

A WORD OF LAMENT, GRATITUDE AND BLESSING

On the Occasion of the Decommissioning of

Ridglea Presbyterian Church, Fort Worth, Texas

July 18, 1943 – July 29, 2018

Warner M. Bailey, Senior Minister 1982-2004

Dear Friends of Ridglea,

Mary and I regret that we had to refuse your kind invitation to be with you today on this day of moment. We are experiencing a family reunion of my siblings and their extended families in Denver, Colorado, on the occasion of my 80th birthday. Truth to tell, I really won't be 80 until September 7 (Gary, please remember that!). But miracle of miracles, this is the only week-end the entire clan could be in one place. We'll do lots of telling of tales and catching up. I'm thrilled to have this practice run on what an octogenarian is supposed to look and feel like!

This day has finally arrived, though for me the possibility of it happening began not long after I had become Senior Minister in 1982. The thought of leaving was as contentious then as I am sure it is for some still. With a different congregation at that time, we finally made the decision to stay and expand. With a different congregation now, the opposite decision has been taken.

Presbyterians have an in-born fear of becoming captive to idols. Idols, as you know, are non-god things we turn into gods. Like a building. Thank God Ridglea is not an idol-worshipper. All the same, it is natural and healthy to lament what will be left behind. These walls have cradled deeply felt spiritual moments and memories. Weddings, funerals, pageants, plays, meetings, cantatas, baptisms, the Lord's Supper, ordinations, the list goes on and on. Not to have that place anymore that brings to vivid memory a precious moment will be a loss. I will lament that loss. But if we become stuck on the loss, we fall prey to idolatry. I'll wager that as we talk about our memories, we quickly talk about the people of those memories. They are still with us in body and spirit. I am going to try to remember people instead of plaster when I think about my years at Ridglea.

Which brings me to my second comment. I am and will always be grateful for all the blood, sweat, tears and treasure which have been poured into the structure that housed what we did for Jesus' sake here. It is significant that I never heard anyone say that the building was an end in itself, but always a means to a greater end. So for the sake of the greater end, we tried not to let the building get in its way, but rather let the building support in uplifting ways the ministry we did for Jesus' sake.

Maybe that is part of the reason you are launching out in a marvelous new adventure. You are searching for a place that is up to the task of supporting what you want to do for Jesus. You have your vision set on Vickery. But remember: Bloom where you are planted! Even if it is in temporary quarters. Bloom where you are planted. John Knox is not a rent-house, but God's house. Don't hold back your spirit of generosity to the people of River Oaks and Highway 199.

Finally, a blessing upon this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to wipe the slate clean, and with a marvelously gifted pastor and superbly trained staff, with a corps of strong leaders, with a happy group of children, youth, and seasoned members, go forth in joy, with steady step, with grit, with grace, with hope and trust. I will be on pins and needles to see your rebirth.

Blessed to be a Blessing

Genesis 12:1-4

July 29, 2018

Rev. Dr. Ryan J. Baer -- Ridglea Presbyterian Church

Now the Lord said to Abram, '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.'

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

On Sunday, June 4, 1944, the congregation of the Ridglea Presbyterian Church, chartered a little more than a year prior, held the first Service of the Lord's Day at its home at 6201 Camp Bowie Boulevard. Today, July 29, 2018, marks the last Service of the Lord's Day that the Ridglea Presbyterian Church will hold on Camp Bowie Boulevard.

If my calculations are correct, it has been 74 years, 1 month, and 26 days since that first Sunday morning, and this marks the 3,869th consecutive Sunday that this church has worshiped the triune God at this address. We may have missed a Sunday or two because of the odd ice storm, but for nearly 75 years, week in and week out, early in the morning on the first day of the week, the people of God have been gathering in this place to hear and to tell the good news about Jesus Christ.

And that's why the Spirit kept drawing me back to this text from Genesis this morning, because my ear caught on the fact that Abram was 75 years old when he packed up and left what was known and familiar and comfortable and headed for a new home.

Genesis, of course, means beginning, and it's the first book in the bible. But I want to suggest to you that the meat of the biblical story doesn't really begin with, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth." I think the creation stories, the stories about Cain and Abel and Noah and the Flood and the Tower of Babel, basically, the first eleven chapters of Genesis, I think all of that is a prelude.

