

July 1, 2018
"Follow the Light"

All scriptures are from the *Common English Bible*.

About 16 years ago, I was a miserable person in some ways. I was unhappy in my career. I had entered psychology with the hope of helping people. Now, my job was more and more about billable hours—how much profit I could wring out of people for the sake of my employer. It was a lot of pressure, and difficult to succeed at being simultaneously a good money producer, caregiver, and leader on multiple fronts. Things I enjoyed about my job had to be sacrificed to the gods of profit.

I didn't realize it right away, but my pain was a burning bush, shedding light on a path of service to God. I thought I was to serve in Christian education, but when the opportunity arose to pastor two small congregations south of Rockford, I leaped at it. It wasn't long before I understood this had been my calling all along. I learned much in the 10 years I was in those churches. By the time I was called to serve in Rockton, I was ready for the next challenge. I have firmly believed this is where I'm called by God to be. The evidence is in the fruits of our ministry here together.

But ***it is God's nature that our calling often changes over the course of our lives***. As I was called to New Milford and Davis Junction, as I was called to Rockton, now I'm being called to Oregon.

To say this took me by surprise is an understatement. I went to Annual Conference this year confident in my place at Rockton. When Rev. Young-Mee Park, District Superintendent of the DeKalb District, told me she wanted to talk with me, I casually wondered what it was about, never guessing what she had in mind. This was rather naïve of me, but that's how secure I felt!

When I did meet with her that Sunday evening, and she said, "I want to offer you an appointment," I was completely shocked. She kept talking, but I'm not sure what she said for the next few minutes as my brain frantically tried to process her first sentence. After the shock, my next reaction was to dig my heels in. "No way!" I thought. "You have got to be wrong! My call is at Rockton."

As Rev. Park continued to speak, though, some of her reasoning began to get through. I began to hear God's still, small voice.

The appointment process in the United Methodist Church is like no other. Instead of churches hiring a pastor, one is appointed to them. It's said that we don't serve a call but are called to serve. In January, as some pastors let the Bishop and cabinet know they are going to retire, as other pastors ask to be moved, and as some churches ask for a new pastor, vacancies are identified. As those vacancies are filled, new vacancies are created, causing a domino effect of vacancies and filling them. Usually, this all winds down before Annual Conference, but sometimes it continues.

The Bishop and cabinet take the appointment process very seriously. Each vacancy is prayed over. Several candidates names are suggested for it, and each one is prayed for. There is holy conferencing, as the strengths and needs of the congregation and the pastors are carefully considered. And more prayer happens as the list is whittled down to the pastor that the Bishop and cabinet hear God speaking most clearly for.

In this case, it came down to Oregon United Methodist Church and me. Right now, the Bishop and cabinet are going through this same process with Rockton UMC as the focus. I find it incredibly humbling to be a part of a method involving the prayer, call, spiritual gifts and discernment of a whole host of God's people.

Being called to service by God is one of the most amazing, joyful, frightening, and unsettling things I can imagine. It has disrupted my life on multiple occasions, required that I do things I didn't think I could do and didn't want to do. It has asked me to go places I never imagined, and do and be far more than I ever thought I would. But it's also been the fertile ground of every good thing I've ever participated in in the name of Jesus.

It's times like this that I appreciate Abraham and Sarah. Here is part of their story from Genesis 12: 1-5:

The LORD said to Abram, "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;
all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you."

Abram left just as the LORD told him, and Lot went with him. Now Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all of their possessions, and those who became members of their household in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan.

Can you imagine what this was like for Abraham and Sarah? I'm just going to Oregon. I'm not leaving my family, and I can easily see you again. But they were called by God to leave everyone and everything they were familiar with behind, for a journey with no known destination or conclusion. Scripture doesn't give us much of a clue about their feelings, but I kinda think they would have reacted like me: "No way! You've got to be wrong!" But, ultimately their "yes" to God's call made history, and a provided a future of hope for the world.

