

**“Forward by Faith”**  
**Text: Hebrews 11:8-16, 12:1-2**  
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*For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Hebrews 11:10*

In 1923, two real estate developers purchased land that became Atlanta's Morningside community. Prior to that purchase, this area had been a small farming community known as Easton, Georgia. The name “Morningside” was taken from the name of the developers’ real estate company, Morningside Park, Incorporated.

In 1925, Atlanta Presbytery decided to plant a new church in the city's newest neighborhood, and Morningside Presbyterian Church came into being.

In 1947, the forward-thinking congregants of Morningside Church purchased this particular campus and, in 1949, completed the sanctuary building and the church school facilities we enjoy today.

Now, fast-forward with me to the summer of 2004. Morningside had elected a Pulpit Nominating committee and that committee was on the move. It was time for a new pastor. Though the preceding 79 years of the church's existence had been vital years, with strong worship and education for both children and young people, with strong outreach and mission, the church had hit somewhat of a slump. The truth is, in the summer of 2004, so had I. I had only recently returned to Atlanta after exiting a situation that had proven to be unworkable in another city. Though I had been back several months, I had not come to any clarity about what God was calling me to do. I had really begun to wonder if perhaps my years of serving as a parish pastor had come to an end. I’d explored several non-parish options, had been offered two teaching positions, and I liked those possibilities, but none seemed exactly right. When I met with the Morningside Search committee, I liked the members of that committee very much, but I had no sense that this church and I were meant to be together.

One muggy morning, I drove from our house, across Piedmont, over to the Morningside area of town. I parked across the street from Morningside Church. By the way, the Pulpit Nominating Committee at this point was not at all convinced that God was calling me to serve the church, so we were sort of in the same place. I stopped the car and put the window down. I looked across the lawn and fixed my eyes on the steeple and began praying for discernment. I prayed for a good long while. I was longing for God to reveal some sort of clarity; I really did listen for God to speak. All I could hear were the sounds of the cars rushing by. This was before the speed bumps. Finally I gave up. I cranked up the car, closed

the window, drove to the closest driveway and turned around. As I was coming back down North Morningside Drive, with the church on the right side, for the first time as I drove toward it, I saw the sign that is out in front of the church. And there it was, spelled out in blue paint as big as life - my word from God. Just one word: Morningside. I stopped the car. I laughed. I loved the new thought that perhaps it might be God's will for me to land on the Morningside of life and ministry.

It was *morning* when the women went to the tomb armed with funeral spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus, but when they got there, they found out that he was not there. He had been raised from the dead. When you turn to the beginning of the Gospel of John, you hear this beautiful proclamation that "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." I loved the thought of being on the Morningside! I drove home full of joy and hope because then I knew that if the Nominating committee saw fit to call me, my answer would be: Yes, I will come. One word became the pivot on which my life and ministry turned.

I remember how it was that Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite writers, was going through an unsettled time in his own life, when he too pulled to the side of the road one day, just trying to think and figure out what needed to happen in his life and particularly in his family life. Out of nowhere, there came a car driving along the road, and as the car passed, Frederick Beuchner saw the license plate. "On the license plate was the one word," out of all the words in the dictionary, he needed to hear and see exactly at that moment. His word was not my word, but it means something very similar. The word was "trust". God's future, God's steadfast love, are our inheritance. Was it an accident that he saw the word "trust" or was it providence? Buechner writes, "Maybe it was something of both, but it was an epiphany." (1)

There are times when you and I have no idea what will happen next, and then there is a word, a sign, an event, and life and history are altered forever. New purpose is revealed, and off we go.

Abraham and Sarah heard a word from the Lord; we don't know what that word was, but we do know the effect of that word. What Abraham heard was, "Get up and go. I have a plan of salvation for the whole human race, and believe it or not, Sir, it depends on you and on your life partner Sarah. Step out in faith; you can trust me. Move toward a new day. If you will trust, fruitfulness will mark your future, and God's great kingdom will come on earth." And it came to pass. Though Abraham and Sarah were old as the hills, "descendents were born, as many as the stars of heaven."

I once served a church that had a large, beautiful redbud tree growing right near its front entrance. One spring afternoon, I walked out the door and was startled to see a man I'd never seen before holding a ladder up against the trunk of the tree.

On a limb of the tree was another fellow. Surrounding the tree on the ground was a wide expanse of plastic sheeting. "What are you doing?" I asked.

The man on the ground answered, "Getting seeds."

Now, I can think of many more appropriate things I could've asked next, but then, the only thing that came to my mind was, "What are you getting the seeds for?"

The answer back was very matter-of-fact. "We need the seeds, so we can plant them and grow more trees."

"Okay," I said, "take all the seeds you want." I was grateful because I just heard the best description of the mission of the church I have ever heard. We plant seeds and trust that God will give the growth. We have faith that beyond what we can see from here, there is a future waiting to be born, a fresh, fruitfulness waiting to break out. We live in hope, trusting that what God has promised will surely come to be. I love that old hymn that declares "The darkness shall turn to dawning, and the dawning to noonday bright. And Christ's great kingdom will come on earth, the kingdom of love and light."