And I think this story, this story right here in Genesis 12, is the overture for the rest of the entire book - not just Genesis, but for the whole rest of the bible. In a symphony, the overture is the theme that the composer will keep returning to over and over again throughout all the various movements. There will be, of course, variations on the theme, with different instrumentation and harmonies and countermelodies, but the overture will be unmistakable throughout the entire piece.

And so I read this story as the overture, the beginning, the key theme, of the entire bible. So let's unpack it a little, shall we?

Up to this point, we know precious little about this man Abram. In fact, all we really know is his name, and that he's married to a woman named Sarai, and that he and Sarai have been unable to have any children. We don't know that Abram is brave, or strong, or wealthy, or even particularly faithful or religious.

But one day, out of the clear blue sky, the Lord says to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house, and go 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."

You all have heard me say this before, but it bears repeating. The bible isn't ultimately about Abram, or the Israelites, or any people, really. The bible is ultimately about God, and we

learn two things about God in this passage.

First, God's intention, God's desire, God's ultimate will, is blessing. That's what God is up to in the world - blessing. And notice, it's not just a blessing for Abram and Sarai. It's not just a blessing for their kids and grandkids. God's ultimate intention is for the blessing of *all* the families of the earth. Not just the families that look a certain way or conform to a certain standard or who live on one side of a border. God's intention, God's mission in the world, is the blessing of *all* the families of the earth.

Now here's the second thing we learn. This is the same God who created everything by just speaking a word. God said, "Let there be light," and *poof* - there was light. So it stands to reason that God could just say, "All families of the earth, be blessed!" and *poof* - it would be so. But as we learn in this text, that's not how God is typically going to operate in the world. For reasons that aren't altogether clear even to me, God is going to work in and through human beings in order to bring that mission to fruition in the world.

And as we'll see as we read through the rest of the bible, by and large, the human beings that God chooses to in and through aren't usually the bravest or the strongest or the wealthiest or even the most obviously faithful or religious. In fact, in a few months, we're going to be reminded once again that when God was ready to come and live among us in human form, God didn't just show up in downtown Jerusalem and say, "Heeere's Jesus." The incarnation of God on earth happened in a backwater town, and it required a very young, very frightened, very under-resourced Mary and Joseph to participate in it.

So the overture of the bible set here in Genesis 12 is that God's deepest desire, God's deepest intention for the world is blessing *all* the families of the earth, and for some mysterious reason, God chooses to work in and through particular people as the instruments of that blessing.

Something else struck me as I read this text, something I'd never noticed before. The text

doesn't tell us how old Abram was when the Lord first called him. All it tells us is that Abram was 75 when he departed. But it doesn't tell us how much time elapsed between when God called and when Abram actually left town.

Maybe it was right away, but maybe not. Maybe it took awhile for Abram to get his affairs in order. Maybe the first three contracts he had for selling his property all fell through at the last possible minute.

All we know is that Abram was 75 when he departed. But maybe the call from God had come when Abram was a younger man.

As many of you know, today marks a milestone in a journey that began a little more than five years ago. That's when we were approached by a retail developer about the possibility of selling and relocating.

But as I have read through old records of the church in recent days, I have learned that this latest iteration is actually at least the third time that this congregation has discussed the possibility of a relocation.

In 1955, the congregation approved a plan to swap this land for an entire city block just a bit to the south of here. If I understand it correctly, it's roughly where the Mutual of Omaha Bank tower stands today. There was apparently some trouble however with the conveyance of title to that property, so the congregation looked at some other options, including the possibility of purchasing about seven acres of land along the north side of the expressway for the sum of \$75,000. However, it was learned that the northern branch of the Presbyterian church was eyeing that same piece of property, so the congregation passed on the opportunity. In the end, it was decided to build an addition to our existing building, including a large sanctuary with a basement underneath, which was dedicated in 1958.

In 1980, there was apparently a major problem with water incursion in the basement, and the minutes of the session reflect that the permanent solution to the problem was so expensive that a reasonable alternative included the possibility of relocating the entire church. A formal proposal to do just that was put forth in 1986, but at the time, the congregation decided to stay put and upgrade and renovate the existing structure.

