

The Pilgrim Way: Through Uncertainty

Luke 9:57-62 Hebrews 11:8-12

Greetings to you, from my usual place in the sanctuary while I deliver this sermon. The sanctuary is empty but in my mind I see all of you—in your usual seats, of course—and I think of you and pray for you. And I hope you are taking all of the good and necessary recommended precautions to keep yourself healthy, and to reduce the spread of this virus.

Our sermon series for Lent is the Pilgrim Way, and as I planned out this series I think it is ironic, or perhaps providential, that this morning's topic is "Uncertainty." Uncertainty being part of pilgrimage, and our journey of faith. This feels like an uncertain time, doesn't it? A very open-ended time when we're not exactly sure how long it will take for this coronavirus to pass, or when we'll be able to gather again in worship, or watch our favorite sports.

Well, let's dive in and see how our Scriptures speak to this, and bring encouragement and strength to us.

Our first reading is from the gospel of Luke. We're following Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, and Luke records this for us:

Luke 9:57–62

57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'⁵⁹ To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' (*That's a middle eastern euphemism for: "let me stay at home until my parents have passed away and I've taken care of everything after that; then I'll follow"*)⁶⁰ But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'⁶¹ Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.'⁶² Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

Our second reading is from Hebrews 11, part of the great roll call of saints who lived by faith.

Hebrews 11:8-12

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.⁹ By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.¹⁰ For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.¹¹ By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.¹² Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Ever gotten lost? While driving, or even walking. Think about a time when that happened... How did that feel? It's disorienting, right? What did we do before GPS?!? Here's another way of thinking about this:

On a scale from one to ten... Where are you on the change-o-meter? One: I don't like change at all—I believe that change is a 4 letter word. Ten: change is my middle name; if I don't have variety and change on some regular basis I go stir crazy. Where are you on the spectrum?

We all probably know or have known friends and family members on both ends of the scale. I know some who wear the same clothes they wore in college, their house looks like it did in the 1970's, they order the same Starbucks beverage every day and if they deviate from that same beverage their day is ruined.

Others we know are the exact opposite. One of my adult youth group leaders at our church in Alaska was a change junkie. He's lived in 5 different houses in the last 10 years—not because he needed to move but because he liked (needed?) change. His family are all saints for rolling with it. But he's a lot of fun to hang out with and take on mission trips because he is so adventuresome and adaptable and curious! He's not fazed by unexpected things that happen or changes in plans.

We all have different tolerance levels to change and unpredictability and uncertainty. And God needs us all! We need explorers like Lewis and Clark who WANT to venture into the unknown. And we need people who stay home and maintain things and keep things running smoothly.

For some of us, though, dealing with change, or the unknown—with **uncertainty**—is not easy! Our first daughter didn't even like having her diaper changed. When we got wind of the need for change, she would hide in a closet and say, "I'm not poopy!" Talk about resistance to change! I would paraphrase 1John1:8-9 for her, which says: *⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" My paraphrase of that for our daughter with sagging diaper was: "If we say we have no poop, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our poopiness, mom and dad are faithful and just to change your diaper and cleanse you from all poopiness." There's some good theology for you!

Wherever **we** are on that spectrum, one thing is true: change and uncertainty is part of life. Whether it's planned or unplanned. And especially if we are on the pilgrimage of faith, there will be times of uncertainty because God

seems to be fond of leading his people into places and experiences that stretch us, perhaps even scare us. For our good, of course. Just like we parents had to challenge our kids from time to time to stretch and grow for their good, in spite of their fears. How many of us parents had to deal with frightened children who didn't want to go to that first day of school? Or learn to ride a bike. Or go to that first sleepover at a friend's house. Maybe it was the parent who was more frightened than the children in some cases!

When it comes to fear of the unknown and uncertainty, the main issues that prevent our experience of *freedom* from that fear, or perhaps are the *cause* of that fear are often one of two things (and sometimes both): a desire for comfort, and a desire for control.

