

“Living Comfortably with Uncertainty” August 7, 2016, at Rocky River Presb.
Genesis 12:1-2, 4a Hebrews 11:8 Matthew 28:18-20

When we look at the expanse of Scripture, it becomes quite evident that the people of God are people on the move. The Exodus from Egypt was a pivotal chapter for the Israelites, along with their journey to the Promised Land, plus their being taken into exile and the return decades later.

And the N.T. is the expansion of Christ’s Church into the world, with the missionary travels of the apostle Paul.

And imagine the ministry of Jesus himself. It seemed like he was constantly on the move. Mark’s Gospel, which was the earliest, was written at a time of great persecution, and when you read it, Mark presents Jesus’ ministry at breakneck speed. There is an urgency to it. As an exercise, try counting the number of times the word ‘immediately’ appears in Mark’s Gospel. It is quite striking. The word appears about 30 times in 16 chapters.

You almost have the mental image of Jesus jogging everywhere he went, with the disciples breathlessly trying to keep up!!

Jesus’ words of invitation to his first disciples are the same he says to us, and they involve movement:

“Follow me. I have something better in store for you. It will change your life, and it will give you meaning, direction, and it will be a grand adventure.”

And therein lies the challenge for any who would be a disciple of Jesus. Because in order to follow...we have to move, we have to step out in faith, trusting that the promises of Jesus are true, even though we may have some anxiety within, because we don’t know what following Jesus will bring to our ordered lives.

Take a look at those disciples to whom Jesus gave that invitation. Think of who they were before they met Jesus.

-Peter, Andrew, James, and John, rugged fishermen, were what we might call ‘blue collar’ guys, maybe a little rough around the edges

-Nathaniel was a bit of a philosopher, an elitist, one who was quick to stereotype whole groups of people. Remember his comeback when Philip told him about Jesus of Nazareth? Nathaniel said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

-Simon was a revolutionary, ready at any time to strike out at the Romans. He was even called ‘the Zealot’.

-Matthew was a businessman, a tax collector, which in those days usually meant that ethics was a slippery concept.

-Thomas, I'm convinced, grew up in Missouri, because he always seemed to be saying, 'Show me'.

-Judas was the outsider in the group. The rest all came from around the Sea of Galilee, but Judas came from the southern region. But he must have been good with money, because he was the group's treasurer.

Quite a motley crew, isn't it? Kind of like...well, us. Each of us comes from a very unique background. Each of us is shaped by our upbringing, our education, our life experiences, the people we have met along the way, the things we've read. All of them have brought us to who we are today, including all our foibles and our flaws.

We are very different...but the one thing that unites us, and why we are here today, is Jesus Christ. We have all said 'yes' to his invitation to follow him.

And I think, like those first disciples, we answered that call, not knowing fully what might be in store for us. And maybe there have been times when we said:

"Wait a minute, Jesus. That's a pretty tall order. I'm not sure that's something I can do...or even want to do. Any number of things might happen. There's a lot of uncertainty."

Well, yes there is. Life happens. It is not always known what is around the corner for us.

The difference maker for us is trusting the One whom we are following. As each of us lives into that trust, it makes all the difference in the living of our days. As someone has said:

It's not what happens to us in life that is important.

It's what we **do** with happens to us that makes all the difference.

And one of the great gifts of Christ's Church is the gift of each other to travel with on this grand journey, encouraging each other, praying for each other, laughing with one another, working with one another, together welcoming those around us.

But let's be clear. To follow Jesus' invitation to follow is a risk. None of us knows fully what is in store.

Some might have a thought of being a little more 'secure'. It's a major part of the world in which we live. A fortress theme seems ever present:

-we build fences around our yards

-apartment buildings are densely packed, yet nobody knows their neighbors, or even speaks to them

-we don't want others to know our thoughts, or to get too close
Even without meaning to, the Church can be a fortress. . Yes, it can happen in churches. Perhaps you have experienced it. Over the years of your life, perhaps you have gone to a church for worship, and maybe even stayed for a fellowship hour...and no one spoke to you.

Let me offer a simple way of reinforcing who we are as Christ's followers, and what we are about. It's a simple exercise, but it visually points out this dynamic.

When your group gathers for a meeting, whether it be a committee, a study group, a mission group, etc., open with prayer by forming a circle and holding hands. As you begin your meeting with prayer, you see each face, connected for the work before you that evening (sharing ideas, visioning, discerning, etc.)

