piney Mountain. While it had been originally the source of hope and anticipation, a place where we dreamed to be, it became the source of worry, fear, and frustration.

From the people of our congregation have come several who felt the call to ministry – and we have walked with them through the process of ordination. I haven't officially checked the records, but I dare say we have ordained more in the past 10 years than most churches do in 50 years. And I believe we have ordained more in the past 10 years than any other church in our conference. And of course, we have attracted a lot of other roaming ordained folk who were looking for a new home.

Those are only a few highlights from our life together. But it all started when some of you heard the Word that says – there is still more life to be lived in us. God has more to do through us. We will dare to trust that promise. It was your faith that made all of this possible. It was your daring spirit that allowed this life to come for all the rest of us.

We have a lot to celebrate! A lot to give thanks for.

There of course have been the hard times too. The struggles. The comings and goings of people who only shared the journey with us for a short while. There have been disagreements and confusion about what the calling was. I do not want us to forget that part. It is important that we remember that the way is never without conflict, never without different ideas and opinions. Discerning God's way always requires all of our best thinking, our best imagining, our best giving and forgiving.

For a little over two years we have been in this new home. We have been waiting for the land to sale. We have been resting from our years of labor. We have been transforming with new members joining and new ministry dreams. And now, with the spirited and generous giving this past fall of our estimates of giving – will you celebrate with me that I did not have to stand up one time and ask you to dig deeper, to give more – you gave in a spirit of joy and we have promised to give enough that we now are in the process of hiring new staff and living into our vision for ministry more fully. We have a lot to celebrate!

Over the past couple of years we have been re-writing our constitution and by laws. We will vote on them today, and even though the document is not perfect, (and of course, it never will be), it has been through many hours of conversation and preparation to bring it to this point today. I hope we can approve it enthusiastically, even though I know there is more editing that will need to be done in the coming year. And we have written a safe church policy and a facilities policy. All that fun stuff that we all were so eager to do!! But really, it is important and we have done it well. We have a lot to celebrate.

And so, we stand at the end of that journey. We are grateful and we are tired. And we wonder, what next? Is there another call for us to receive? Is there another word from God to carry us yet again to places and situations and ministries we have not yet begun to imagine. Is there more life for us? And what does that look like?

I believe that we are already living into that new day. I see it all around us. In this new location, I sense we have a call to be what I call a city or a public church. To do more of what we have already been doing in terms of engaging the public conversation about the well being of all the people in Asheville and Buncombe County. And to do so in a variety of creative and life giving ways.

I see it happening already with the arts. With music and dance and the visual arts. We have in the past year dedicated a new organ in the presence of the whole community. We have started an art gallery in the most visible part of the church – so that the larger community can also participate. And Gary and the Arts Committee has agreed to partner this summer with the Asheville Community Theater to hold some of the children's summer theater camps here in our building.

We have some great Christian Education classes for all ages in this church. With some great teachers. I am so appreciative of the time and energy that our teachers give to the learning process. But we have a long way yet to go in the Church to find new ways to teach and live our story. I found it interesting a few weeks ago to hear on National Public Radio that Mike Huckabee, who is still running to be the Republican presidential candidate, is using language that people don't understand. For example, he talked in one speech about the several small stones having more power than a mighty warrior wearing full body armor. And people didn't get it. They assumed he was talking about the occupation in Iraq. But if you know the story, you know he was referring to David and Goliath. What amazed me is that his audience was conservative, Evangelical Christians who keep calling us back to the Bible – but they didn't know their own story.

I want us to know our story. To engage it in creative ways that are interesting, fun, engaging, life changing. It is our story and our experiences that help us live the promise of God to us in a new day.

We are doing some important justice work. Work that tries to connect our story to the realities of our lives. With our work for equality for all people. With our efforts to bring forth a living wage for those who build our expensive community structures and teach in our schools and work in our community mental health services. Who clean our buildings and fix our cars. Who work in our grocery stores.

And we are mindful of immigration issues and the struggle for people who have come here to find a living, and who do work that we want them to do – but at the same time we have a system where they live in fear, are mistreated in so many ways, and have none of the protections of our law to keep them safe.

I am proud of what we are doing. Proud of the spirit in us that wants to do more. We are working to make our building accessible – and also to make it as green as we can. We have members and friends who cannot currently get into our building – and thus can not join us in our worship, in our programs, in our learning, in our being together. It will take creativity, and it will take money to do what we need to do. Some of us may be ready to just relax now. To just be here. But I invite us to listen for our calling. What next for us? Can we find the energy and the resources to do what we still need to do so that all our people can be together here.

And as we begin to do this work, we will need to have two plans. A short term plan and long range vision. Those of us on staff have some ideas for turning this building into a very creative and useable space that would eventually mean taking out the pews and renovating the chancel. Again – to help us engage as fully as possible the spirit that lives in our midst. Over on the mountain we were going to build a very flexible worship space. Michael Hester, Janet Stephens, and all those on the building committee worked for hours imagining and creating such a space. This building does not allow us to do all we had dreamed of in that new space, but it does allow us a good bit of creativity that could be very exciting! But it all takes the willingness to dare. To step even further into being an alternative community that lives the promise that God calls forth.

Today we stand as did those 15 years ago – not trying to decide if we should close and lock our doors – but trying to discern what is next. What part of God’s vision are we called to live out? What voice can we speak that needs to be heard? How can we tell our story so that our children and youth will find a passion to live the story and be the story in the next generation?

We have a lot to celebrate! We have a lot to share with each other that we have not had time to share. As we did last month with our first monthly pot luck, and as we will do again following the annual meeting today with our second potluck hosted by the ONA committee. We have put so much time into getting here that we have not always had much energy for caring for ourselves well as we got here. We are working hard on our ministries of caring.

And of course – worship. This is the one place where we all gather at one time. We must always do our very best to make worship faithful and grounded in a deep spirit for all of us. That requires us pushing the edges further while also honoring the traditions that have carried us thus far.

I want to see us be a public / city church by doing all these things well. This is what I want to do. Not to close our doors but to find more and more ways to open our doors. Not to see our ministry as primarily for ourselves, but to remember that we are called to live our faith in all the arenas of our lives. How do we teach that kind of faithful living? How do we support that kind of living? What is next for us?

Abram and Sarai heard a Word from God. They were called to embody the blessing and promise of God for a new future. God was calling forth a new creation. I believe God is

calling forth a new creation in us again. That we might embody in human history a life giving blessing through which all the families of Earth will bless themselves. We have started that work over the past 10 years. And look at where we have come. What is next for us? Can you even begin to imagine? What is next? Amen.