

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

C: Ninth Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 19
Genesis 15:1-6, Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

7 August 2022
Salem, Bridgeport

“A Vision and a Promise”

*“...The LORD came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram ... your reward shall be very great.’
But Abram said, ‘O LORD God, what will you give me, for I continue childless....’
But ... the LORD ... brought him outside and said,
‘Look toward heaven and count the stars.... So shall your descendants be.’”*

That’s got to be one of my most favorite passages in the Bible, probably because I can so relate to it.

It’s a long story, too long to relate in its entirety this morning, so instead of starting at the beginning, I’ll just start with the part where God came to me as God came to Abram.

God chose to bless Abram so that he might be a blessing to others,
and God called Abram to leave his home and embark on a journey to a new place,
and about 4 years ago God called me to do the same.

Specifically, God called me to a new path for the church – a path between the white church & the black church,
and a path between the main line Protestant church and the Evangelical Pentecostal church. God called me
to that new path because white mainline Protestantism is dying
as it is lacking something that the black Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have,
and the black Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, while not yet dying,
are limited because they lack something the white mainline Protestant churches have.

This call to a ministry that bridges the divide between the white mainline church & the black evangelical church
is the loudest, clearest thing I’ve ever heard God say to me –
as clear as God’s promise to Abram made against the background of a starry sky.

At the time it seemed possible,
as my primarily white American Lutheran congregation was already doing joint ministry
with our local Lutheran mission congregation
led by an African American lay licensed minister who describes herself as “LutherBaptiCostal”
and with a black Jamaican Pentecostal congregation.

But about 6 months into the pandemic our joint ministries ended and my congregation changed
from being the most diverse congregation I had ever served to being the least diverse.
I began to wonder if I had heard God correctly.

That was the larger issue worrying me
but there was also a smaller but more urgent issue that was causing me anxiety.
The congregation wanted to return to in person worship and was considering whether or not to buy air cleaners.
Most of the leaders didn’t want to spend the money,
despite my feeling it was necessary and despite the urgent pleas of an engineer on council.
I had promised that engineer that I would speak up at council in favor of his proposal
but by the time the subject came up, I just didn’t have the energy to fight.
As I left the meeting the engineer expressed his hurt at my betrayal
and at the same time I also heard God’s voice saying,
“You didn’t keep your promise, so maybe YOU should buy the air cleaners, Marjo.”
My response to that was, “You’ve got to be kidding, God!
Have you looked at my bank account lately? My husband hasn’t worked in 10 months!”

The next morning I woke up terribly depressed and as the day progressed I felt worse & worse.

I went out to take a walk & to pray on my way to my acupuncture appointment, but I was too upset to pray,
So in despair, I called my best friend
and through my tears and sobs I explained that it wasn't just about the air cleaners.

It seemed like nothing at all was going as I had expected.

I thought God had called me to interracial ministry, and then my congregation had become entirely white!

I told my friend I must have misunderstood God.

She replied that I had not misunderstood.

I said, "Well, then I need a sign!" And she said, "Well, if you need a sign, God will give you a sign."

Quickly I clarified, "I need more than a sign – I need a miracle!"

to which she replied, "If you need a miracle, then God will give you a miracle!"

At that point I told my friend I had reached my acupuncturist & it was time for my appointment.

We hung up and I went in and the acupuncturist put the needles into my arms below my elbows,
my legs below my knees, and my head.

As I laid back, listening to the New Age music, I began to pray.

All of the sudden I had a vision of white faces in the pews of my church,
and suddenly the face of a black man appeared amidst all of the white faces.

At that very moment the phone in my back pocket vibrated.

I couldn't answer it because I had needles in my hands!

But immediately after my appointment I took out my phone and there was a text message.

It was from someone I had never met and had never seen,

but had only heard on the zoom worship and Bible study of the Jamaican Pentecostal church. I knew he was
Jamaican and lived in Canada and I had heard him testify and believed him to be a man of deep faith
but that was all I knew about him.

His message said "Pastor Marjo, please call me as soon as you can".

When I called the man began,

"Pastor Marjo, I know we don't know each other, so this is going to sound strange,
but God told me I needed to send you my tithe".

At that moment all I could think about was the vision I had had just minutes before
of a black man's face appearing in the midst of the white faces in the pews of my church
and I realized it had been this man!

I started crying so uncontrollably that it was several minutes before I could speak.

The man was asking for my address so that he could send me \$1000.

I responded that he didn't have to send me any money because he himself was the answer to my prayer.

God was showing me that despite what I saw in my pews on Sunday,
my call to interracial and interdenominational ministry was even now being fulfilled
as it was not limited to the people I saw in the pews of my church on Sunday
but was extended by God in ways I could never even imagine.

The man insisted he needed to send me \$1000 and again, I told him I didn't need it.

He said, "Look, I know this is strange. In fact, I told God it was strange & I didn't want to do it.

But God said that if I didn't give you my tithe, I would need to give you everything I have,
so I really need to give you my tithe!

"Besides", he said, "you need the money in your account. You told God last night."

And then I remembered! We needed \$1200 for the air cleaners!

I didn't have \$1200 but I could afford \$200 and with his \$1000 we could order them!

God had not only heard the desire in my heart for air cleaners

but God had heard my prayer for a miracle to confirm what God had called me to do.

A few weeks later I received a check but instead of it being for \$1000 it was for \$3500!
I thought perhaps my new friend had made a mistake with the exchange rate
but when I called he said that God had told him I needed \$3500 not \$1000.
I told him that \$1200 could go for the two air cleaners for my church
and that I had loaned somebody \$1000 on my credit card and it looked like I wasn't going to get that back
so that would be \$2200 which left another \$1300 and I wasn't sure what I was supposed to use that for.
But then two weeks later I realized that my Jamaican Pentecostal pastor friend
had re-opened his church in New York to in person worship
in a space without windows or any kind of adequate ventilation
and I could purchase two air cleaners for that church as well!

I used to read this story about Abram as simply a story about Abram.
But now I understand that story on a very personal, experiential level.
I know what it means for God to speak, for God to call one to undertake a new journey,
for God to make a promise, and for God to reiterate that promise again and again along the journey.

That miracle was only the first of many that have happened in my life since,
so about six months after it I decided I had better start keeping a record of all of them.
A year later I had recorded 75 "signs and wonders", or about 1 every 5 days!
And those are just the ones I've noticed and remembered to record!

I share this story with you to make it clear that the Bible is not just a story book or even just a history book,
but the Word of God that continues to be written in each of our lives.
I share this story with you because even though I have known a lot about God & believed in what I was taught,
it was only when God brought a black Jamaican Pentecostal pastor into my life
that I began to experience the power and love of God in a life-transforming way.
I share this story with you because now that I have experienced this awesome, amazing, astounding God,
I cannot help but share the good news!

Just as God had a plan for Abram's life and just as God has a plan for my life,
I believe that God has a plan for your life, too.
I believe that God has called you to step out in faith on a new journey.
I believe that God has a promised reward in store for you.
I believe that God delights in giving you the desires of your heart,
the desires that God's own self has placed there.
I believe that God has more in store for you than anything you can ever ask or imagine.

God fulfilled his promise to Abraham.
God is in the process of fulfilling his promise to me.
And God will fulfill his promise to you.

And all we need to do is to keep walking, keep praying, and keep trusting
in the God of boundless power and endless love!
To that God be all honor and glory and power now and forever! Amen and Amen and Amen