

## **He Went**

Genesis 12:1-9

I have enjoyed the fact that over the years I have found sermon illustrations in a list of unlikely movies: Animal House, Blazing Saddles, Young Frankenstein, Airplane! and others. I understand they are not appropriate to show to children, but I see them as belonging to an era when political correctness did not hamstring comedy and I think they are uniformly hilarious. Today, I am proud to add another movie to my list: Groundhog Day. This Bill Murray/Andi Macdowell classic turns on the concept of repeating the same day—Groundhog Day in Puxatawney, Pennsylvania—over and over. It is that repetitiveness that I want to use, not some specific piece of dialogue or action. We studied and preached on Genesis 12 just a few weeks ago. It came up in the lectionary, which I have followed all summer.

Today, however, we start a new series. Instead of following the lectionary, I have decided to spend some time looking at biblical models of leadership. I have a particular reason for this. We have just started another cycle of strategic planning. It will mark the fourth (I think) round of doing so, normally in five-year repeats. I have reviewed all the previous reports I can access, and they have a certain repetitive nature to them. The same needs and concerns tend to appear: a recommitment to staying in—and maintaining—our aging building in a downtown location, maintaining our traditional worship style, trying to find ways to do hands-on mission, and etc. Of

course there are other goals listed. Our next-to-last Strategic Planning Task Force proposed that Central adopt education as an emerging mission focus. This seems to fit our educator-heavy congregation well. And as an aging church we also face a challenge when it comes to recruiting people to do hands-on mission, such as the SAWS accessibility ramps for wheel-chair bound people.

We have just started the process of forming our next Strategic Planning Task Force. We have begun one year early. There is nothing wrong with the results from the previous groups. Indeed, they do seem to fit into a certain, familiar pattern. This is because the needs we face are repetitive. These groups have worked diligently and correctly identified our congregation's needs and challenges. But while we have accurately named our needs, have we paid attention to how the world around us has fundamentally changed? And have we asked whether what we perceive as *our* needs fit with the needs of people in our community but not in the church? Perhaps we have, a little, but perhaps not enough. We have started the next cycle of strategic planning because it seems to this pastor that we need to redirect our course. We need to decide whether we want to gradually erode into numerical and missional irrelevance, or do we want to try our best to identify and accomplish God's will for this church?

Here is where I try always to make it plain that I do not have enough arrogance in me to presume that I know God's will in perfect detail. Nor do I wish to imply that I know exactly what God wants Central Presbyterian to do. I *do*, however, trust the Presbyterian system, in which we believe God has invested power and responsibility

in the elders of the church. As pastor in our system, I serve beside—neither above or below—the current session, the elders the congregation has elected to lead us. We could just repeat the past endlessly, as Bill Murray's character in Groundhog Day appears fated to do. Or we could find the path out of the time loop, the path to a free and positive future. It turns out people argue endlessly over what finally broke the characters in Groundhog Day free from having to repeat the past. To this watcher, it seems the answer is that Bill Murray's character had to learn how to love others and not to attribute all of our actions to cynical self-serving motivations. As Presbyterians we have a proud past. But it is past time to stop reliving it.

I have told a number of you that I believe I have but a few years left as an active minister. I have served as a pastor now for 38 years. I have served as a youth pastor in a big suburban church, as a solo pastor in a small Southern Indiana city, and as a planter for a new church development. We came here just over five years ago, and this is a wonderful church to serve. Linda and I are happy living in Terre Haute. We truly are. It might seem tempting just to coast to the finish line. *But I could never live with myself if I did that.* We now live in a culture with which this church is poorly prepared to connect. This does not make us bad or wrong; it is just a fact. We are designed and organized to appeal to Americans living in a bygone era. We are surrounded by congregations designed to appeal to Americans living now. And meanwhile, increasing numbers of Americans no longer believe they need the church.

We can like or dislike this. It does not matter. It just is. So I am asking this

congregation to confront the questions: *do we feel God leading us to do anything about this? Or do we feel we have it right and if we prefer just to coast along it only proves our own righteousness?* Believe me, I have encountered that attitude not only here, but everywhere I have served the church. I do not believe anybody intentionally wants to be self-righteous. But when a treasured institution suffers while we remain loyal to it, we naturally seek scapegoats. One of you—a person, by the way, present today—has asked me, “Why do people not see that they are not pleasing God when they mow their yards on Sunday mornings instead of going to church like they ought to do?” This is a kind, spiritual person. But the answer is that people no longer perceive church participation as a requirement for pleasing whatever God they believe exists. We can either judge them for this, or we can try to find some way of opening their hearts and minds to the deep meaning and satisfaction that come from joining the community of God's people.

Last March Linda and I traveled to a Presbyterian conference center in south Texas. We choose the place, frankly, because it was warm, and because I expected it would be quiet enough in the off-season for me to get some reading done. Both things turned out to be true. I read three books and a number of articles on leadership in the church. In prayer and contemplation I had conceived of the idea that this wonderful congregation needed to course correct, to find a modified path forward into its future. I did not then, and do not now, believe that God calls for us to make radical changes. Even a church as healthy as this one can beat against the winds of societal change for so long. But obviously we must either correct our course—at least a little—or we will

gradually grind to a halt. I cannot stand the thought of that. Yet I believe it is an entirely accurate dichotomy. Change or die. Truly.

Now many Presbyterian congregations have knowingly or unknowingly chosen death. Change just proves to be too fearsome. As author Anthony Robinson notes in his book, Leadership for Vital Congregations, “We do not fear change itself. We fear the losses that come with change. We know that if we choose a different road, we may never again encounter things we experienced on our previous road. And some of those things have long been satisfying, reassuring, food for our spirits.” We all know deep in our bones that this is true. This understanding has led many, many individuals, and many churches, to shelter in place. To hunker down. To gradually slide into irrelevance. *I believe God has greater things in store for Central Presbyterian of Terre Haute, Indiana.* But we will have to choose a different road to reach them.