Maybe God was calling us to a new land in 1955. Maybe it was 1986. Maybe it was 2013. Whatever the case may be, it's clear that it's taken us some time to get our affairs in order. It's taken some time to make sure we haven't lost our marbles completely. But the time has come for us to go. Ridglea Presbyterian Church turned 75 last spring, and today, we are setting out a new adventure.

There are things I'm going to miss dearly about this building.

I'm going to miss the way the pulpit in the chapel creaks just so when I rock from one side to the other.

I'm going to miss the way that my whole being fills with the music when Dale cranks the organ up to eleven.

I'm going to miss the view I have from the end of the center aisle when we gather for a wedding.

I'm going to miss the silent stillness of this room on a weekday morning, when I get it all to myself, with the sunlight streaming a million colors through all those windows.

This is not just a building.

This is a place where we have lived and loved, a place where we have laughed and cried,

a place where we have sung and been silent, a place where we have prayed and been prayed for, a place where, every once in awhile, we have become aware that we have been standing in the very presence of the Most High God.

But I keep coming back to this text, to this story that sets the overture for the whole bible. And I keep thinking about God's beautiful words of intention for the blessing of all the families of the earth, and about how truly remarkable it is that God is going to bring this out through ordinary, messy, broken human beings like Abram and Sarai and you and me.

And I keep running into this simple, stark fact. In order for any of it to happen, in order for God's mission to get untracked in the world, Abram had to change. In order for Abram and Sarai to become a great nation, in order for all the families of the earth to be blessed in and through them, they had to move.

And that's the whole trouble with the gospel. It keeps telling us that God loves us completely, wholly, fully, and passionately, just exactly as we are.

And the gospel keeps telling us that God loves us too much to let us stay exactly as we are.

Every time Jesus meets someone, he invites them to change.

"Drop your nets and come follow me."

"Pick up your mat and walk."

"Does no one condemn you? Then neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

The call to discipleship in Jesus Christ is a call to *change*.

And so we'd do well to remember that as much as we love this building, we didn't sell it because it makes good financial sense. We're not moving because moving is ever so much fun, especially in summer in Texas.

We're moving because God's deepest desire, God's most intense yearning, God's mission in the world, is blessing, not just for us, but *all* the families of the earth, and God is inviting us to play a role in it right here in west Fort Worth. Through it all, even though our address is changing, our call to participate in God's mission in the world remains unchanged.

One other detail of this story caught my ear this week. Abram was 75 years old when he departed, and Lot went with him. Abram didn't have to go through this thing alone. Lot went with him.

And that's another overture note we'll find that carries throughout the whole bible. Very rarely does God ever call anyone to a monumental task by themselves.

Abram and Lot did it together.

Moses and Aaron did it together.

Ruth and Naomi did it together.

Esther and Mordecai did it together.

Elijah and Elisha did it together.

Peter, James, and John did it together.

Mary and Salome did it together.

Paul and Timothy did it together.

Most of the “you’s” in the bible are actually “y’alls.” As we learn right here in the beginning of the bible, we are in this thing together.

Moving is stressful. It just is. It’s a huge job, whether you’re moving across the country or moving next door. I’m not a neat freak by any means, but just walking through this building and seeing all the stuff being pulled out into the halls raises my blood pressure.

But you know what lowers it?

The dozens of members and friends of this congregation coming together and working side by side.

The dozens of people who are tapping into their deep experience in accounting and engineering and organizational leadership in the service of God’s mission in this place.

The spiritual fruit of generosity and patience and gentleness and wisdom that has been manifest in the leadership of this church.

When I think about buildings and boxes and furniture, my blood pressure goes up. But when I think about the disciples of Jesus who use those buildings as a tool for God’s mission, my blood pressure goes down.

And so we’re going to go, and we’re going to go together.

Because The Lord came to Ridglea Presbyterian Church and said, “I want you to go from

your building and your land and what's been comfortable and familiar, and go to a land that I will show you. I'm going to continue making you a great congregation, not for your own sake, but so that you will be a blessing. I will bless all the ones who bless you, and if some poor soul is foolish enough to mess with you, I've got your back. And in and through you, my dear people, I will bring about the blessing of all the families of the earth."

So Ridglea went, just as the Lord had told them. They were seventy five years old when they departed Camp Bowie.

And they went together.

Thanks be to God. Amen.