

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C

February 24, 2013

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35

Hold On to the Promise

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I was once at a conference where we were asked to draw a diagram of our life's journey. It's a very interesting and insightful exercise. Beginning with your date of birth and ending with the present date, you chart across a piece of paper with colored markers. Using a peaks and valleys format you list all of the important dates and life events you can think of. Peaks can include things like graduations, marriage, birth of children, landing an important job and other high points in your life. Valleys can be times of struggle; like losing a job; losing a family member, a painful divorce, serious illness.

Looking back over the whole chart you can see your life passing before you; the twists and turns, the high points and low points that have made you who you are. And if you are a person of faith, you become aware of how God was present with you through all of it.

Yes, life is a journey, isn't it? No one knew that better than our biblical ancestors, Abram and Sarai, later to be called Abraham and Sarah. In today's reading from Genesis we find them settled comfortably in their family compound in Haran, when God says to them:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.”

Living in a culture where families are sometimes separated by thousands of miles, (like our family) we can't fully get our heads around what a wrenching experience that uprooting must have been for that couple.

God's call had not included any specifics. Where were they going? How long would the journey take? All they had to hold on to were God's promises; to be with them as they traveled; to make of their family a great nation; to make them a blessing; to give them an expanse of land in Canaan.

Reading through the entire narrative of Abram's encounters with God, an interesting pattern emerges. Promise - then trust - promise - then resistance - reassurance - then acceptance. We find a similar pattern in the lives of Jeremiah and Moses, as they struggled to be faithful to God's call. These are natural human responses to making the changes in our lives God asks of us.

Here's how the pattern emerged for Abraham. God makes a **promise** of land and descendants. Abram acts on the promise. He uproots his family and stopping along the way to build altars to God, he eventually arrives and makes a home in Canaan. Then his **resistance** begins. Surveying all the land around him, he sees no possible way God's promise of descendants occupying this land can be fulfilled. There will be no descendants. Because, at

this point in time, Abram is childless. God **reassures** him of God's **promise** by showing him the numbers of stars in the sky representing the number of his descendants to come in future generations.

Then Abram challenges and **resists** God's promise that the land will be his. God **reassures** him of God's presence by appearing in the darkness as a fire pot and flaming torch, passing between the pieces of sacrificial animals, like a treaty, sealing in blood God's unilateral, unconditional promise that his descendants will be given this land. This ritual establishes a new relationship, a new covenant between God and Abram.

God's promise of descendants begins to unfold soon after when their son Isaac is born. The promise of land was fulfilled as they settled down in the land of Canaan which God had promised them, to raise their family and to pass down the land through the generations to come.

So, what does this ancient story have to teach twentieth century people of faith? First, that God works in very different ways from a culture like ours that demands "I need it now!" God is not into instant gratification. God makes promises that sometimes do not play out for decades, even centuries. The second lesson we can learn is that God is always faithful in keeping those promises.

We have been on a journey with God together as pastors and congregation for about twenty months now. Pastor Samuel and I and I'm sure many of you have been continually praying for this church in this interim time. Like Abram and Sarai, we walked together into an unknown future, trusting and relying on God to take us where we needed to go.

On this journey of faith I have seen God slowly begin to reveal part of God's purpose for this congregation. Upon our arrival, we were made aware of several barriers which impeded your doing effective ministry here. The first impediment was the condition of the church house and adequately meeting the needs of its tenants.

Despite financial constraints, your Admin. Council and session stepped out on faith and hired a Building Manager to do long deferred maintenance and to quickly build a working relationship with your tenants, Park Street Academy and IHN.

One major task was to repair and re-furbished the Junior Room which has allowed us to do mission in this place, reaching out to our neighbors. Two weekends ago the church house was swarming with families who had brought their children for free dental care at Kinder-Smile. The entire Junior Room and gym were set up for this event which was entirely run by volunteers from the community. Hundreds of children received dental care that day in our facility.

God's purpose to do mission at Central takes place again about two weeks from now when The Interfaith Hospitality Network houses four of their homeless families in our church house for a week. The Junior Room will be the central gathering place for the families. Later in the service Tia Aery, the Executive Director of that program, will tell us more about what we

can do to offer them hospitality.

Another of God's purposes for this congregation is just beginning to unfold. Expanding our mission opportunities to an international level. Last weekend, Frederick Moulongo, Samuel and I, and Bob and Bobbi Snyder, our retired missionary friends who were here with us last year, held a conversation by Skype Elder Costin Mwale from St. Peter's church in Lusaka, Zambia. We are seeking to build a closer partnership with that congregation. We are exploring the possibility of sending a few people from Central Church to visit our Zambia sisters and brothers to further cement our relationship. Frederick wrote an extensive article about our conversation for our upcoming newsletter.

Another barrier we saw upon our arrival was a struggling Christian Education program. God's purposes for doing dynamic Christian Education are now being revealed as we welcome our new Christian Educator staff person, Patricia Pastas. And an anonymous donor has unexpectedly given enough money to fund her position for the next year. God has also raised up some new Sunday School teachers and youth leaders.

Yes, all along this interim journey, God has been faithful, building and re-building at Central. Much will be accomplished here before your next pastor arrives on the scene to walk with you into the future. I invite you to watch God at work as we walk together for a little while longer. May we continue to hold onto the promise that God has a plan and a purpose for Central Presbyterian Church and will be doing great things in and among us. Thanks be to God!
Amen.