



Rooted and Ready:
“CALLED TO THRIVE”

Genesis 12:1-5; Matthew 28:16-20¹

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There is a story that I’ve heard of a young boy whose family moved from a rural farming community to the suburbs when he was about six or seven years old. In the first few days after moving into their new home, Johnny was all excited and bouncing off the walls. His poor mother just wanted to get some boxes unpacked so that the rest of the family would begin to feel more settled. Seeing that it was nice outside, she sent Johnny outside to play and discover the neighborhood, but reminded him to come back in around lunch time.

So Johnny went outside to play and his mom began to get quite a bit of work done around the house. About an hour and half later, Johnny came running back inside calling out, “Mom! Mom! Guess what! Guess what!”

“What?” asked Johnny’s mother as her silence had suddenly been stirred again.

And Johnny replied, “Mom, every house in our neighborhood has a doorbell.”

Johnny’s mom said, “That’s nice,” as she returned to the task at hand of unpacking her boxes.

Not letting up, Johnny spoke up again, “But Mom, that’s not all of it. Do you know what’s even better?”

“What?” asked Johnny’s poor mother as she continued to unpack.

“All of them work!” said Johnny.

I promise not to let my dog go around ringing doorbells in our new neighborhood. My three year old niece, on the other hand...well, she should be busy enough ringing mine that she shouldn’t bother the neighbors too much. That kid loves a doorbell! And she has one of her own, too!

Times of change and transition are difficult for some of us and filled with new discoveries and curiosities for others, aren’t they? Even the neighbors get to experience our times of transition, don’t they?

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, the patriarch Abram, who later is called “Abraham,” had been settled in the land of Haran for quite some time. Abram’s father had brought his family to that land. Now, at the tender young age of 75—hey, his father lived for 205 years in Haran—so at the tender young age of 75, God calls out to Abram and says, “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.” In the very next verse we are told, “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.”

Now I don’t know about you, but I’m wondering what the rest of the story was here. I’m not 75 years old, but I’d like a little bit of time to think and pray about such a big next step in my life. I cannot begin to understand what that conversation or the transition must have been like for Abram as he packed up his belongings and gathered his extended family while together they moved to a new land.

The other week at annual conference, Bishop David A. Bard, our Bishop for the Michigan Area of The United Methodist Church, was preparing to fix the appointments after they were presented to the annual conference. As the superintendents gathered with him beforehand, we all joked about the days long ago when the Bishop would read off new appointments at annual conference and that’s when clergy would find out whether they were staying or moving. That’s also when local churches would find out who was coming to serve among them for the next year. There was usually a rush to any nearby telephones so that pastors could call their spouses and tell them to pack up the home. Last week, even the Bishop breathed a sigh of relief that we don’t do it like that anymore.

There is a story that I remember hearing many years ago, however, of that time when pastors and local churches were informed of moves at annual conference. I cannot remember who told it first, but I remember it well. I’m also not sure how much truth there is in it, but it seems believable enough.

At the time, all of the clergy would line up in front of the annual conference. The Bishop would begin to read of the names of the clergy and you would step forward upon hearing your name. Then the Bishop would read your appointment for the coming year. Whether it was a new charge or a reappointment to your current charge, the appropriate response was, “God is good! Thank you, Bishop!” and then you would step back into line.

One year, a certain pastor was anticipating that he might be appointed to a new church. He was kind of daydreaming about where it might be. When the Bishop read off his name, he stepped forward as all the others had done before him. Then the Bishop read the name of a church. The only problem was that it wasn’t where he was expecting to go. In fact, it was a church that was known for being particularly unfriendly. He was so torn inside that when he opened his mouth, his words got all mixed up and, forgetting the expected response, the pastor replied, “Good... God...Bishop!” as he stepped back into line.

Now before you go writing to the Bishop, let me be clear. Dawn and I are thrilled to be serving among you at Birmingham and Berkley. We are excited about where God is leading us together in such a time as this.

Times of change and transition are filled with the celebration and excitement of what has been and what is as well as the anticipation of what is yet to come. We look back on our past, acknowledge our present and, like Abram, seek to step forward into a future that is not always so clear until we begin to live into where God is leading us.

Not only as a local church with a pastoral transition but also as a denomination, we are in a time of transition and anticipation. Last year, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church met together, celebrating our global nature as a part of the body of Christ. Yet, with that transition to being a global church over the past several years has come a need to understand the greater diversity that we experience across our worldwide church. As a result, the General Conference appointed a general commission to help us find a way forward on key issues of concern and ministry in an ever-changing world.