Our fear of uncertainty and change could be driven by a desire for **comfort**. We are comfortable with the way things are, and some unknown future event that *might happen* (or *is happening*) represents discomfort and we don't like being uncomfortable. ***We're uncomfortable with being uncomfortable!*** And this is magnified for us if we have built our faith and our theology around a belief that God's goal for our life is mainly comfort. And to that I say: have you read the Bible lately?!?! Is there any person in there to whom God says, "My great calling

and goal for you is comfort”? Not really. Comfort does come, along the way, as God blesses and consoles people here and there—*along the way*. But God’s goal, it seems, is actually to get people into trouble. Not get them sick! But often into trouble. It seems like most of the Biblical characters found themselves in trouble of some kind as a result of God’s call on their life. So if we have trouble, that might be a sign that something good is happening, not bad. Because it’s in times of discomfort and uncertainty that we learn and grow the most. Because we are unmoored from our usual anchorages, and hand-holds, the things we cling to for comfort and security, and all we have is Jesus to lead us. That’s a good thing!

So, our fear of the unknown could be driven by our desire for **comfort**.

Our fear or resistance could also come from a desire to have **control**. We want to know what’s happening and when—I want predictability, want to have a plan, I want to know what the outcome will be. That’s the problem with the people Jesus calls to follow him, from Luke 9. They want plans, they want things buttoned up and figured out, close the loop here and there and then once everything is neat and tidy, *then* I’ll follow. Jesus tells them, it doesn’t work that way. There is going to be some amount of loss of control here. “*The son of man has no place to lay his head*” is a way of saying “There will be uncertainty.”

Now, I'll be the first person to say that planning is good and I like to have a plan to work with. But I realize that I can't often control what will happen when, and, outcomes are out of my control. Because the truth is, control is an illusion. None of us are in control, really—in terms of big picture things of life and life's circumstances. We *can* control ourselves in many ways: self-control is a fruit of the Spirit after all, and I can control my attitude, my responses to people, and my daily decisions about many things—but trying to control life as a whole, or control others, or control the future and every imagined 'what if,' is an illusion, a chasing after the wind as it says in Ecclesiastes. This coronavirus feels out of control, doesn't it? We can't control that it's here among us; but we can control how we respond, and what our attitude will be. We can take the good precautions, we can calm and encourage others. But for now, we are living through an open-ended situation, and we don't know when things will get back to normal (if there ever is such a thing anyway). And it feels out of control, doesn't it?

As disciples of Jesus we are asked to let go of the desire for control, and trust Jesus to lead us well. When Jesus called his disciples to follow him, and they did, they risked everything—talk about heading into the unknown future! They had to trust him by letting go of what they had been doing, and follow him into the new adventure.

I try to imagine Jesus saying to Peter, “Follow me!” and Peter saying, “Okay. Sounds good. But first, would you lay out what the next three years is going to be like for me? Where will we be going? Where will we be staying? What will we be eating? Who will I be with? (because there are a couple people I don’t like hanging out with) Can we do a cost-benefit analysis? I’d like to know a little more about what exactly you’re getting me into, Jesus.” That sounds silly, but it sounds like my prayers sometimes. And imagine, what if Jesus *had* told Peter what he was in for? Peter probably would’ve bailed out before he even started— “I’m not signing up for *that*. It ends in a crucifixion?? That doesn’t sound like any fun.” Talk about discomfort! “And *those* people?—the others you’ve asked to come along? I have to be friends and coworkers with *them*?!?”

Let’s imagine that Jesus did lay out a plan for Peter, and he began to follow Jesus... would it have helped Peter to know? I really doubt it. Like us, he’d become anxious about what he knew was about to happen. And in the times when I pray and say, “Hey Jesus, could you lay out the near future for me and let me know exactly what’s going to happen and when?” After sitting with that prayer for a while I realize that it would ruin things if I knew everything. It would create its own anxiety, and rob me of the joy of living in the present moment and

appreciating what's right in front of me, right now. And, I would stop trusting God and lean into predictable, or probable, outcomes.

It's the same in the Abraham story: God says, "Go!" Abraham says: "Okay, where?" God says: "You'll know when you get there." "Um, can I have some more specific directions and information please?" God says, "I'll guide you as you go, one step at a time." And it tells us in our reading that Abraham went, *not knowing where he was going*. That line makes me chuckle, and it sounds humorous, like someone getting lost or being irresponsible and not asking for directions. But Abraham became the great patriarch he was because he trusted God to lead him day by day, living in the present. Abraham is known as the father of faith, for good reason.

