

Beginning In The Middle

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Gen. 12:1-5b; Matt 28:16-20; Eph 3:14-21

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Anna Quindlen, a U.S. journalist, columnist, and author wrote in her book, *Living Out Loud*, “Life is not so much about beginnings and endings as it is about going on and on and on. It is about muddling through the middle.” When you think of life this way, this is a pretty true statement. However, none of us here today, including me, can say this is not a day of beginnings at First Presbyterian Church—a beginning—in the middle of our faith journey together.

One of my favorite little books is titled *To Pause at the Threshold*. It’s only about this big, and around 70 pages, but it is packed with very thought provoking words. The author, Esther de Waal speaks about the borders or thresholds we all are in and out of throughout our lives—a succession of thresholds to be crossed. We are on a threshold today, about to cross it and enter into a new phase of our church.

“In the Bible, we are reminded of the journeys of the people of Israel, the exodus from Egypt, the journeys of Paul. The very word *exodus* carries a fullness of meaning of a journey from bondage to freedom.”

The texts I have chosen for today’s sermon have to do with passing over these thresholds and beginning in the middle of things. The Old Testament lesson from Genesis is the call of Abram. What a threshold he was on. The call story from Matthew is also called the Great Commission. And the final passage, from Ephesians, is not so much a particular story of call or crossing thresholds, but it is the equipment, our luggage for our journey—it is a prayer for the strength that God will give us all to live out the calls we have been given.

Let's look first at Abram. (Abram was the same man as Abraham—this story takes place, though, before God gave him the new name of Abraham.) Abram was a great man of God. One of the things that made Abram such a man of God was that he **listened** to God, and he did exactly what God told him to do.

Did Abram have a few doubts about what God was asking him to do? Probably. This guy, Abram, was not a young man, after all. How could God call someone of that age to pick up and start off on a new adventure in life? But he did. He packed up his wife, all his possessions and took off to where God called him.

You know, in my own life, there have been times since I have been in ordained ministry when I felt like I was Abram's age and ready to kick back and enjoy life, but God seemed to have different plans for me, and for once or twice in my life, I, too, decided to listen to God.

Bob and I were pretty content with our lives in Driftwood in our new home there. We moved there with the intention of waiting to hear from God and waiting to hear where God would send us to do God's work. However, after almost a year there, we were really getting settled in and enjoying our life of "early retirement."

Being called by God to do something is not always an easy task—in fact, most of the time the tasks are not easy or comfortable at all. We left our home, our new friends, our children to come to a new town and a new congregation.

Please don't get me wrong—I am thrilled to be here, and to be your new pastor. Being a solo pastor of a small congregation is the prayer I have prayed for many years. Now God has answered my prayer. But, at the same time, it is a change in my life—it is a change for *you*, and change for most of us never comes easily or without a little grief or anxiety. It was a step out in faith that we both took when we listened to God's call for me to be here with you. God is good though, and I have a deep felt faith, down to my core that

many good things are going to occur in my life and in this congregation as a result of my decision to listen to God.

And what about you? I'll bet there have been a few times for each of you here, too, that just when you thought you were where you needed to be in your life, when you were feeling all settled in and comfortable--whether it was with your marriage, your singleness, your job, your retirement, your church or your pastor, God stepped in and had a different idea in mind. You found yourself on yet another threshold of your life, not really knowing what the future would hold.

For some of you, me being called here may not be an easy thing either! If you haven't noticed, I don't look a lot like George Stewart, or Rick Carroll, or any other pastor you have *ever* had here at First Pres. Uvalde. George stepped in and heard God's call to this congregation at a time when you desperately needed a calm, relaxed, and self-assured pastor. George was just what you needed at the time. God is good, and God knows our every need.

I can tell you with almost certainty though, that I will not pastor the same way these men pastored you. If you haven't heard this before, men and women are just plain different from each other. It will be different, having a woman for your pastor. But, I also have a certainty that it will be good, and it will be rewarding and spiritually fulfilling for all of us.

