

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
Embracing Faith: Adventure
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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[Watch Service](#)
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[Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 4:12-23](#)

Once upon a time, as all good fairytales begin, there was a kingdom surrounded by a forest. Every day hunters would venture into the forest and return with game to feed the people. But one day a hunter went in and never came back. Later more and more hunters went into the same part of the forest, and they did not return. Soon the people did not go into that part of the forest anymore. One day a hunter, whom no one knew, arrived in the city and asked, “Is there anything dangerous to do around here?” The king said to him, “Well I could tell you about the part the part of the forest into which we don’t go because no one ever returns. There’s not much return on going in there.” Upon hearing this, the unknown hunter decided that is where he should go. Taking only his trusty dog with him, he headed into the forest. He and the dog walked for several days, and then they happened upon a pond. As they approached the pond, a great red, hairy arm reached out, grabbed the dog, and dragged it under. Rather than running away in fear, the hunter said, “This must be the place.” This fairy tale is called “Iron John” or “Iron Hans”, or any other name, but it is about the heart of adventure; going into the unknown and dealing with whatever is encountered.

In my mind, we use the term adventure perhaps too often to describe too many things that are trips rather than adventures. I say this because Cindy and I get multiple catalogues every week from cruise companies trying to get us to go on their “adventures.” The catalogues then go on to describe how luxurious the accommodations on the ships are, how fabulous the food is, the amazing sights you will see, and how the cruise line takes care of everything from when you leave home to when you return, and more. This my friends, is a trip. This is not an adventure. An adventure, as I described a moment ago, is going into the unknown and dealing with whatever is encountered. This is the kind of adventure we find in all great stories stretching from Gilgamesh to Star Trek. These are the kind of stories that draw us to movie theatres and streaming services because there is something about watching adventures from the safety of comfortable chairs that stirs something deep within us.

These are also the kind of stories we read in the Bible about God’s people. This is the story of Abram and Sarai. Abram and Sarai were comfortably well-off in Heron. They had everything they needed. God, however, had other plans for them. God asks them to pick up, leave behind family and friends, and travel to an unknown land; a journey that would cause them to encounter untold dangers. This is the story of God’s people fleeing Egypt. Though they are free they must travel across wastelands with little food or water. They must travel to places that are inhabited by fearsome peoples who have fortified cities. This is the story of Jesus and the disciples. Jesus has begun his ministry as a wondering apocalyptic preacher, teacher, and exorcist. Along the way he calls disciples to come on the journey with him. Those who follow have no idea how they will feed themselves, where they will stay, or what will happen to them, but they are willing to go on an adventure. This is one reason I believe that the Biblical stories have staying power with generations of human beings; they stir something deep inside us. The question becomes though, why does God continually call people to adventure? Why perhaps, might God be calling us to adventure?

I would argue that there are two reasons that God calls God's people to adventure. The first is that adventure leads people to trust God. Over the past several weeks we have been talking about faith; about faith as faithfulness born in humility and nurtured in focusing on God. But the question the Bible always poses is, what kind of God are we placing our faith in? What kind of God are we being faithful to? Is this God trustworthy enough to follow? If we think about it for a moment, these are the kinds of questions that, sooner or later, we ask about every relationship. Can I trust this person? Is this person someone I can spend time with? Is this a person I ought to follow? In some ways only time will tell as we measure their trustworthiness. This is what happens in adventures. In adventures the true measure of a person, or of God is revealed. In both our stories we watch as people discover that God can be trusted. Abram and Sarai find themselves in multiple difficult situations, and yet God rescues and protects them every time. In those moments, they learn to trust God. The same is true for the people of God in the wilderness. God provided them with food, water, clothing, and protection. The same is true with the disciples. When the disciples believed they would perish in a storm at sea, Jesus saved them. When people were hungry, Jesus fed them. When Jesus said he would be raised on the third day, he was. The longer the disciples are with Jesus the more they realize that they can trust in him and trust God.

The second reason I believe that God calls God's people on adventures is that it is during adventures that people are transformed; transformed more and more into the image of Christ such that we can be more and more faithful along our life's paths. Think about adventure as resistance training for faith. In resistance training one uses one's own weight, or resistance bands, big rubber bands, or weights, to in essence, push back against. As one pushes back against the resistance, muscle is transformed. It is strengthened and improved. This is what adventure does for our faith and faithfulness. Abram and Sarai are not the same at the end of their journey as they are at the beginning. They are so different in fact, that they are given new names. They become Abraham and Sarah as their faith and faithfulness increase. The people of God in the wilderness need forty years of adventure training to become ready for their next adventure of going into the land of Promise. The disciples need three years of adventure training and a resurrection for them to be ready to carry out their mission of proclaiming God's love in Jesus to the world.

Adventure is what God's people are always called to, and I believe that we at Everybody's Church have been and continue to be on an adventure for God, especially over the past seven years. I say this because the last seven years have sent the church into new and uncharted territories. We have traveled through four election cycles that stretched and broke friendships, families, and churches. We have traveled through a time of racial reckoning that divided our nation and churches. We have traveled through a pandemic that had not been experienced in more than a hundred years, and simply will not go away; a pandemic that forced churches, schools, and businesses to close and adapt. And this pandemic was enough to not only cause many businesses but churches as well to go out of business. All these events tested the faith and faithfulness of our church and all of you. Yet what we discovered was that we could trust God through it all. We realized that God's presence and power, love, and compassion never left us, but lifted us up even in the most difficult of times. We were transformed. We are not the same church now that we were seven, or ten, or fifteen years ago. The resistance training of adventure has caused us to be a more compassionate, inclusive, welcoming, and serving community. It is not that we were not these things before, but it is that we have discovered more and more what it means to be Everybody's Church.

I wish I could say that the adventure was over and that we are going on a trip instead. However, the adventure is going to continue. It will continue as you welcome an interim pastor who will help to

lead you on this adventure over the short term. Then you will call a new pastor who will lead you in the next stage of your adventure. It will be an adventure because the world continues to change, and challenges will continue to be present. But the gift of God is that God is always with us, showing us how we are to continue to be the church of Jesus Christ, shining light into the world as Everybody's Church. My challenge to you then on this Sunday is to say "yes" to the adventure and then week after week, come to this sanctuary and say, "This must be the place" where I will adventure with Jesus and this community as together, we seek to be God's inclusive family.