

“Following Her Call” by Marjory Bankson



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Scripture:

Gen 15:1-12, 17-18 *On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”*

Luke 13:31-35 *...I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.*

Did you hear the last statement of the Old Testament lesson appointed for today? In it, God clearly promises the land between Egypt and Iraq to the descendants of Abraham. The only catch is that the promise was written down by devout human beings – with the limited understanding of a tribal people – interpreting their own pre-history. They understood themselves as chosen by God, set apart and blessed with a divine right to

that land.

It's a story that gets repeated by every conquering people! In American history, the westward movement was justified by so-called "manifest destiny" – a belief that God had ordained that land for our taking. It is the dangerous underbelly of call.

Two weeks ago, Mark Braverman stood in this pulpit and reminded us that Jesus was a Palestinian Jew who turned that tribal covenant inside out.

Jesus demonstrated a new and different understanding of God – that was relational, universal and inclusive. Jesus healed the sick on the sabbath and freed people who were imprisoned by Temple rules and Roman brutality. Braverman reminded us that Jesus' understanding of what it meant to be an heir of Abraham was very different from that of the Genesis author.

Last week, David focused on how Jesus deepened his understanding of his own call as he faced temptations to power and authority in the wilderness.

In our Gospel reading for today, we see Jesus weeping over Jerusalem – grieving because of the deep divisions among people – knowing that God would rather gather them all together "as a hen gathers her brood."

What an amazing image! God as a mother hen, wanting to gather

in her ALL of her chicks and not just a few special ones. We don't know whether Jesus actually used this startling image of God as a mother hen, but we do know that the author of Luke and Acts chose this metaphor because it communicated something stunningly different from the fiery tribal God of the Genesis reading. It's a homely and feminine image of protection and care from the Holy One, and of freedom for the chicks.

While I would love to explore all of these important themes, I want to focus on one: Call as an ongoing relationship with God that leads, not to triumphal and exclusive privilege, but to wholeness and healing. In particular, I want to follow the thread of call as I have seen it develop in the life of Sue Johnson.

Back in 1987, when Sue arrived at Seekers, I remember her most as an intense student in the School of Christian Living. I learned that she was a Connecticut Yankee by birth, had grown up in the Congregational church, married a minister, had four grown children, two sisters and a mother in this area – and was recently divorced. Also that she had been a Danforth Fellow and a church organist in several different places..

Sue had been recruited for a position at the National Mental Health Association. She wrestled with the notion that she would have to take four classes in the School before becoming a member (as Stewards were called in those days), but she dutifully took the classes and moved into membership in 1991. She said that having a place in the formal structure was important to her.

Soon, the whisper of a new call began to emerge. In 1993, Sue requested a Growing Edge grant to attend the Sacred Dance Guild, because (she said) she had always wanted to dance in church. That really surprised me. She didn't seem like the type.

Sue's request was a perfect example of a growing edge – money meant to explore something new that might or might not be a call. She came back from the Sacred Dance Guild fired up to form a dance group here at Seekers. She would learn dances elsewhere and bring them back to Seekers and she cajoled many of us into performing. I think she even got Christo and some of the other boys involved.

The following year, in 1994, Sue submitted another request to the Growing Edge Fund. This time it was for a drum. As she continued to follow her interest in dance, she seemed to be gaining courage and frankly, I wondered where this might take us.

1994 was the year that Church of the Saviour voted to disband and many of the Stewards were deeply involved in plans to become the caretakers of 2025 Mass Avenue, where Seekers rented space for worship. Dance was always difficult there because the sanctuary was so crowded.

To undergird her growing interest in expressive movement, Sue joined the Artist's Mission Group, and she continued her efforts to get a dance group started.

About the time she retired from full-time work, Sue attended her first gathering of InterPlay. She came back truly energized. Something was definitely different. Spontaneous movement, though with particular forms, gave her new freedom. Sue had finally found the language for her call and she was determined to get other Seekers interested.

Meanwhile, other Seekers were going through the agony of whether to purchase a building for ourselves or try to share space with another congregation. While Sue was willing to participate in the endless discussions and projections we were making in the late 90s, my memory was that she kept holding up a vision of space where expressive movement would be possible.

When we finally bought this homely, unkempt building in 1999, Sue was terribly concerned about the distance she would have to drive from her home in Annandale. But instead of backing away from Seekers, Sue stepped toward the new building and scheduled an InterPlay Conference for the new space. In the end, it had to be held in the Takoma Presbyterian Church, because this space was not finished in time, but Sue had clearly staked out her dream with a clear intention to make it work.

Most Seekers blithely assumed we would be able to move into the new building without too much renovation. Instead, it would take us four more years before the space was ready. During that time, Sue continued to deepen her roots in the community and in 2002, became the Treasurer. If it is true that money is more secret than sex or spirituality, then Sue became the keeper of the keys. She knows more about our giving habits than anyone else in this room – and she has held that trust lightly and well.

By the time we moved to this location, in June of 2004, Sue was devoting much more of her time to InterPlay. Although she worried about driving at night, she joined the Time and Space Mission Group in order to make sure that the policies we developed for use of the building would make it possible for InterPlay to build a community here that stretched out beyond Seekers. More recently, her love for the environment inspired the Green Team here to promote eco-friendly supplies and recycling. Again she understood the value of sharing her passion with a team.

In the past 20 years, Sue's vision has continued to evolve and she has been faithful to her call beyond telling. When driving at night did become too much of a burden, Sue left Time and Space, took leave from the Artist's Mission Group, and joined Living Water – because we meet in the early afternoon in northern Virginia.

We have been able to walk with Sue through her growing sense of a new call coming – one which would take her into a retirement complex that would be closer to nature. We listened and prayed and worried and watched while Sue looked for just the right place. She knew she would feel God's peace when she found it. And now she has.

On March 10, Sue will be moving to Sunnyside, a Presbyterian campus in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Our mission group is planning to help on the day of the move and to wave good-bye to her as the truck pulls out. Today we celebrate completion of her call here.

The Genesis story that we began with suggests ownership and control of a particular place. It's a static vision that requires permanent defense. The Gospel story in Luke is quite different. It is a relational story, full of feeling, of God's longing for a relationship that includes freedom, exploration and homecoming. That's the story we claim as followers of Jesus.

That is, at the core, what it means to live in the face of death – our theme for this Lenten season.

It is why we can celebrate Sue's cycle of call in this place, in our company, and also let her go freely into a new place of call and companionship.

The poet, Mary Oliver, says it well:

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:

To love what is mortal,

To hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;

And, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

And now Sue would like to have a few words...