One of my favorite sayings, and I would guess you will probably hear it from me again, is that if we want to make God laugh, tell God our plans. Somehow, sometimes, things in our lives just don't always go the way *our* plans take us. And that is not a bad thing. When my plans have been changed due to listening to God—I have never once been steered in the wrong direction.

Abram listened to God. God blessed him and all the families of the earth, as the text says, and he was a blessing to others. He made of Abram a great nation. I believe you as a congregation listened to God when you called me to be your pastor. Listening to God brings blessings.

As we move to the Gospel of Matthew, we hear Jesus talking to his disciples after the resurrection. Jesus had just crossed the biggest threshold in history, I would say. The disciples had gone to Galilee, to the mountain, where Jesus had told them he would be. The text says that when they saw him they worshipped him, but some doubted.

For me, this passage says a lot about our own doubts that we all have at times. It gives us permission to doubt—to doubt things even as important as our faith. The text doesn't say anything about how Jesus reacted to the doubt some of the disciples had. He just tells them to GO and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and to teach them to obey everything that he had commanded.

Do you think Jesus realizes that we **all** will have doubts at one time or another? I believe if the disciples, who lived and learned directly from Jesus for three years could have doubts and Jesus was OK with them, I think that is perfectly human and normal of us, too to have doubts at times.

Jesus, as we see in the Gospels, dismisses certainties—almost inviting doubts. We watch the way Jesus enters into people's lives and dissolves an existing situation, whatever it might be. The likelihood was that the condition—whatever it might have been or is now had promised security, safety, but now Christ challenges the disciples, and us today to leave our nets, or to leave a nice safe pew, to maybe step outside your comfort zone a little and follow him. GO, he said to his disciples, stand up, move, walk, and come with me. Our God is a God who moves and he invites us to move with him as we muddle through the middle and cross over the thresholds in our lives.

I think Abram must have had doubts before he left his country to set out for Haran, where God had called him. But I believe what Jesus was telling his disciples, God was telling Abram, and one of our messages for today, is even though we all have had doubts, we are still being commanded to go out and tell others about God, Christ, his love, and what he has done for us.

Listening to God brings blessings.

For me, the second half of verse 20 in this passage from Matthew is absolutely one we can all hang our hats on when we have doubts. “***And remember, Jesus says, I am with you always, to the end of the age.***” What a comfort to hear those words of Jesus spoken to the disciples and spoken to you and me today.

The final text I would like to speak about today is from Ephesians. Listen to these words from the Apostle Paul:

For this reason I bow my knees before God, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of God’s glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God’s Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God. Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

What a beautiful prayer Paul prayed for the Gentile believers in Ephesus. I also call this passage our luggage for the journey—what we take with us as we cross the thresholds in our lives. God’s Word, you see, is a living document. Paul prayed this prayer thousands of years ago for the Ephesians, and God’s Word lives on as we pray this prayer for ourselves today.

It is a prayer for strength, a prayer that Christ will dwell in our hearts and a prayer that asks God for the understanding of just how wonderful and great our God is. It is a prayer that asks we be filled with all the fullness of God.

As we muddle through the middle of our journey, as we cross the threshold into a new time in our congregation, I believe we need this prayer in our lives everyday. Our journey together as a congregation will be filled with twists and turns that none of us can probably even imagine. There will be great joys, and there will likely be some things we are not too proud of along the way, or sorrows we wish were never a part of our lives.

But we are on a journey together—it's you and me and God on this marvelous faith journey we are traveling. We are here because God has called us here to this very place on this very day. God has a purpose for you, for me, and for this congregation. When we listen, as our ancestors Abram and the disciples did, God will fill us to the brim with blessings beyond our greatest imaginings. Listening to God brings blessings.

I cannot think of any better words to close this sermon with, than the words Paul closed his prayer to the Ephesians when he said:

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.