

## “Re-Pitching the Tent”

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Script: Genesis 12:1-9

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Southwest State University professor and poet, Leo Dangel, has a poem called “The Stones Take the Field” (*Home from The Field*, p. 193).

When I was thirteen,  
the cemetery had graves  
only at the far end,  
and we played baseball  
on the vacant ground,  
wary of bumblebees  
visiting the wildflowers  
in the deep, coarse grass.  
With the tombstones  
of prairie homesteaders  
behind me, I flexed  
my knees and pounded my glove.  
[My friend] Arlo, batting near the gate,  
where my mother and father  
are buried now, lifted  
a fly ball into the sun.  
I faded back, squinting at  
the dizzy sky,  
measuring the arc.  
On a dead run, I made the catch  
above my right shoulder  
and hopped, laughing, over  
a headstone, confident  
that nothing could trip me up.

Time moves on, and the stones of time do take the field. The limitations and shortcomings of our present facility to our ministry are the headstones we must hurdle in order to play our ministry. They have led us to this moment when we feel we are on a “dead run”, reaching to catch a ball. Our field of ministry must find new space to play. We are hopping over headstones we cannot ignore any longer.

Let's start with a bit of history. Ten thousand years ago (you get the feeling this is going to be a long sermon?), the last glaciers left this area a scarred and barren landscape, flowing with icy cold waters, gouging the river valley with its power. Four thousand years ago, Abram & Sari left all that was familiar— family, friends, livelihood, and followed a voice of a strange and new God. They set off, going 800 miles across the desert to find a place they didn't know about. It had something to do with being a blessing for all others they felt, and when they finally sensed they arrived at this unknown place, they piled some rocks up and made an altar to worship this God. Then they continued on to the east and pitched their tents, stayed a while, moved on a pitched their tents once again. They wondered how to be a blessing.

Five hundred years later, Moses & the people of the Apiru heard the voice of this God once again. Blessing they felt, meant to escape slavery and become a people. Into the wilderness they went, where they felt the absence of all that was familiar, yet also sensed the presence of God; the pillar of fire and smoke, the ark, the tent known as the Tabernacle connected them with this God. 40 years they wandered in the wilderness, re-pitching the tent wherever they went. There were delays and detours on their journey, but eventually they found their place and thought they had arrived. The tent was pitched in various holy places; Shechem, Hebron... eventually Jerusalem. There it was pitched and re-pitched in various forms from canvas to gold for over a period of 1,000 years.

Jesus said the Temple would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days, pointing to a deeper sense of God's presence and blessing. His movement then exploded all over the world, and has continued to pitch and re-pitch the tent in each new location, each new time, each new culture that it incarnated into, in evolving forms from house churches to basilicas to cathedrals to clap-board country churches to tents at camp meetings.

So each generation re-pitches the tent to fit the needs of worship and ministry. Whether or not we actually move to a new location geographically, we re-pitch the tent. It is a journey... a journey with God (for we sense and believe God to be present among us also, seeking to bless the world through us).

It is a painful thing to consider. To leave this space where we have been church together, met God's holiness and marked our life's transitions... we do not do that lightly. When I say that we are leaving this space I mean either direction— for even if we chose to stay in this location, our building and sacred space will *not* be

the same. A re-pitching of even this space (the sanctuary) is before us, keeping the best of the past and what is here, but re-arranging (perhaps radically) the rest to fit our values of hospitality, safety, social justice, spirituality and children. We may even find that it makes sense to demolish ½ of this building and start over. It is probably a less expensive, more efficient use of space than working within the skeletal confines of the old building. Other confines would remain however. So to consider these re-pitchings is an awesome and painful thing to even hold in our minds and hearts.

First Church has been on a journey in these last 150 years, as we've sought to be a blessing. This is our sixth major re-pitching, and our fourth physical location. Indeed, we've been on a journey. For the last three years we have been intentional about our journey in this visioning process. We've made progress in our wilderness...scouted information, prayed and pondered...and have had our fair share of detours too. Wisely and unselfishly Katie, Dan and key leaders embarked on this visioning process, forging who we are into the Vision Priorities, creating new staff roles to begin new ministries, and bringing us to this point in the process. It is not the end by any means... It was a courageous and astute move to embark on this Visioning, because it is clear that to do nothing with our facility and its limitations is to choose a steady diminishment of our ministry (in numbers, strength, effectiveness, its influence of society...). Our own internal data tells us this, as does national studies of congregations in similar situations. To do nothing is to worship our stones, and we find that if we worship our stones (instead of God), they become our tombstones.

And so this Conference is our "hopping over a headstone." It is our chance to be open to God's voice, to "squint into the dizzy sky, measure the arc"...seeking to be a blessing as we re-pitch the tent. It is not the only or final Conference on our journey—we can, with further information, later change our mind and go in another direction. Yet it is a vitally important one; for opportunities may be lost...costs will rise with delays.

Abram, Moses, and the people at times gathered to discern their future—to make decisions. They did that based upon prayer, their sense of purpose (their vision priorities) as the people of God, and upon their strengths... their giftedness...their opportunities to be a blessing in the future. Now we do the same. God is with us. Amen.