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## *Lift Up Your Eyes* Genesis 13

Next year we will celebrate 100 years of Presbyterian ministry in Gig Harbor. And the following year, 2013, Chapel Hill will celebrate its 50th anniversary. Are there any charter members present today? Unless the Smalls are here, I doubt it. That means then, for the rest of us who didn't help start Chapel Hill, we are about to make one of the most important decisions we will ever have regarding the future of our church. This is a once-in-a-lifetime decision; a moment when we offer a witness to our denomination, to our community and to our world about what we believe about Jesus, about his Word and about God's future for this congregation.

This is not a day to beat up on our denomination. There are many things about the Presbyterian Church (USA) for which I am deeply grateful. Westminster Presbyterian Church where my family came to love Jesus and grew in that faith. Our pastor Dave Newquist who began praying me into the ministry when I was still in Junior High! (Believe me, there were lots of people praying for me in Junior High... but it wasn't about which seminary I would attend!) First Presbyterian Church, Bakersfield, where I was ordained thirty years ago next June. And, of course, Chapel Hill. This sweetheart church has been the greatest pastoral gift I have ever or could ever imagine receiving.

I am grateful for God's grace poured out upon me and upon us through the PC (USA). Our departure will bring pain and loss. But depart we must. It is the conviction of your pastors and your elders that the time has come for us to go. Every single elder, elected by you to listen to God and lead this church, has studied this matter carefully, especially over the last six months. We have prayed, read, gone on field trips, interviewed experts. We have listened to fellow presbyters on both sides of the aisle. We have carried on a gracious, Christ-honoring discernment process with our brothers and sisters in the Olympia Presbytery. And as a result of all this, we have come to the unanimous conviction that Chapel Hill's future belongs, not in the PC (USA), but in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. We believe God is calling us to a new home.

Today I want us to look at a similar journey found in the scriptures. It's the story of Abram, whom God would later rename "Abraham," and his beloved nephew, Lot.

The LORD said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. (Genesis 12)

God called Abram to leave his home and go to a new place. There, God would bless Abram and through him and his family, bless the entire world. So off they went. They were nomads, traveling from place to place, looking for water and fields to graze their flocks. But as they traveled together, things got crowded. Listen:

Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot...

So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. ...So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company. (Genesis 13)

There are several reasons that this story speaks to our present moment. First, Abram and Lot shared a fruitful journey together. From Haran to Canaan to Egypt and back again, they prospered. They accumulated wealth. Their flocks grew. In fact, they reached a point where the land could no longer support them while they stayed together.

It would be untrue and ungrateful to pretend that our journey within the PC (USA) has not been fruitful. Fifty years ago the Presbytery of Olympia decided there ought to be a new work in Gig Harbor. They called Paul and Della Ruth Neel to begin that ministry and through the sacrificial efforts of the charter members of this congregation, Chapel Hill was born. We would not be sitting here—I would not be speaking to you here—were it not for the PC (USA). As we look over a half-century of fruitful life together, over all that God has done in and through us... how can we help but see God's hand in this?

And notice something else... Abram and Lot were brothers. Not literally—Abram was Lot's uncle—but their hearts were knit together. They shared more than blood; they shared love and respect and history and a call of God. The hardest thing about this decision is that we leave behind brothers and sisters whom we love and respect. My dearest friends in the world are PC (USA) pastors: Jim and Rick, Stuart and John; Jim and Peter and Jeremy. All of them believe as we do and yet, they some feel called to remain within the PC (USA). They are staying in order to be faithful to God. We are leaving in order to be faithful to God. And it is painful to leave.

But—and here's the point—it would be more painful to remain. Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers." Because they were so crowded, they reached a point of constant turmoil. They were always fighting. Tempers grew hot; punches were thrown; relationships suffered. Because they were brothers, because they cared for each other... they had to go their separate ways.

We have reached a point in our life together where we are theologically crowded in our denomination. There are so many points of view... so many understandings of scripture and of Jesus and of salvation and of morality... that we are always fighting. There are brothers and sisters on the other side of those arguments. They love Jesus and yet hold firm

convictions contrary to our own. There is no reason to demonize them; to call their faith into question. In the end, God will be the one who sorts out what's right, what's wrong and what matters. But we have reached the point where our OWN convictions about how to read the Bible, what it means to follow Jesus, how we ought to behave... are a source of ongoing conflict within our own denomination.

And we are tired of fighting. Now, if that's all there is to it—that we are tired—then you could say, “Suck it up! You don't quit just because you're tired.” But there comes a time when you must decide if a fight is worth fighting; if the lives that are being wounded and the resources expended are worth the cost. We no longer believe that to be the case. It is not worth it any more. For all my ministry we have been fighting. One year, one side wins. The next year, the other side. For thirty years, we have battled over the same theological turf. Millions of hours...millions of dollars...time and money that could have... and should have... been spent on reaching people for Jesus Christ.

