

I want to share with you today my faith journey this year. It is intensely personal. Yet I hope my journey will provide guidance to some of you who may be facing critical decisions in your lives.

“My Faith Journey This Year”

“By faith Abraham, when called to go ... obeyed and went ... without knowing where he was going.” Hebrews 11:8

“So keep up your courage men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.” Acts 27:25

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Two passages from the New Testament frame my remarks to you today. I will refer to them often throughout this message.

Introduction

1. Two of my life heroes died within the past two years. I miss them, their counsel, friendship and wisdom.
2. My personal faith journey this school year has compelled me to return to the scriptures to study anew the life of two biblical heroes, Abraham and Paul. And what a spiritual journey it has been this school year for Anne and me!
3. My November 2005 announcement to Board of Trustees, and later to the faculty, staff and students provide some context for this very eventful year in my life. The announcement referred to my plan to retire in 2007 from MVNU. Following the renewal vote last fall, I shared with the Board the following thoughts:

“During the past few months, I have had an increasing awareness that my renewal vote in 2005 would be the last one for me as the university president.”

I have a growing awareness – I believe, a Spirit inspired confidence – that this is the time for the Mount Vernon Nazarene University Board of Trustees to begin the process of transitioning to a new University president. There is an emerging sense of a release from God’s call to me in 1989 to serve as the fifth president of this outstanding institution.

I continued to share reflective thoughts with the Board:

“From 1978 to 1989, I was involved in theological education in Europe and Asia. I believe I had a small part in shaping emerging Christian leaders at the European Nazarene College and the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. Today, as I look at the denominational leadership in Europe and throughout Asia and the South Pacific, I feel as though, in a small way, I helped train a generation of Christian leaders who are now serving in key leadership roles in the Church of the Nazarene and other holiness denominations.”

And, then I concluded my statement to the Board with these words:

“If I had the opportunity, I would like to give the remaining time I have in active ministry to reaching and teaching another generation of emerging Christian Leaders to serve the Church of the Nazarene throughout the world. However, I have faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He will lead me as He wills. And God is enough!”

4. Throughout this year, especially leading up to the Board meeting last fall, I read and re-read Hebrews 11 – the chapter on “Heroes” of Christian faith. I could not get away from these words in Hebrews 11:8: “By faith Abraham, when called to go ... obeyed and went . . . without knowing where he was going.” Nor could I stray far from Paul’s words in Acts 27:25; “So keep up your courage men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.”

Let me share with you why these verses have been so important to me this year.

- I. The words COMFORT me.

Each phrase in Hebrews 11:8 has captivated me this year. The first phrase is:

A. BY FAITH ABRAHAM ... We can review the life of Abraham in Genesis, chapters 11-25.

1. Several verses jumped out at me this year as I have read and re-read the story of Abraham:

- Genesis 12:1 “The Lord had said to Abraham, leave your country, your people and your fathers household and go to the land I will show you.”
- Genesis 12:4 “so Abraham left, as the Lord had told him.
- Genesis 13:18 “so Abraham moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the Lord.”
- Genesis 15:1-2 “After this, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abraham, I am your shield, your very great reward.”
- Genesis 15:4 “Then the word of the Lord came to him...”
- Genesis 15:6 Abraham believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness.”
- Genesis 22:8 “Abraham answered, God himself will provide ...”
- Genesis 22:14 “So Abraham called that place, The Lord will provide.” And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.”

2. What is faith?

Hebrews 11: 1,6 states: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”¹ “And without faith it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”⁶

- Translated to my situation means “By faith, LeBron, trust and believe me.”
- Trust and believe that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 - redeems me,
 - calls me, gives direction or vision to me,

- sustains me, and
 - leads me, often, to places, situations, people, assignments without ever knowing the full implications of His word of direction to me!
- By faith, LeBron, trust and believe, that
 - The promise of God is true: He who calls and speaks a word of direction will never leave me nor forsake me! What a promise!
3. Yet, throughout this year, I have prayed the prayer in Mark 9:24: “Lord, I believe; help me overcome my unbelief.”
- If you think my prayer is faulty, remember Abraham’s life:
 - Before he was called righteous, Abraham was frightened in Egypt. He instructed his wife to lie. He was wrong and he sinned.
 - But he returned to the Lord. God forgave him. Abraham learned and grew in faith as a result of his experience.
4. Have you heard the song on WNZR, “Lord, I Believe in You.”

