

TRUST THE GUIDE

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

***“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.”***

Hebrews 11:8

Maybe it’s because journeys have been on my mind lately — what with our recent journey from Point Pleasant Beach to Lamington — but I’ve chosen to speak to you today, my first Sunday as your Pastor, about one of the epic journeys of the Bible.

The traveler, of course, is Abraham — or, as we know him in these early chapters of his story, Abram. And I’ll be the first to admit: his journey was a good deal *more* epic than Claire’s and mine.

We traveled but a short distance. In fact, we never left the State of New Jersey. And while we labored long and hard for many weeks, packing up our worldly possessions — and have now begun the tedious work of *unpacking* all those boxes — we had the services of a full-sized moving van and a six-man crew.

Abram and his wife, Sarai — later to be known as Sarah — had the members of their extended family — and yes, sad to say, an indeterminate number of slaves. As for their mode of conveyance, there was no moving van for them.

Only a string of camels: who, I imagine, were a good deal more ornery than even the crankiest motor vehicle.

Abram and Sarai undertook their journey at a more advanced age, as well. A 75-year-old man, with his 75-year-old wife, dwelling in what we have to assume was a comfortable retirement in the bustling city of Haran.

Abram says to Sarai, “The Lord showed up today. Gave me a message.”

“A message from God — what was it? The secret of the ages? The pearl of great price? The meaning of life?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well, what did God say to you?”

“God said, ‘Go.’”

“Was that all?”

“Just about. There was something about us becoming a great nation, and God making our name great, and that we 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.”

“No, no, that’s not what I mean, Abram. That’s all well and good, but — did God happen to drop off, maybe, a couple caravan tickets — you know, with a

destination on them?”

Well, we all know God didn't do that. As it says in the letter to the Hebrews, “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.”

(Hebrews 11:8)

Not knowing where he was going. That doesn't exactly make Abram a responsible institutional manager. Where's the project proposal for this little jaunt? What's the estimated budget? How do we know expenditures won't outpace revenues? If we examine historical trends and project them out, say, 5 or 10 years into the future, where can we reasonably expect to be? Where are the benchmarks, for crying out loud? What are the metrics? We can't not know where we're going!

Did Abram have any of those things? When he perched Sarai, on top of a camel, and told his people to load up that little caravan with all their worldly goods, did he first test out several different routes, choosing the optimal combination of well-beaten trails, proximity to water-holes and freedom from bandits and ravenous beasts?

Somehow, I think not. God doesn't seem to supply any of that sort of detail, and the Bible doesn't talk about Abram doing so, either.

Think with me, for a moment, about the implications of that. Abraham — one of the most renowned spiritual leaders in human history, common progenitor of three great world religions, the one by whom “all the peoples of the earth will be blessed” — is a man who doesn’t know where he’s going!

Go figure.

I seem to recall another time when that sort of thing happened. An eager new disciple runs up to Jesus and exclaims: “Rabbi, I will follow you wherever you go!”

Freeze the scene for a minute. Imagine you’re the pastor of a church. You’re concerned about maintaining the membership. You’ve got to keep a strong volunteer base, to make sure the church’s programs stay healthy. So, here’s this eager-beaver new member who comes up to you, grinning stupidly from ear to ear, who says: “I will follow you wherever you go!”

Most people in my position would quietly say to ourselves: “Thank you, Jesus!”

Then we’d ask: “Have you ever thought about becoming a youth advisor? That’s not your cup of tea? How about Stewardship Chair?”

But that’s not what Jesus thought. Nor is it what Jesus said. What Jesus

actually said was: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20)

Evidently, Jesus never read that book about volunteer management in the church. You know, job descriptions, encouragement, awards, recognition....

It sounds rather like old Father Abram: the pilgrim who set out, not knowing where he was going. Where did Abraham have to lay his head? Other than the floor of his tent: no place.

There was another time when somebody asked Jesus where he was going. In John, chapter 14, he’s just finished telling his disciples about how, in God’s house, there are many rooms, and he’s going ahead of them to prepare a place for them.

