

A-Proper 5, 2008
St. Luke's, Renton, WA
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Genesis 12.1-9

Abram was well into his retirement years, 75 years old, when, as the story goes, God told him to pack up lock, stock, and barrel and hit the road. "Go from your country and your family and heritage to a new land. "Get a-going," said God, "and I'll let you know when you get there. I plan to bless you. Your journey has a purpose for my future."

Matthew was sitting in his tax office when Jesus walked by and said simply, "Follow me."

The Divine invitation in our lessons today is to join in the compelling journey of God's future. Join in the compelling journey of God's future.

The other day I attended a talk by one of our church's foremost researchers of mainline congregations, Diana Butler-Bass. Last year, your vestry read one of her books together. She has a message of hope for the church. When all of the rhetoric about mainline denominations is about how we are declining in numbers, her research has revealed another story. Her research has noted that we are living in a new time and that churches which have been able to translate their tradition for our time are thriving.

Well, Diana told us about a talk she had recently heard by another scholar who earned a Ph.D. studying human happiness. This fellow was asked the obvious question, "So what are the keys to human happiness?"

"Three things seem to be key, he said:"

1. Meaningful work
2. People to love who love you ... and
3. Hope for the future

Butler-Bass highlighted this matter of "hope for the future". From her own research with what she calls "Practicing Congregations"—congregations who in some way do the work and mission of the gospel, she has seen how crucial this aspect of hope for the future is and how detrimental is its absence. Congregations can get stuck in a backward glance of nostalgia. When groups of people in a church locate the bright spot of their lives of faith as having occurred "back in the day"—back when church was culturally the thing to do, back when ladies wore hats and gloves, back when everyone knew all the same songs, back when the baby-boom begat scads of children, back when we were all the same, back when ... you fill in the blank—Butler-Bass noted that when congregations' locate the bright spot of their lives of faith as occurring in the past, they tend to become anti-future. They are disabled from seeing the work God is doing right before their eyes, and they tend to be daunted by the direction of God's future.

She told a moving, personal story. She said when she was 8 years old, her beloved, but pessimistic grandfather said to her, essentially "The world is going to hell in a hand-basket and I pity you for the future you will have to endure." Butler-Bass said, quite to the opposite, her eyes were full of the *possibility* of the future and yet also of love for her grandfather, which meant that

she had to choose between them: her grandfather and her hope, and it took her years to recover her sense of hope.

Quite to the contrary, God invites us to join in the compelling journey to God's future. God invites us to join in the venture of hope for a future that will be revealed to us. God invites us to the blessing—to the feast of God's future.

Now, one of the things we do intentionally and profoundly in church is to remember. Our liturgy is a memorial thanksgiving feast: "Do this in remembrance of me." Memory is the touch stone of our religion. In the Eucharistic celebration, we are ever invited to remember. But we remember so that we may see in our own time. We tell the stories of God's people so that we may see God at work leading and guiding us forward. "O God our help in ages past, *our hope for years to come.*"

I have an old priest friend who is fond of saying "Future" is another name for God. Some would say "Now" is another name for God. The idea is that God is always unfolding, God is always revealing. Or as the new motto of the United Church of Christ says, "God is still speaking." God is ever leading us forward on the journey of faith.

- God says to Abram (and you will remember that it wasn't until Abram was **99** years old, as the story goes, that God changed his name from Abram which means "an exalted father" to Abraham which means "the father of many nations.") In our story, God says to Abram, "Pick up and go from your country because I want to bless you with a bright future that goes well beyond yourself."
- Jesus invites Matthew the despised tax-collector to follow him into the way of God's future.
- The woman suffering from hemorrhages touches Jesus, she is healed and takes her place in God's future.
- When the life of the synagogue leader's daughter is all past, until Jesus takes her by the hand and gives her a future.

I love that line in the burial liturgy where we say, "even at the grave, we make our song: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia." Even at the ends of our lives, we are ever unfolding into the life of God, into God's future.

Like Abram, we journey in stages. Some of us may be most comfortable as settlers and others of us may love adventure, some are builders of shrines, others break the way for us to follow and saying, "Come follow me." We journey in stages, but the Christian vocation, the meaningful labor of our lives, is the transformation of our lives, the redemption of our lives, the healing and forgiveness and amendment of our lives, and the renewal of our common life. We do not dwell among those who have arrived, but are ever fellow-travelers on the path of God's mercy. There is no end to God and no end to our journey into the Mystery of God's future. Grace upon grace we go into the very heart which God will show us.

If Diana Butler-Bass is right, our future as a congregation and our happiness as humans, has something to do with our hope for the future. It has something to do with answering the invitation of God to follow toward a future of God's blessing—to hear the compelling call of God on our lives for a future that will be revealed to us. I hope we'll join in.