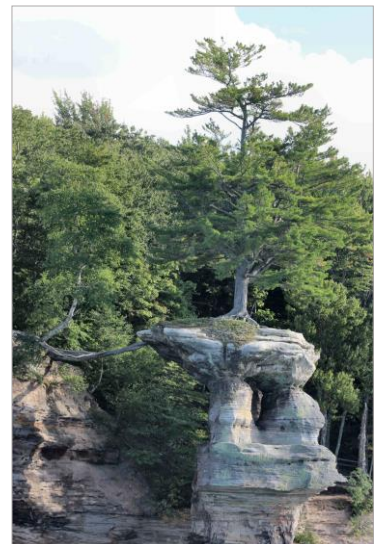
While the Church is growing in some places, we have been faced with a steady decline in other areas of the world. How do we remain faithful to who/what we have been, to who/what we are now, and to who/what God is calling us to be in the future as The United Methodist Church? As a local church in a community that has changed around us over the years, how do we remain faithful to the Gospel message while we adapt to tell this great story of God's love for the world in ways that those around us might hear, cherish, and claim as their own story? Will we survive such a time of transition and change? Can we make it? Where do we find hope?

In the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, between Grand Marais and Munising, along the beautiful shores of Lake Superior lies the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. Five years ago, when Dawn and I last returned to Marquette, we finally made the time to take the boat tour of the national lakeshore. While you can hike the trails and see a few of the rock formations, some of the most majestic views are either from one of the national park boat tours or from the vantage of a kayak going right up close to the rocks.

One of my favorite formations along the lakeshore is called "Chapel Rock." Chapel Rock is pictured on the cover of your bulletin this morning. My friend, Jan Barrett, a photographer living in the Upper Peninsula, graciously allowed us to use her photo of Chapel Rock in our series for this summer.

Chapel Rock consists of a tree that stands on a rock formation that is separated from the mainland. It seems to spring up from the shoreline. There are, however, these thick roots that stretch across the air that is between the rock and the mainland. You'll see those roots on the left side of the picture on your bulletin.

The story is told that at one time, the rock formation was a part of the mainland and there was solid land under those roots. Over time, the waters of Lake Superior have washed over the rocks as



well as the land along the shoreline and carved away the rock from underneath the roots. The tree, however, continues to thrive because its roots stretch back to the mainland where it receives the nourishment that it needs to survive. Although the waters have changed the landscape around it, the tree stands tall as a sign of life and hope at the shore of the largest of the Great Lakes.

In Jeremiah 17:7-8, the Lord, speaking through the prophet, says, “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

Friends, at Birmingham First you have a long history of strong roots that have made you a sign of the life and love God offers us in Jesus Christ for many people in our own metropolitan Detroit area and throughout the world. Through the years, you have sent your roots out over the waters that others may see God’s work in and through you as you continue to bear the fruit of God’s love throughout our world. Even now, as the landscape of the world around us is changing, you continue to thrive because God has created you for just such a time as this.

It would be easy for us to look at the seas that swell around us, washing away the shores from our roots, and be fearful of what lies ahead. Perhaps Jesus understood this for his disciples as well when, shortly after his resurrection, he gathered with them. As Matthew recounts the story, he tells us, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.”

Even after the resurrection visit, even upon seeing Jesus in the flesh, Matthew reminds us that “some doubted.” We disciples can do that from time to time, can’t we? It’s historical for us. It’s biblical! We don’t always go as easily as Abram, do we? Sometimes, we look around us and wonder where God is leading us next.

And as we stand on the precipice of what will be for the disciples, we hear Jesus speak these words, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

We know these words as “The Great Commission.” These words give us, as United Methodists, our common mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” These words are inscribed upon our hearts as United Methodists. We hear that call, and yet it is equally important that we hear the promise of Jesus as he spoke to a fearful group of disciples who would be transformed from disciples (those who are taught) into apostles (those who are sent). It’s as if Jesus knew the difficult work that would be before them and before us whenever we stepped out together in new directions to which God was calling us. Therefore, he reminds his disciples throughout the ages, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Sisters and brothers, the landscape around us may change, but Jesus is with us. We may not know always what the new land looks like towards which we journey, but Jesus is with us. We may not speak the language or understand the customs of the changing culture around us as we try to share the good news that we have received, but Jesus is with us as we step out in faith. The

roots which God has grown in us over time stretch out over the air, to reach a nourishment that only God can provide, because Jesus is with us.

Jesus is with us. And because Jesus is with us, we are rooted and ready for where God is calling us and what may be! Jesus is with us and we are created and called to thrive! [We are] Blessed to be a blessing!