Lord, I believe in You
 I'll always believe in You
 Though I can't see you with my eyes
Deep in my heart
Your presence I find
 Lord, I believe in You
 And I'll keep my trust in You
 Let the whole world say what they may
 No one can take this joy away
 Lord, I believe.

5. Last fall, after sixteen years of serving the Lord and this campus community, I believed deeply that, just as He called me to Mount Vernon, He was now releasing me from this assignment to move to a “place or assignment I do not know.”

I believe He gave me this release and I trust Him to lead me to the next chapter just as he led me in the previous chapters of my journey of faith with Him. And this is why the second phrase of Hebrews 11:8 speaks convictionally to me.

B. By Faith, Abraham . . . OBEYED AND WENT . . .

1. In the musical “Abraham and Sarah – A Journey of Love,” this refrain is heard over and over again: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”
2. I’ve tried to live my life as a joyful response to God’s leading and guidance:
 - as the first person in my family to enroll in college;
 - as a graduate student in a response to God’s prompting to be “the best trained pastor I could be”;
 - as administrator and faculty member at European Nazarene College even though moving to Europe meant we could not adopt the daughter for whom we had applied;
 - as president of the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in Manila, The Philippines, where the annual per capita income – annual – was approximately \$700.00 or \$2.00-3.00 a day in wages.
3. And now . . . in my “old” age, I believe God is calling me again . . . to obey and follow Him.”

Lord, I believe in You
I'll always believe in You
Though I can't see you with my eyes
Deep in my heart
Your presence I find
Lord, I believe in You
And I'll keep my trust in You
Lord, I believe.

And, I will obey!

And the third phrase of the Hebrews 11:8 text is just as fascinating.

C. By Faith, Abraham, obeyed and went... NOT KNOWING WHERE HE WAS GOING!

1. It does not take faith, trust or belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to obey if we know all the details of His call to us.

2. But Abraham believed God had spoken a word of direction to him and he obeyed, without knowing the implications of his obedience.
- I have tried to live my life in just this way. I have attempted to lead this university as a faith journey.
 - And, I believe it was this sense of call that came to me last fall that compelled me to obey...without knowing:
 - Where I would be going,
 - What I would be doing,
 - Why I would be led in such a direction.

D. And again I remember the words to the song previously quoted.

Lord, I believe in You
I'll always believe in You
Though I can't see you with my eyes
Deep in my heart
Your presence I find
Lord, I believe in You
And I'll keep my trust in You
Lord, I believe!

The words of Hebrews 11:8 comfort me!

II. Secondly, the words CONFRONT me.

Question: How do we know that this style of living and leading is truly from God?

Asked another way:

How do we know that God is speaking a word of direction to us (and this word is not a word from satan or a word from our inner selves?)

A. Over the years, I have tried to apply three tests to discerning the vision or direction of God I sense for my future.

1. Test One: The test of integrity

- I read recently this quote from David Cottrell: “Integrity is never being ashamed of your reflection.”
- We must continually ask the question: Is this “spoken word” I feel or hear consistent with God’s written word?
- It may be God’s spoken word to us if it does not contradict God’s written word.
- The issue is this: I do not try to manipulate or abuse the word of God to me, spoken or written, for my benefit.

The test of integrity

2. Test Two: The test of motive

- Will this “word of the Lord to me” glorify God or elevate me? Or who is elevated as a result of my “obedience” to God? God Himself or myself.
- The issue is why I do what I do: to glorify God or to elevate self?
 - *Example:* Mark 10:38. James and John asked Jesus if one of them could sit on one side of him and the other on the opposite side of him in glory. To this request Jesus replied, “You don’t know what you are asking.”
 - *Example:* If the person who says: “I think God is telling me to be a bank president, district superintendent, the owner of my own company or the pastor of a mega church.
- The critical question is why do I believe God is speaking a word of direction to me.
 - Am I trying to use God for my purposes?
- I have learned over the years to give God time.

“In His time, in His time, He makes all things beautiful in His time.
Lord, please show me everyday as you are teaching me Your way, that
You do just what You say, in Your time.”

The test of integrity. The test of motive.

