

“Seeing Beyond the Horizon”

Genesis 12:1-4; Hebrews 11:8-16

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

October 18, 2015 – 21st Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

“Horizon” is an interesting word. It comes from the Greek *horos* meaning "limit." Horizon is that line where the earth and sky meet, or rather, appear to meet.

When we go to the beach every summer one of the first things I am struck with is the ability to see at an unlimited distance. Standing at the edge of the water, all that appears ahead of me is sky and sea. I don't get that kind of panorama back home in the city. At home the vastness of the earth is hidden by trees and buildings, street lights and billboards. Our eyes are capable of seeing great lengths but, most of the time, that ability is wasted. We're boxed in and hemmed in by lots of things.

In practical terms the horizon is the functional end to our vision in all ways but up. Forward we just can't see beyond the horizon. Certainly we may see the effects of the rising sun before it actually appears, but we can't see it directly until it moves above this imaginary line.

We're not the first generation to look outward. Going out beyond the horizon always has had a certain draw, but at the same time it can be a bit frightening, too. It takes us into new and unfamiliar territory. Our usual landmarks may not be there to guide us. We may not find anyone we know. Perhaps we might get lost and be worse off than when we started. We simply don't know what lies ahead and that, in itself, causes even the most stalwart to pause.

Maybe that's some of what Abraham and Sarah experienced as well. Our Old Testament account from Genesis tells the original of that story. Hebrews, our paired New Testament lesson, retells it and applies it in a Christian context.

Abram and Sarai, as they were known then, leave their homeland at the beckoning of God with the promise of something better, something more significant, which lay over the horizon. They move on what appears to be but slim hope, but this is offset by trust in God. Faith is what gives strength to Abraham's commitment. The future may be uncertain, but—to Abraham—it is also sure because they are being lead there by the Lord. It is God's will for them.

From that small beginning, taken in faith, has come the whole Hebrew people. Without trust, however, it couldn't have happened. Abraham and Sarah could have said "no" to this possibility. They could have found a hundred good excuses for staying put in the relative sameness of their lives, but they didn't. Instead, they packed up all they had and left for Canaan. They moved beyond the horizon because they trusted in the divine presence to show them the way to the future.

The author of Hebrews reminds us that same kind of trust must be the basis for our lives as well. If we aren't where we want to be today, it may be because God has something different

in mind for us tomorrow. There may be a new stage to our journey of life and more for us yet to do.

I was going through some old magazines recently and was reminded that a little over eight years ago the world lost two extraordinary women at about the same time. One died in the prime of a life just beginning to hit its stride; the other when her body simply wore out. One lived surrounded by the richest and finest of things; the other shared the poverty of the least of those around her.

These two women were 50 years apart in age, and couldn't have been more different in style and trappings. One wore a tiara and the other a habit. And yet on one thing they were strikingly alike: they cared deeply for the poor and the powerless. They both looked beyond the horizon of personal pleasure and saw the hurting of those at the fringes of society. They could have ignored the plight of others, stayed in more comfortable circumstances, but both each chose otherwise.

These two women—Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales, and Agnes Boaxhiu, Mother Teresa—were given a look at what lay on the other side of the horizon. They both had a strong sense of being called to some greater good. To the older woman it was clear whose voice it was that led her on. To the younger one, she may have only begun to sense its source. Yet they both followed what they heard drawing them forward despite the cost it required. Family and friends and the public in general often didn't understand what moved them; but they knew. That was enough.

Their lifestyles couldn't have been more diverse. Their relationships were formed on different terms. Both, however, identified with the hurt suffered by others and vowed to do what they could to bring about change. They ventured out rather than staying put.

These two contemporary women could have identified with their sister, Sarah, as she also ventured into unknown territory. Where Abraham went, Sarah travelled, too. Sarah gives birth to the Hebrew nation through a son named Isaac. Her internal struggles are not set down on paper, but she surely didn't experience them any less than her husband.

No matter how the lives of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa might have been covered by the media, whether the emphasis was on their glitter or plainness, their flair or their simplicity, the surface person was far less important than the inner person. They were both touched by the less fortunate. Whatever their outer appearance or style of life, these women are identified with works of caring and love. Their lives resonate with Sarah who also chose to follow an unknown course toward a greater destination.

As it's turned out I think these two scriptures today may have particular application for our church anniversary this year. In a sense we're in the midst of our own wilderness experience at the present. It is a time of change.

After seven years hosting the Highlands Learning Center both they, and we, are now out on our own. We gave them the space to launch a school for special-needs children and they provided us with an income that allowed us to stabilize after a decade of twists and turns, advancements and regressions. The payments from rental particularly helped us to offset the

sizeable mortgage still due on our building, and which we will continue to carry for a number of additional years.

Like it or not we're now in process of embarking on the next leg of our journey as a congregation. We know we can't stand still, but we don't know where the future will lead us. Of this I am certain: it will be someplace where we've never been before. It will have some similarities to the past, but it will also be unique as time always goes forward and not backward.

Several weeks ago the Session was hopeful that we had a new tenant ready to come in, though we weren't at liberty to share this information with the whole congregation. Well, the plans didn't work out as hoped and just recently we were told they will be going elsewhere. This was not because of any lack on our part, but rather had to do with prior obligations to another site before we entered the picture.

So, we've got some choices before us and it basically comes down to this. We can sit in place now and do nothing or we can be willing to move ahead and look forward to whatever may come next. I would strongly suggest the latter course.

We are called today as a congregation to affirm God. This means to step out in life with God. We are not asked to go alone on our journeys. We get into trouble when we try to use our strength of personality as the total means available to us. We overestimate ourselves when we conclude alone can get the whole job done.

Strength of personality serves us well in many areas of life, and is needed in our endeavors, but that alone will be insufficient here. If we face the future at Highlands by putting ourselves in the lead spiritually, then the time ahead will be pretty bleak. The simple truth is this: God's role is to be the one moving ahead... and our role is to discern and follow. So it's not a matter of what we want for the church, but what the Lord wants to make of us.

Today we don't really have to see beyond the horizon, but we need to believe in what lies past the horizon. On this anniversary we're asked to move onward into an unseen future, but with the promise that the way will become evident. And that's requires faith built on trust. God, show us the way. Amen.