

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, October 29, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 28:16-20
“The sermon with no title”

As you may imagine, I thought and prayed long and hard about this sermon, my last as minister of New St James. I thought long and hard especially about what title I would give it. Then it came to me. ‘That’s it,’ I thought. ‘That’s the one,’ I thought. ‘Got it,’ I thought.

‘No, you haven’t,’ I thought back.

You see, the title that came to me was Goodbye, Farewell and Amen. This will be ancient history for the boys and girls in the choir, but does anyone else recognize it?

It was the title of the final episode of the most profoundly spiritual television series ever: MASH. Broadcast on February 28, 1983, after 11 seasons, it was the perfect end to a great series. But not the perfect title for this sermon.

You see, Goodbye, Farewell and Amen was about an ending. An absolute, firm, hard ending. The show was over. The cast and crew dispersed. And apart from a 30th anniversary reunion, I don’t believe they have all worked together ever again. It was over. Period. Full stop. Goodbye. Farewell. Amen.

That is not what this sermon and this service are about. For whatever I have done over the past ten years; whatever we have achieved together for the kingdom of God over the past ten years: if that all comes to an end today or on Wednesday, then I will have failed you. And we will have failed in our work together for the kingdom of God.

So a title I might prefer is Movin' Right Along. Does anyone recognize that? It's the title of the song that Kermit the Frog and Fozzie Bear sing as they make their way to Hollywood to find fame and fortune in the greatest movie of all time, The Muppet Movie. Movin' Right Along. I have lost count of the number of times I have preached on Genesis 12:1-9. I know it was the last text I preached on in Scotland before I left my country and my kindred and my father’s house to come to the land that God was showing us. It was the first text I preached on when we arrived in Burlington, and I read it, though I didn’t preach on it, at the last gathering we had when we were leaving. It was the first text I preached on from this pulpit when I became your minister, and it will be my last today.

I have focussed on different parts of the passage at different times, but the part I want to focus on this morning is the very last verse, Genesis 12:9: And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb. Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.

Genesis 12 is just part of the story of Abram, or as he is later known, Abraham. The story of his life goes on until Genesis 25:8, when we are told that Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.

The story in Genesis 12 of Abram's move from Haran to the land that the LORD would show him is the first major episode in the story. And pretty much throughout the rest of his life, we see Abram on the move. In chapter 12 alone he moves from Haran to Canaan to the Negeb to Egypt and back to the Negeb.

Abram journeyed on by stages. Not in one single move, one great migration. Not in one single chapter of his life. Not in a way that would allow him to pause at the end, heave a sigh of relief, and say, 'OK, that's it. Journey over. Destination reached. Nothing more to do. Time to sit back and rest.' Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb. He got to the Negeb eventually. But until then, he was a man with a purpose. He journeyed on by stages, setting up altars wherever he went, claiming the territory for God, and effectively building God's reign on earth.

Which sounds much like the task that we are engaged upon. We are – you are – a people with a purpose: to follow Christ, worship God, and serve others. There is an energy, a dynamism, a determination behind that purpose that I see everywhere in New St James. I take no credit for it, because it has always been there. It maybe just needed a bit of encouragement to bring it to the fore. But it is to the fore now.

So: journey on, New St James. Journey on into the future that God has in hold for you. Follow Christ. Worship God. Serve others. And as you do, consider this. A few weeks ago, a colleague posted something on Facebook that I want to close with. On Facebook, it was attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in front of the altar in his church in El Salvador while celebrating the Mass. But in fact, it was written by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, as part of a tribute to Romero on the anniversary of his murder. The title is A Future Not Our Own. Untener writes: It helps now and then to step back and take a long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

Now there's a sermon title worth pondering: We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.