"We lay aside every weight and run with perseverance the race that is set before us." Because we trust God with the future, we run in hope, even as we are being cheered on by the heavenly gallery of saints who have gone before us - fathers and mothers and Sunday school teachers and coaches and great heroes and heroines of the faith, like Sarah and Abraham and Isaac and Rebekah and Mary and Joseph.

At the end of this year - even I find it hard to believe some time - I will retire from parish ministry, but I will retire with a heart full of gratitude that I have been a part of the ministerial team that has led Morningside for the past 84 years. I want to remind you today that throughout those years, the most vital times have been when this congregation stepped out boldly in faith. The most difficult times have been when this congregation turned inward and said, "We'd better just stay where we are and conserve what we have." The prophet was right: "Without a vision the people perish."

Did you know that the tradition of Morningside has been to step out in faith? For years, Dr. Lawrence Bottoms, the first African-American Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, United States, was a spiritual leader here in this predominantly white church, at a time when those kinds of things rarely happened in the south. Vann Gibson, in 1957, signed the Ministers' Manifesto which appealed for peace and brotherhood in the face of terrible racial tension.

Perhaps my favorite story from the past is that when the church was built, the vision had been so great that the money ran a little short. There was money for

everything but the steeple. I love to imagine the church with a great big hair cut, no steeple out there at all.

I have never known a church that was in much danger of overreaching. The problem is almost always fear, lack of trust, timidity. The church exists today to proclaim that an ancient story that began with Abraham and Sarah continues, generation to generation. We are stewards of that story, the ones through whom the promise goes on. Who is going to offer an alternative vision of the meaning of human life, if not the church? One of our great theologians [Karl Barth] observed once: "There is no sentence that starts with 'I' and ends with salvation and freedom."

Our message is the message of Jesus Christ, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith," who gave himself away for the sake of this broken world and did so joyfully.

When I came to Morningside, we had a faithful, hardy band of Morningsiders, small, but brave. We had Walter Huff! We had a part-time secretary, a very part-time cleaning service, and more leaks in the roof than could be counted. Tough times. One day I asked where the light bulbs were. I didn't mind screwing in my own light bulbs, I just needed to know where they were. I was told they were on the shelf at Home Depot. That was how bad it was! But even in those dark times, there were bright times – for example, the day Carolyn Morton and I went over to Columbia Seminary and interviewed students. And at the end of the afternoon, a young student named Christopher Henry walked through the door, and all our lives were changed forever.

I know that many of you wish that Chris could be your next senior minister (I love saying the word "senior" with regard to Chris!) but Chris cannot do that. Our Presbyterian *Book of Order* specifically prohibits Associate Pastors from being called as Senior Pastor in the same congregation. Chris will be here in the interim, helping you remain strong and preparing you for a next chapter in seed-planting and race-running. Actually, I think Chris might need some tutoring in the latter category – race-running. A week or so ago, Chris did the chapel for the Preschool. At noon, one of the moms picked up her kid. Riding home, the mom asked her son if Reverend Chris had done the devotional in chapel. He said yes. The next question was, "What did Reverend Chris talk about?"

Her son answered, "He said, 'Don't ride your sister like a horse.'" When we tried to get an explanation out of Chris about that, he said something about a book that told a story about running a race, and so on and so forth. Clearly, the nuances of the story were lost on at least one four-year-old.

I hope and pray that there will be adequate resources in 2010 to plant the seeds and run the race. I know there are adequate resources to do what needs to be done. That's the good news. The challenge is that the resources are right now in

your savings and checking accounts. I hope that you will let Jesus be your role model. He gave everything so that you and I might live in the fullness of life.

A story as I close - Al and I have a little place up in the north Georgia mountains, and we subscribe to a forest watch newsletter up there. The latest edition has a wonderful piece written by a woman, who after a particularly confusing, baffling time in her own life, decided to hike the Appalachian Trail. More power to her! She writes, "Life very gradually got easier as the days and weeks went by. I enjoyed the routine. I arose before daylight. I heated water on my stove. In the dark, I'd retrieve my food bag and eat my oatmeal and drink my coffee. I would start out in low light, and I would be on the trail by the time I could see my footing well enough to walk. As the day went on, companions from other trail shelters would pass and we would greet one another. When I was tired, I stopped and rested. When I was hungry, I stopped and ate trail food: cheese, peanut butter, an apple or an orange. The apples, the oranges - they were luxuries. They were gifts, from what we call on the trail, our 'trail angels'. 'Trail angels' are people who leave gifts, usually food, near path crossings to help hikers and give them a treat and make sure they have enough energy to go on. One day, I came across an entire bag of oranges hanging from a tree. . ." (2)

Life is sometimes like a race. Sometimes it seems like a hike, a hike that takes tenacity and energy and the kindness of friends and strangers. Every twelve hours out there on the trail, the sky turns dark, but then, always, morning comes.

We are morning people, you and I. We can handle whatever the darkness has to deliver. We can handle it best if we can serve as "trail angels" for one another and especially for the children and young people. It is up to us to make sure they have all they need and more. It is our turn now, and we have all we need: faith, hope, love. That's it. That's what we need, and we have it in abundance - bread for the journey. Thanks be to God.

(1) Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember*.

(2) Myra Kibler, "AT Tru-hike: Lessons on Living," *Georgia ForestWatch*, Fall, 2009.