“Lord,” says Thomas, “we don’t know where you’re going! How can we know the way?”

Remember what Jesus says, in response? It’s just a little more encouraging than the “Foxes have holes, birds have nests...” line. This time, Jesus says: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

He’s not expecting them to know the way. All Jesus is expecting them to do is follow him. It’s like God’s instruction to Abram. To Abram, God says, “Go.”

Well, Jesus’ command is kind of similar, except it’s not “Go.” It’s “Come.”

Come, follow me.

If you're going to set out on a journey, and you don't know where you're going, and you haven't got any maps — no GPS, either — there's one other thing you need. It's not a thing at all, really. It's a person. What you need is a guide.

I can remember, years ago, when I was growing up, our family took a little vacation to Gettysburg. We stopped by some kind of visitor's center, and my dad went in to look for a map of the battlefield. He came out, saying, "Here's a map, but there's something even better. They tell me in there we can hire a guide to drive around with us and give us a personal tour of the battlefield."

"Can we afford it?" my mother wanted to know. "I think we can," said Dad. "It's not as expensive as you think."

So, that's exactly what we did. A man came out to our car and sat in the front passenger seat. Mom climbed into the back with us, and we set off, driving across the battlefield. Our guide told my father exactly where to turn, and when he said "Stop here," we did, and then he pointed out some monument or other and told us a story about it.

Then he said, "See that hill over there? That's Little Round Top. Let me tell you what it was like to be a Union soldier that day, trying to hold that piece of ground." He pulled a rusty metal ball out of his pocket, about the size of a marble.

“Do you know what this is? It’s a minie ball. It’s what those soldiers loaded into their rifles, along with a charge of powder. It’s real, it was dug up here on the battlefield. Do you want to hold it?” My brothers and I could think of nothing better.

And then he said, “See that monument over there, the one that looks like an open book? That’s where Pickett’s Charge ended. They call that spot ‘The high-water-mark of the Confederacy.’”

It was a glorious afternoon. I remember it to this day. We didn’t need a battlefield map. We didn’t even need to know where we were going — because we had a guide.

Abram and Sarai did, too. The Lord said “Go,” and they went, but they knew they weren’t traveling alone. They knew God was going with them.

The same’s true for us, here at Lamington Church. Some people have asked me, during the peculiar courtship process known as a pastoral search, what my plans are for this church. I’m afraid I haven’t given a very clear answer, for two reasons.

First of all, it’s not our tradition, as Presbyterians, to let the pastor call the shots. This congregation has the Session, your board of elected leaders. *They* are

your visioning body. I haven't even met with them yet, but I do plan to work with them to see what sort of mission priorities we can come up with together.

The second reason I don't know where we're going, exactly, has to do with where I am, myself, in my journey of ministry. When I was a much younger man, I might have stepped into a position like this with a pastoral shopping list in my hand.

"Here's what's on my list," I might have said — though not in so many words. "Your job, as the congregation, is to help me get what I want."

But that's not where I am, not anymore. My task, as I see it, in my first months as your pastor, is to be a good listener. My task is to get to know you and our ministry setting, here in Somerset and Huntingdon Counties — and in the larger area that comprises Elizabeth Presbytery.

By all accounts, Lamington Church is a wonderful community. People here truly care for one another, and that's a great thing.

But our Lord hasn't called us together to enjoy one another's company. Our call is to journey together. Our commission is exactly the same as the one God delivered to Father Abram and Mother Sarai: "Go. Just go," says the Lord; "and I will go with you."

I'm reminded of the old African proverb, one you may have heard before:

“If you want to travel fast, go alone. If you want to travel far, go together.”

I believe, my friends, that we *can* travel far. And one thing we need is provisions for our journey. Our provisions are laid out upon this table: something our guide has prepared for us. He has promised, as we travel the pilgrim path, to give us what we need.

More than that, he has promised to be our guide. So let us be attentive to where he is leading us!

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