

“Community of Hope”

Deuteronomy 8:10-18

September 11, 2011

Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

This is the second Sunday of a new series called: “Come, dream with us.” Last Sunday, I shared a message about the “purpose of Church.” I added a new mission goal: “Connecting, Empowering, Thriving and Transforming” for the ministry of our church. People want to be connected to a safe place where they can belong to and where they want to be empowered to grow through engaging and relevant ministries, and where then they can experience transformation of their lives and other lives in Jesus Christ. Church is called to do this work for the people of the world. This morning, I would like to talk about the *direction* of our church. Where are we headed in our journey of faith? I hope we can learn something from the past when this church started fifty years ago and learn something from the lesson from our scripture reading so that we can learn and envision together for the future of our church.

Once during a long flight, the pilot’s voice comes over the intercom. He tells the passengers, “Well folks, I have good news and bad news.” “The good news is that we’re ahead of schedule.” A cheer goes up from the cabin. He continues, “The bad news is...we’re lost.” No matter what we do in life and in our ministry of this church, our life and our ministry is not a matter of speed, but direction. Our little one, Jacob, just started to stand up by holding on to something, and he can slowly walk around. People call it, “cruising.” As a brand new parent, it is great fun to witness his physical developmental changes every week. I thought about the meaning of “Cruising” for this baby. Probably, this will be his first experience of navigating his direction in his life. Maybe, he will ‘run’ around this church sooner or later. (Maybe, Atticus and Taylor will run as well, and we will have to watch over them!) Our church has been growing over the last fifty years along with our annual conference. We thank God for this blessing in the past and present that we gather here together today for envisioning our future ministry. We know that the Holy Spirit will be guiding our church to grow and to fulfill God’s purpose. I am grateful that I am on the journey of God’s history for our church. As a new pastor to you, I was curious about the history of our church - where we were, and I look forward to our unopened future for where we are headed in Christ, our Lord.

Thankfully, Mary McCollum wrote a brief history of our church in July’s newsletter, the Acorn. I was able to see some of the background of our church.

According to that article, the early beginnings of the Fair Oaks United Methodist Church were in 1895, but the first church building was built on the corner of Watkins Drive and Sacramento Street in 1897 (less than one mile away from here!) One interesting thing is that until Fair Oaks United Methodist Church was officially chartered to California-Nevada Conference on June 6, 1954 and located here in this place at the same year, our church remained as “the federated church of Fair Oaks,” an alliance between local congregations of the Methodists and Presbyterians from 1919 to 1952. The Presbyterians decided to part ways and formed a separate church. That church is now Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church which is located at the intersection between Madison and Fair Oaks Blvd. And then, our Tongan community joined us in 2006, and our Tongan language ministry started in 2007. Our church has a historical experience for caring, welcoming and getting along well with our brothers and sisters in one house. (The Presbyterian Church USA is our sister church.) By the way, one of our church members shared a “behind the scenes” story with me. I heard that when the Presbyterian group left us, they took ‘our church bell’ with them. (Probably, they need to return it back sometime in the future!) One more historical fact: I heard that our church location was once a family farm. Actually, our office was one of the farm houses a long time ago. Isn’t “farming” a great metaphor to describe our ministry? Jesus Christ is our shepherd, and we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. We shall not be in want! I also heard that there was a trial to build a new sanctuary, but it couldn’t happen. There must have been times of ups and down during the last fifty years, but we have still kept this faith community alive by the grace of God until now.

Today’s Scripture reading is one of Moses’ farewell messages to the Israelites. This is a story from more than 3,000 years ago, but it still gives us inspiration. As we know, although God chose Moses to be a great leader for the Israelites, and he brought them out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, God didn’t allow him to complete this journey to the promised land. This final task was handed over to Joshua, his successor. Sadly, Moses stopped his travels here right before the Jordan river, but he had to pass his leadership on to Joshua. While I was preparing this sermon, I thought of Pastor Kelly and of all of our broken hearts. She served you for the last seven years and was ready to return back to you after her renewal leave. It must have been a great shock to all of you. I met Pastor Kelly couple days ago; she asked me to share her great love for you. I know that all of you dearly loved Pastor Kelly and still miss her in many ways. She said to me that she dearly misses you, too. I have known Pastor Kelly for four years through our conference task force team group. She is a brilliant but humble pastor. I truly understand your feelings. God always works in a mysterious way and sometimes it is a different way than our wish like Moses and the Israelites. God passed her place to me, and I am working hard to fill her shoes, but her shoes are too big to be filled!