Instead, we fought the same battles over and over and over again and there is no end in sight. And it's not just yelling at each other on the floor of the General Assembly. It's the thousands of backroom meetings-lobbying, planning, strategizing how to win, preparing for battle. And there reaches a point where you say, “This is not healthy for any of us and it is an embarrassment to the Lord and a horrible witness to the world.” To remain together, to continue fighting means less energy turned outward, increased turmoil in our own presbytery and a harsh end to many Christ-honoring relationships.

Last spring our denomination voted to change our constitution regarding the standards for ordained leadership—and your Session decided that was an Abram/Lot moment. There has been enough quarreling. Our brothers and sisters have chosen a direction that they want to go. And now, after a period of prayerful discernment, we have chosen a different direction. We share the same Bible but we read it differently. We share the same ordination vows, but we understand them differently. We share the same Jesus but have different convictions about what it means to call him “Lord;” what it means to call him “Savior.” And so, we believe the time has come separate.

But at one of our Town Hall meetings, our General Presbyter, Lynn Longfield, warned us to think, not just about what we are leaving, but also to think carefully about where we are going. That is good advice. So, then...what is the new destination to which God is calling us? Back to our text for a moment.

After Abram and Lot had parted ways, the Lord said to Abram, “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”

Half of your vote is about leaving something behind. The other half of the same vote is about going to a new place. So, this morning, I want you to lift up your eyes! I want to give you a glimpse of where we are going—the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (the “EPC.”) Our Book of Order only allows us to be dismissed to another Reformed body. We are not permitted, for instance, to become independent. And of all the Reformed bodies we considered, we are convinced that the EPC is the best fit for us. We have studied them carefully. We attended their General Assembly in June in Memphis. We attended the first meeting of the Presbytery of the Pacific in October. We met with their Stated Clerk—their

chief executive—many times. We heard from a woman pastor in the EPC. We studied their constitution, their confession, their position papers. We tracked down rumors and determined to our satisfaction that they were untrue. We have done our homework.

When I walked into the General Assembly in Memphis, I had a pang of anxiety in the parking lot. I remember thinking, “Mark, you are a nobody here. Are you really ready to start over?” I sat down for their first worship service and, by the end of that evening said to myself, “I’ve come home. I didn’t even know such a place existed.” And after our October trip to California, that conviction was only confirmed...not just with me, but with every one of us. We are convinced that the EPC will provide a home where we will find theological, cultural, missional and relational alignment...in a way that we have never found in our own denomination. I want you to lift up your eyes this morning and see the features of this new land to which God is calling us.

The heart of that alignment is found on the first page of the EPC constitution. It is called “The Essentials.” The seven essentials are the absolute, non-negotiables of their faith. If you cannot affirm every essential, without reservation, the EPC is not the place for you.

So what are they? The Essentials declare that the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God; that there is one Triune God who is the creator and ruler of all things. They declare that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God who died on a cross for our sin, rose bodily from the dead and ascended into Heaven, leaving behind his Holy Spirit to empower his disciples; this same Jesus will one day return to make all things right. The Essentials declare that salvation is available only through Jesus Christ to all who put their faith in Him and that the Church exists to proclaim God’s salvation to the entire world.

That’s it, in a nutshell. Now...what did you notice about those Essentials? They describe exactly what we believe here at Chapel Hill. There is not one Essential that your pastors and elders do not affirm wholeheartedly, without reservation. The PC (USA) has no such list. No essentials. We have a Book of Confessions that contains all of these things. And when we make our ordination vows, we promise to “receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith...” But as a denomination, we have refused to declare what the non-negotiables of our faith are. And I believe that is a core issue behind our ongoing theological strife.

To be a part of the EPC will mean that we are part of a denomination that shares our core theological convictions. And because we share these convictions, we can be free to get beyond internal fighting and focus our energies on a common mission—the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ.

What will this mean for us at Chapel Hill? It will mean freedom. Freedom to be who we are without apology or embarrassment. Freedom to join wholeheartedly in mission with others in our denomination without reservation or suspicion. Freedom to own and use our own property as God directs us without fear. And freedom for your pastors to stop fighting. I long to lay down my arms and devote the final chapters of my ministry to a denomination committed to evangelism, church-planting, discipleship and mission.

Lift up your eyes, beloved! The EPC is such a place! This is the new land to which we believe God is calling us. It is a small denomination. Some would view that negatively, but we see it as a plus. There is little bureaucracy; they have national staff of 17. It is highly

relational. It's kind of like "Cheers." Everybody knows your name. And we have an opportunity to make a real difference, to influence the future of the EPC in a way that we were never able to do in our own denomination.

After much prayer and work, I believe that this is God's call upon my life. After much prayer and work, the Session believes that this is God's call upon our church. Now it's your turn. Seven hundred years after Abram first saw Canaan, Moses stood on Mt. Nebo, lifted up his eyes and looked across the Jordan River to the Promised Land. Moses never set foot inside. But we can. Your leaders are convinced that this is God's bright future for us. This is a decision that is bigger than any single member of your staff...a decision that will affect this church's future for the next century and beyond. We cannot make that decision for you. But we sense that this is where God is leading us...and we hope and pray that we will make this journey together.