

Faith Paradox: Departing Without Leaving, Part 1
Feb. 7, 2016
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Texts: Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 3:26-28

I have a friend who worships with us from time to time, including one day when our protestors were here to welcome us. It's funny how they always do the opposite of what they intend, how they clarify our sense of identity and energize our mission.

My friend attends a large sister church. It sits on a big piece of land surrounded by a tall wrought iron fence. When he visited us, he saw how close our protestors come to us and to our front steps. He said:

“At my church, our front door is way back off the street. We have tall iron fences that keep people from getting too close. But here, the public sidewalk ends where your property begins. There is literally only an inch between the world and your front steps.

“That says everything, everything about what you are trying to do here.”

Fences, whether they keep others out or us in, can play a big role in how we practice our faith. That's because God's people have always been pilgrims. God has always nudged – if not pushed, if not shoved – God's people to leave home and seek what is new and different. Fences just stand in the way of the world coming to us ... and us getting out in the world.

Today and next week, I want to invite us to walk with two of God's great pilgrims—Abram and the Apostle Paul.

Abram was God's first great explorer. God renamed him Abraham, to signify his fatherhood of the nation of Israel. And we should never mention Abram without his wife Sarai, whom God called every bit as much as Abram.

Thousands of years later, Paul also became one of God's pilgrims. In the first decades after Christ, he established churches from the heart of the Holy Land across ancient Eurasia. But Paul covered more than just great distances. He was also a cultural pilgrim. Paul transcended many cultures and institutions and translated the gospel to each in a way they could understand.

Both Abram and Paul left what was comfortable and familiar to advance the kingdom of God on earth. If we call ourselves God's people, the same is asked of all us - to go beyond ourselves, our identities, our experiences, our perspectives, our cultures. In making that departure, in drawing closer together, especially across differences, we can draw closer to God. By strengthening the fabric of our church family and of our city, our response to God's grace takes on a special and vital meaning.

That brings us to our sermon title, “Departing Without Leaving.” So what do I mean by that? The idea of “departing without leaving” may not make much sense at first. But our faith is full of things that don’t make sense, at least at first. One word for this is paradox – something that seems to contradict itself.

Lent begins this Wednesday and throughout this Lent, I will be asking us all to dwell in the paradox of our faith. The thing about paradoxes is that they can deepen our faith in a profound way.

Back to Abram and Sarai. A moment ago, we read these words from Genesis in scripture:

Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’

There it is - the first great call in the Bible, which is a book of calls to ministry to all sorts of people in all sorts of situations. And Abram and Sarai? They did just as God asked. They packed up and went. Just like that, they departed.

Wonder what his family said. In those days, family was security. Family defined where you lived and what you had. Family was your support system for whatever you needed. It’s hard to overestimate what a radical move this was - and how much pushback Abram would have gotten.

Am I hinting that we are supposed to do the same? Like Chevy Chase in the Vacation movie, are we supposed to pack up the Wagon Queen Family Truckster and head across country. Well, I doubt God wants any of us to take off for Walley World.

But there is more than one kind of departure. Some departures don’t require leaving home. That brings us to Lent.

On Wednesday, God’s people around the world will gather, including our own Wednesday night service. Millions worldwide will smear ashes on their forehead to acknowledge publicly our human frailty and sinfulness, hearing the words, “ashes to ashes dust to dust.”

In the days that follow, God calls us to depart and walk with Christ with a special focus. To hear with new ears the upside-down, paradoxical, non-sensical good news of the gospel. The good news that in dying to ourselves we receive new life. To consider again what it means for the first to be last and the last to be first. To take in afresh the illogical grace of how a father welcomed home with a great celebration the prodigal son who had broken his heart. To ask God again and again for the strength to turn the other cheek, to forgive 70 times 7 times, to love our enemies, to say willingly and sincerely,

“forgive them God, for they know not what they do,” to walk willingly with Christ into the Garden of Gethsemane and to pray that just this once, we don’t go to sleep on our Lord in his time of need.

That journey – that departure - is what God’s people do this time of year ... All to connect us more closely with our Creator and shed new light on Christ’s redemption of our sins.

But I have an additional kind of departure in mind for all of us. Like the first, it connects us more closely with God – by connecting us more closely to each other.

This departure is about escaping the captivity of ourselves, our experiences, our opinions, our so-called “truths” ... all that we can more fully embrace the one we might think of as “the other.” After all, that is what Christ did from the first day of his public ministry to the last.