Then, when you close your meeting, form a circle for prayer again, only this time, face outward while holding hands. You're still connected, but now the collective vision is very different. Each person, symbolically, sees a portion of the world and, collectively, the group sees in every direction, 360 degrees, and the needs that might need to be met. A world to which we have been called.

The first word God said to Abram was 'Go', and it set the pattern of God's word to people of faith.

And then, in what only can be considered a massive understatement, a few verses later we read this:

"So Abram went, as the Lord had told him..."

And to top it off, in the N.T., in that great chapter in the Letter to the Hebrews, which describes what might be called the Faith Hall of Fame, there is a classic line which, for me at least, has some humor in it.

It's the verse we read earlier regarding Abraham's call.

"And he went out, not knowing where he was to go."!!!

It's so antithetical, isn't it? We like to have things pinned down, details known.

What about this thing we call 'faith'?

Followers of Jesus are people 'on the move', sometimes maybe even changing addresses, and certainly changing their courses of action in their ongoing journey and adventure with Jesus.

You see, faith is not something we get fixed, settled, nailed down for all time. If that is how we see it, then we are sorely missing a lot of excitement.

Faith...living, real, and vital faith is discovered **on** the journey as we move.

And that is both the promise and the challenge with Biblical faith. It is always calling us forward, into new and perhaps unexplored territory, bringing new possibilities where none existed before.

That is a prospect that is exciting...but which is also risky, wouldn't you say?

Jesus, in his words which have come to be called the Great Commission, contain another call from our Lord.

At the beginning of his ministry he says to his disciples, and to you and me: "Follow me." Now, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, he says: "Go into the world...give yourself to that world in my name...share the good news of love, forgiveness, hope, peace."

Even though it's God's work, he tells **us** to 'Go'.
And, in faith, like Abraham, we go out, not knowing where we are going!

The paradox of following Christ is we can't follow without stepping out...and we can't move without, perhaps, leaving some things behind.

A bit scary, isn't it?

The call 'to go' is risky because we don't know precisely where the Lord may be leading us. It's a new landscape out there, filled with a lot of uncertainty.

But, together, we can live comfortably in that uncertainty, on the move with one another and with our Lord. We are to go, take risks, and move into God's future.

Our comfort comes in the final words of Jesus' Great Commission:

"I am with you always, to the close of the age."

And, as we go forward together, we dare not close ourselves from others, keeping some in and some out. The frontier beckons with all its excitement, all its possibilities, all its opportunities.

In 2002 I attended our denomination's General Assembly in Louisville, KY. I was moved by the sermon preached in the opening worship by the outgoing Moderator, The Rev. Jack Rogers, now a retired professor of San Francisco Theological Seminary. In his message he suggested that we imagine in our minds a birdcage and a birdbath.

Dr. Rogers indicated that the PCUSA was struggling with the issue of diversity. One way to look at this struggle was to understand the relationship between boundaries that define us as a Xian community and the freedom that is possible within those boundaries.

He said that if you think of the statements of faith in the Book of Confessions as a birdcage, all of our attention is on the boundaries. And it leads to the question: Who's in and who's out? The Pharisees of Jesus' day were experts at it.

But Dr. Rogers also said that our affirmations of faith can be seen as a birdbath. A birdbath has boundaries, too—otherwise, all the water would dribble away. However, in this case our attention is not on the boundaries, but rather on the nourishing water of life.

In this scene, we are not asking who's in and who's out. Rather, we are inviting all to share in the nourishing water of life that we have found at the center of our faith.

So, the questions for every church are these:

Are we living in a birdcage, tending only to ourselves, thereby keeping others out?

or

Are we splashing around in the nourishing waters of life, welcoming others in to enjoy it also, sharing in our diversity and in our unity in Christ?

Some might say, "Well, as long as we have each other, that's enough."
But the Church of Jesus Christ says:

"We have each other, and that's a good start, but it's **not** enough. The world needs to hear Christ's story, our story...which is the world's hope."

Friends, here in these days together on the journey, living out Christ's Great Commission, let us rejoice, amid all the uncertainties of this world, for two wonderful things, which bring us a real sense of being comfortable in all that uncertainty:

1. Christ's promise that he will be with us to the close of the age.
2. The gift of his Church, the gift of each other on this exciting journey, and the excitement and joy of welcoming others into that adventure!!

Thanks be to God! Amen.