3. **Test Three: The test of honesty**

- Am I playing games with God?
- Do I really believe deep within me that this is God speaking to me and not me projecting my thoughts to God?
 - Or, is there a “hidden agenda” or “secret desire” and I want to convince others that God gave me this vision or direction when in reality it is from me!

The tests of integrity, motive and honesty have helped me over the years and has guided me through the process this year of discerning the “vision” or word of direction for me at this point in my life of obedience.

The words of Hebrews 11:8 comfort me, confront me, and,

III. The words also CHALLENGE me.

I told you earlier that Abraham and Paul were two biblical heroes of mine. Abraham and Paul help me understand that when God speaks a word of direction to us:

A. Delays may occur.

1. Abraham wandered to Egypt before God’s vision for him was finally realized.
2. Abraham traveled with Lot, his nephew, and finally separated from him.
3. God told Paul he would go to Rome to preach. Read this account in Acts 23:11.
4. He did not tell Paul when, how or how long it would take before this vision is fulfilled in chapter 28!
5. In fact, over two years passed before God’s vision to Paul was realized.

When God speaks delays may occur, and

B. Suffering and hardship may also result.

1. For Abraham there was pain in Egypt when, because of fear, he lied, to Pharaoh.
2. For Abraham there was discouragement over Lot's dispute with him.
3. I believe Abraham suffered with the long delay and the near despair because Sarah and he had no children and they were getting old.
4. For Paul, there was a plot to kill him.
5. He was manipulated and insulted.
6. He received threats of death.
7. He encountered a typhoon and shipwreck on his way to Rome (in fulfillment of God's vision to him)!

C. But if we believe God has spoken a word of direction to us, then, by faith we must "push ahead, we don't look back!"

1. In the midst of delays and sufferings, Abraham believed God and his faith made him righteous before God.
2. Paul didn't second guess his decision.
3. He didn't harbor the "why me" questions and "what if"...when the delays came and sufferings occurred.
4. And I remember my first night in Manila. I kept asking myself, "did I make a mistake?" God was gentle in His response to me.

D. For Abraham and Paul, God had spoken; they believed Him, regardless of the uncertainty.

1. Abraham was "tested" when God told him to sacrifice Isaac, his son, "on a mountain I will tell you about." (Genesis 22:2)
2. Paul affirms in Acts 27:25, in the midst of a typhoon, and shipwreck, "So keep up your courage men for I have faith in God that it will happen just as He told me!
3. For Abraham, Paul, you and me, the message is clear: Give God time to work on his plan and purposes for you and me... as He graciously did for me in Manila.

4. “In His time, In His time, He makes all things beautiful, In His time, Lord, please show me everyday as You’re teaching me Your way, that You do just what You say, In Your time!”

In Conclusion

1. I believe God has spoken a word to me regarding my tenure at MVNU.
 - My biblical heroes continue to provide counsel and insight to me as Anne and I journey through this spiritually rewarding process.
2. By faith . . . we seek to obey . . . without knowing what our next phase of ministry will be. And we are aware that challenges may face us. Yet, we are confident that God has spoken. And He is enough!
3. Our testimony is reflected in another song we hear often on WNZR: “My Life Is In Your Hands.” Listen to these words of this prayer at the conclusion to this message. May it also be your prayer.

Life can be so good
Life can be so hard
Never knowing what each day
Will bring to where you are
Sometimes I forget
And sometimes I can't see
That whatever comes my way
You'll be with me.

My life is in your hands
My heart is in your keeping
I'm never without hope
Not when my future is with you.

My life is in your hands
And though I may not see clearly
I will lift my voice and sing
Cause your love does amazing things
Lord, I know, my life is in your hands.

Nothing is for sure
Nothing is for keeps
All I know is that your love
Will live eternally
So I will find my way,
And I will find my peace
Knowing that you'll meet my every need.

My life is in your hands
My heart is in your keeping
I'm never without hope
Not when my future is with you.

My life is in your hands
And though I may not see clearly
I will lift my voice and sing
Cause your love does amazing things
Lord, I know, my life is in your hands.

When I'm at my weakest love
You carry me
Then I become my strongest love
In your hands.

My life is in your hands
And though I may not see clearly
I will lift my voice and sing
Cause your love does amazing things
Lord, I know, my life is in your hands
I trust you Lord
My life is in your hands.