

June 8th, 2008 Fourth after Pentecost: The Journey

"So Abraham left, as the Lord had told him." This is the beginning of the saga of what would become the Hebrew people. More than that, it is the story of all who would claim Abraham as their ancestor: Jews, Muslims, and Christians. In the *Letter to the Romans*, the apostle Paul emphasized that Abraham is our ancestor in the faith, as much as he is the ancestor of the Jews. This is true, because Abraham followed God long *before* God's covenant with the Hebrews at Mt Sinai: he didn't know much at all about this God who was calling him. But he had faith, and that faith brought him into relationship with God, just as it brings us into relationship, here in the 21st century.

"Abraham set out in faith, not knowing where he was going, or even why he was going, except that God had commanded him. He defied both the inner propensities of human nature and the outer pressures of cultural conformity that call us in the opposite direction: to journey from the unknown to the known, from what we do not have to what we think we want and need, from the strange and the unpredictable to the safe and the secure, and from mere promises to human guarantees. Whereas Abraham acted whole-heartedly but without absolute certainty, we demand certainty and act timidly.

God's call upon Abraham's life is a call that's repeated to each one of us today. It's a call that subverts conventional wisdom, and so it can feel counter-intuitive, for it's a call to move beyond three very human, powerful and deep-seated fears—fear of the unknown that we can't control (ignorance), fear of others who are different from us (inclusion), and fear of powerlessness in the face of impossibilities (impotence). " Daniel Clendenin, *The Journey With Jesus: Notes to Myself* www.journeywithjesus.net

Many of us find ourselves in the same place Abraham did: not geographically, but spiritually. We know we can't go back to the way we lived 20, or 40, or 60 years ago, in our personal lives, or in the life of the church. Life moves forward, and we must move forward with it. But we are very anxious about where that forward-movement might take us. We want to reach out to others outside of these church walls – to get to know our neighbours and learn about their hopes and dreams and beliefs – but we're afraid that knowledge might change us. We are faced with rapid change, be it the increasing cost of gas, the environmental threat, the speed of local development, or the changing vision of what it means to be the church – and we feel powerless in the face of that change. So we just stand still. We retreat into what is comfortable, what is familiar, what fits us like an old and worn-out shoe.

The trouble with old shoes, though, is that they aren't really good for us. The arch is broken down, the collar of the shoe is worn and chafes our feet, the laces keep breaking and tripping us up. We need new shoes to walk the path forward. In one of the readings assigned for today, Jesus tells his disciples that you can't

take his words and try to fit them into old ways of doing things. He said it's like pouring new wine into old wineskins: the old skins can't take it, and they burst. You need new shoes, new wineskins, new ways of being. And the only way to get there, is to leave the worn-out ways behind, and listen to God's call to a new way of being.

There are some things you can take along with you. Abraham packed up his family, his herds and all his possessions – they went with him on the journey. You too, make this journey with people you care about, and who care about you. This faith community is going on a journey together. No-one needs to go it alone.

On this 83rd anniversary of the United Church of Canada, we take with us the strengths of our denomination. We hold onto the importance of Scripture, the engaging of reason and the insights of the time in which we live; we take the centrality of music in our worship and devotional life; we take our strong concern for justice and compassion; we take our inclusiveness and our affirmation of the dignity of all life.

We take this congregation's history: its concern for young people and its care for the elderly and the frail; we take the strength of prayer that is so much a part of the church's life; we take the commitment and involvement of our members in many aspects of the church's and the community's life. We take our commitment to Jesus, our mission statement, our sense of purpose.

We gather together what is good and strong and useful, and we take it with us on the journey. We leave behind the worn-out shoes, the old wineskins, the things and habits and customs that once fulfilled a purpose but will simply be a hindrance to us on the journey.

Part of the task of our church is the discernment of what to keep, and what to let go. This is not a quick and easy decision. We're probably going to take some time figuring this stuff out. Perhaps as we journey, we'll leave a trail behind us: an out-dated hymn here, a committee there, a pew to one side, a project to another. As we journey, we will come to know what is useful, and what is unwanted baggage.

It's hard, making a journey without knowing the destination. But it's the nature of life these days. I can't tell you how many times in the last month I've heard various versions of the same illustration: how we're driving in the dark, and we can only see about as far ahead of us as the headlights can manage. The road's there, and the destination is at the end, but we can only see a little bit ahead of ourselves. Driving in the dark can be scary – but we'll make it, because though we don't know the destination, we have God journeying with us.

Never, in the history of the people of Israel, did God abandon them – even though there was plenty of provocation along the way. God will not abandon us either. It is the nature of God to call us to new ways of being, new levels of commitment, new understandings of faith. Jesus came, 2000 years ago, to call his people to new ways, but also to remind them what to keep. He continues to remind those of us in the church today, what is essential to our faith.

We know the basics, don't we? We know to love God, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. And we know that love requires action. We also know that we model our decisions on the life and words of Christ – that he is our guide, the one who walks with us on a path he knows. It's become a bit of a cliché, to ask "What Would Jesus Do?" But it's not a bad question. If Jesus were walking around Langford today, whom would he be speaking to? Where would he be spending his time? What would he have to say to us?

We have an advantage Abraham didn't. He was following a God he knew nothing about. We are following the same God, who chose to be revealed in Jesus. The more we come to know Jesus, the more we will have a clearer sense of where God is calling us to.

We journey as individuals, deepening our knowledge of God and our relationship with God. We journey in community, adding new members with joy and saying farewell to old members with sadness, knowing that this too, is a part of being a family. We journey with the wider church – struggling and talking and praying together about the most faithful way to follow Christ in our own time and place. We journey with Jesus, who gives himself to us, to be our strength, our living water, our bread for the journey.

"So Abraham left, as the Lord had told him." Where are we on the journey? God give us the strength and courage to look forward, and not backward. Amen.