Yale scholar Miroslav Volf is one of the world’s leading living theologians. Born in the former Yugoslavia, he watched his country torn asunder by division and warfare. That experience inspired his devotion to reconciliation and peacemaking. I borrow this language of “departing without leaving” from him.

Volf describes this departure this way.

At the very core of the Christian identity lies an all-encompassing change of loyalty, from a given culture with its gods to the one God of all cultures. A response to a call from that God entails rearrangement of a whole network of allegiances.

Just what is Volf saying? What are we departing for, you may ask? The answer is not so much a place – as an act, the act of embracing those who are different from us. The distance we seek to close is the distance we put between us and them.

As you may know, I have been away for two weeks for study. My two intensive classes fit perfectly what we are seeking to do here as a congregation that is urban and suburban, black and white, gay and straight, rich and living week to week, Presbyterian and just about every other kind of religious background.

I come home to you to testify that our walk together may be one of the most unique there is among so-called mainline churches. I emphasize this because it’s easy for all of this to have become a bit too familiar. We risk losing sight of how unusual our casserole of a congregation actually is.

In the mainline Protestant church, especially in the Presbyterian Church (USA) – which is about 92% white, highly racially segregated and just recently accepting of LGBT people – I have yet to come across a congregation with our unique mix of race, sexual orientation, socio-economic levels and differences in religious background, neighborhood and past church experience.

To invoke our phrase of the day, our life together is a divine paradox. It is glorious. It is messy. It is a glorious mess. But it is our glorious mess, a gift of God that so many congregations do not know, a chance for us to be a light to the world.

That's why, again and again, we must depart without leaving. We can "depart without leaving" to seek the face of God in "the other," to find one who is different from us, the one who can teach us more of what it means to be human, to be a child of God to be another kind of full citizen of the kingdom of God on earth.

I realize that some may be thinking that we have been on this journey for a while. We have. But we are an ever-changing congregation, blessed with new faces, growth and all of its plusses and minuses, focused on a mission statement that calls us to bear unique witness to the gospel, its call to justice and radical inclusiveness. We've added about 50 new members in the last 2 years. How many have you gotten to know?

We must admit that, as human beings, we are inherently tribal. Yes, even us. Even Caldwell. We tend to settle into circles of association. We hang out with people like us, people who agree with us, people with whom we may have a history, people we already know and like – because, after all, they're like us. Departing from that is hard. So we stay close to home, so to speak.

But God didn't call Abram and then tell him to stay at home, to remain among his people and his family. God told Abram and Sarai to go. God called and sent Paul. And they went.

But – and here is the hard part – to make this departure is to be willing to step away from those things about ourselves that we think define us, that comfort us, that reaffirm us ... that that we might gain a new vantage point.

It also means that we must recognize that while God makes us all equally in God's image, this broken, sin-corrupted world does not honor all of God's children by granting them equity and equality. So to depart means continuing to listen deeply to the pain and the anguish of those whom our predominant culture would continue to subjugate and oppress.

This month we acknowledge the struggle of African-Americans in this nation – and we celebrate their story of overcoming in the face of systems of injustice and oppression. But that is not just a "this month" thing, at least it should not be.

At the same time, alongside African-Americans, we lift up the struggle of other oppressed peoples and we seek to live into the potential each of us has to change the course of our nation that it might align more closely to gospel.

So we called to depart again and again and again.

We have chances to meet “the other” at our new Wednesday night suppers each month, our Christian formation gatherings, and serving alongside one another in our missions and justice work. During Lent, there are two new opportunities to gather and depart together - a new Wednesday night Bible study with Dr. Steve Shoemaker and an exploration of spirituality with member Pat Adams. These are all chances to build stronger bridges among us – that together we might bear stronger witness to our city.

And we welcome additional ideas for other kinds of departures.

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Let me close by coming back to the story I shared about my friend who worships at the church with those tall iron fences. It’s true that we don’t have physical fences around this church – that we have easy access to our city and the city to us.

But I want to make a different point. Just because we don’t have a tall iron fence around our property, we shouldn’t assume there may not be a fence around our hearts, our souls, our minds, our experience, our way of seeing things, our willingness to go to the “far country” of the other to see the world from their eyes.

So, let us pray for eyes to see the obstructions right in front of us. Let us pray for pilgrim’s hearts.