Let's go back to our Scripture reading again. When Moses heard a calling, he was around 80 years old. He and the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Now, Moses, a 120 year old leader, stood before his people and gave them a word from his heart to his people. Let's picture this image in our mind: Moses is standing on a mountain top, and he is looking at the promised land across the Jordan river to the west. On the other side, to the south and east, they are looking over wilderness where they had traveled through. The Israelites had survived the last forty years wandering in the wilderness. They were very excited to go to a promised land with flowing milk and honey. Now, Moses is about to share his last word for his people that they need to listen to and keep in their hearts. What is that?

In his speech, Moses reminds his people and us of three pieces of advice that we need to keep in our hearts wherever we go and even in the promised land. The first one is that you should always be grateful to God for what you are and for what God has given to you. The second thing is that you do not forget the Lord your God by failing to keep his commandments, his rule and regulations, especially when you are satisfied, because it is then that you build a pleasant house and settle in so you feel that you don't need God any more. The last thing is that you do not become so full of yourself and your possessions that you forget God who brought you out of Egypt and led you through the great and terrible wilderness. Remember when you start thinking to yourselves, "I did all this. And all by myself. I'm rich. It's all mine." Well, think again! God gave you strength to produce all these things. In our journey through life, it is important to take the right direction, but the more important thing is to have a sense of discernment and to follow a right leader. Moses was a great navigator and leader to the Israelites.

Two hunters, Charlie and Sam, were walking in the woods, headed back to camp after a long day. Charlie says to Sam, "Hey, let's take this short cut I know about." Sam wasn't so sure. Charlie tells him, "Come on, it'll save us some time." Reluctantly, Sam agrees. After being off the beaten trail for a while, Sam calls to Charlie ahead of him, "Are you sure you know where you're going?" "Of course." The sun gets lower in the sky, and they still haven't made it to camp. Sam says, "Doesn't seem like a very short, short cut to me." Charlie tells him, "It's just around the next bend." When they go around the next bend, the outcropping of rock looks very familiar. Sam says, "Wait a minute! We've been this way before. We're going in circles. Look, there's a ranger's station up on that ridge. Let's go ask for directions." Charlie isn't having any of it. "No way. We're on the right track. We're almost there." After another 20 minutes, they come to the same outcropping and hike past the same ranger station with

Charlie huffing and puffing in the lead. About that time, Sam stops in his tracks as the ranger comes up from behind and says, “I’ve been watching you fellas going in circles for a while. You lost?” Pointing to Charlie, Sam says, “Naw, I’m not lost. I’m following *him*.” You have to be careful who you follow. I know that Pastor Kelly was your great leader. I hope that I can be her good replacement, well, at least not misleading you like Charlie in this story. I pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to keep us moving forward and guiding us for the future of our church.

Obviously, Jesus Christ will be our real guide, and we will follow him until we will reach the “promised land” with the attitude of gratitude and the memory that God will be our guide and protector for the future. Where are we headed towards in the future of our journey? We should remember that God was hope to the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years. They joined Moses because they believed that God was the hope for their lives. By trusting that God is our hope, we should continue to grow and move towards Him in our journey of faith. God is our hope in times of despair, in times of darkness in life and in times of trouble. God’s church should be a community of Hope for people. Our Church is not only a hope for our congregation, but it also should be a hope for other churches, for our conference and for our United Methodist Church. John Wesley never meant to establish a Methodist church, but instead, “Methodism” was a “movement” for reviving and renewing our Spirits and our church in Christ. Hope must not be abstract, but it must be real and practical through our acts of our ministries to the world. Church should be a hope for the young generation, our children and youth. Church should be a hope for those who are in despair healing the broken pieces of hearts in this hurting world, and church should offer a direction for those who are wandering in the wilderness of life. This is our responsibility and our privilege: to continue to live in hope as Christ’s followers. By the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I hope that we will journey together in this direction.