There are a few things to take away from their story.

We learn that ***a call from God is uncomfortable, which has to do with the fact that it's risky and full of unknowns***. There are some thrill seekers who enjoy risk, but most of us don't. We don't like the thought of potentially losing what we've worked for, what we're comfortable with, what we value. Turning these things over to God rather than clinging to them is incredibly difficult. And we don't like the unknown. We want to know where we will live, how we will pay our bills, where our next meal is coming from. ***We want our present and our future to be under our control. Following a call, on the other hand, is about handing our lives over to God's control.*** Let's just admit that we hate that!

But, ***following God's call is where the blessing is***. Abraham and Sarah were childless, an awful fate to people of Biblical times. By following God's call, they were promised that God would make their name respected, that they would have a son and parent an entire nation. And God's promises came true.

What blessing comes from our call? Because of my life as a pastor, I have been more abundantly blessed than I can even communicate. The love, generosity and grace that have come to me because of you is so great it is unmeasurable! I was thinking how many times I say thank you in the course of a day. I've already done it five times today. Each "thank you" represents a blessing I have received. There are so many wonderful and amazing ways the love of God has come to be because of this call to ministry that there are no words for it. I'm convinced that ***the joy, peace and comfort of God's kingdom is most available to us when we are following his call to bring that kingdom forth with our service.***

God made another important promise to Abraham and Sarah. He said that he would bless them, and that they would be a blessing. God was the parent of Abraham and Sarah, and they were the parents of a great nation. We can be the parents of God's kingdom to our neighbors when we are faithful to our calls. ***We experience a blessing and become a blessing to others when we are obedient to God.***

It all begins when we say, "Yes."

For me, that "yes" began about 3 AM on Monday morning after I had spoken to Rev. Park. I had a very restless night, thinking of all the things I would be losing, all the people I would miss, all the ways my control was getting jerked away. (And brothers and sisters, control is always an illusion!) I began to realize how comfortable I am here. I love this church, this town, the parsonage. I love you, my congregation. It's all like a big, wooly blanket where I feel safe and secure.

Then the voice of God came to me in my own words, that I had repeated before: ***Good ministry seldom comes out of a comfort zone.*** Read that line again and let it sink in. I thought of all the ways I had served God in the past. Almost none of them were comfortable at first. Preaching, leading worship, doing the administration of the church, casting a vision, planning for and enacting service to God's people—all of it challenging, and all of it uncomfortable, until I did it

and found that God was holding me closely. Then I knew I had to say “yes” to this call. I still had a few more arguments with God, but my heart knew my resistance was futile.

And now you are being asked to say “yes” to a call as well, to leave a comfort zone for the risk and unknowns of serving God. You’re being asked to welcome a new pastor, and to explore what great ministries you will do together. Brothers and sisters, it’s hard! We just want things to stay the same, to make us feel warm and cozy and safe. But good ministry is seldom done from a comfort zone. And good ministry, obedience to God’s call in our lives and our church, is where the blessing is. And it’s where we become a blessing to others.

There is a lot of change, risk and unknowns coming up for all of us. One thing comforts and leads me forward. As it says in Psalm 119: 105:

Your word is a lamp before my feet
and a light for my journey.

If you have ever actually used a lamp to walk in darkness, you know that it doesn’t light very far in front of you. By the illumination of a flame, you can really only see about two steps ahead. What’s out there, beyond the circle of light, is unknown. We only discover it by continuing to walk. But ***we walk by the light of God’s Word, with trust that he is with us, and hope that as he promises, he has planned a future of good for us.*** I’m saying “yes” to God’s call in my life, not really knowing what’s ahead, but trusting in his Word of mercy and grace. I’m asking that you, too, say “yes” to whatever it is that God is calling you to in the changes ahead. I know that by the grace of our good and loving God, you will be blessed, and you will be a blessing.