Now, you and I not called to *that* type of following God; that was a unique calling. But it's given to us as an example of someone who trusted God's leading, a person releasing the desire for comfort and control. And, it's an example of *God's* faithfulness. Abraham experienced *God's* faithfulness all along the way.

As human beings we seem to believe that we need 3 things in order to be happy and have inner peace: security (comfort), control, and approval from others. But that isn't true. We don't need those things to be happy. In fact,

pursuing them is the primary cause of our *unhappiness* and *lack* of inner peace.

What we need to release, therefore, is our attachment to the assumption that we need these things (security, control, and approval from others). To release our need to try to control circumstances and outcomes over which we have no real control, and put our weight down on God's love and faithfulness and his promises to us that he is always with us, no matter what.

Here are a couple of encouragements from the Abraham story and from Jesus, on overcoming fear of the unknown, or fear of uncertainty:

1. Trust and follow. Follow God into the world... We need to press on through our fear and *act* on what Jesus calls us to do. We may not be able to control what's going on in the world, or in our lives, but we can still love people with the transforming love of God. Continue doing that, and be people of action in the world. Like Abraham, trust and go. Do what we know we *can* do, and what we know we're *supposed* to do, as God's pilgrim people. Again, take the good precautions about the coronavirus, for our sakes and for the sake of others, but don't shrink back in fear. Help others, love others, live your life as much as you are able. Read the poem "Pandemic" (posted on our web site and Facebook

page) which beautifully describes how we can do this—from the heart, even as we practice social distancing.

This is a call to trust. A trust that God is always working out his good will and his purposes in our lives and in the world, no matter what is happening. Trust that God loves us—and everyone else! Trust that God keeps his promises. Trust that “God makes all things work together for good.” Even with this virus; even in our politics. Nothing goes to waste in *God’s* economy! Sometimes the good results aren’t apparent until later, when we look back, and that can be frustrating. So for now, we are called trust that God is working for good.

Simply put, we have to have faith. And *faith isn’t something we exercise when the way becomes clear and things are easy*. Then it wouldn’t be faith. It would be certainty. But we’re not called to have certainty, we’re called to have faith. We’re called to trust. *And faith and trust are what we exercise when things are hard and uncertain, not when they’re easy*.

We have to trust that God is with us, and we have to trust that God is good, that God fulfills his promises, and that God is going to honor our desire to trust him as we take steps forward in our journey and live into the adventure that lies before us, knowing that God is with us, always. Like Abraham. Trust, and go.

2. When uncertainty and trouble is afoot, whether small or large, we need to keep an eternal perspective. We need to try to keep the big picture, and look at the circumstances and changes of our lives, and of the world, in light of eternity. We need to learn to say, “In light of eternity...” Or, “in light of God’s great kingdom...” what does this thing that *might* happen, this change that *is* happening, really affect? Is it as big and as bad as it seems right now? Have I awfulized it? Is this something God hasn’t seen or handled before?

Scripture tells us, and especially our reading from Hebrews this morning, that Abraham—and all who lived by faith—were keeping their eyes on the bigger picture. On the eternal and loving God, their God. And it says in Hebrews that they were looking forward to a homeland, a better country, a city. Their eyes were lifted up; they were looking at the horizon, at an eternal perspective, and therefore they could be okay with not knowing all of the little what-if’s and what-might-happen’s—because, as it says shortly after this in Hebrews: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. That’s the constant: God’s faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ. So, in light of eternity... (fill in the sentence for yourself)

God is our refuge and strength, it says in our call to worship from Psalm 46, “therefore we will not fear, though the earth should *change*.” Is the world

changing? Yes! In many ways. Is there change in your life and my life? Yes! But the reminder is: God is with us. He gladdens our hearts and gives us peace. And he invites us to *be still*, and know that he is God.

Let's pray together:

Loving God, help us indeed to be still. To quiet our minds and hearts, and know that you are God. Which means knowing that you love us, and you love the world. That you are present, and working for good.

In the quiet moments of our reflection at home, speak peace to us. And speak words of wisdom and instruction to guide us in ways we can help and encourage others, and pray for others, especially those who are sick and who are affected by this virus financially, and in other ways.

May this be a strengthening time for us, and a time of experiencing your faithfulness on this part of our pilgrim journey. Through Christ the Lord. Amen.