

## **“Taking the First Step”**

**Genesis 12:1-9**

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Not much is known of the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu (604 BC - 531 BC). It is said that as an old man, in despair of humanity's unwillingness to cultivate compassion and hoping to find a place of solitude for his last years, Lao-tzu climbed on a water buffalo and journeyed toward what is now Tibet.

“At the Hankoa Pass a gatekeeper, sensing the unusual character of the [man], tried to persuade him to turn back. Failing this, he asked if the “Old [One]” would not at least leave a record of his beliefs to the civilization he was abandoning. This Lao Tzu consented to do. He retired for three days and returned with a slim volume of five thousand [words] entitled “Tao Te Ching” or “The Way and its Power”. A testament to humanity's at-home-ness in the universe, it can be read in half an hour or a lifetime...” (Huston Smith, The World's Religions, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, p. 197)

In it Lao-tzu writes, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

We know this to be true. Whether it be dropping in the mail box one's application to college and all that a degree earned from such an institution can bring...or asking one's beloved out on a first date never imagining the Golden Wedding Anniversary to be celebrated fifty years later...or finally finding the desperate courage to say out loud at an AA Meeting and mean it, “I admit that I am powerless over alcohol and my life has become unmanageable” thus beginning the recovery from addiction .....we all know that any journey worth taking doesn't begin until we take the first step.

And lots of times that first step is the hardest one to take of them all.

What it must have been like for Abram we can only imagine. His father Terah had led the family to Haran from the land of Ur; (Genesis 11:31-32) Ur being in today's southern Iraq and Haran in Southeast Turkey. There in Haran Abram had married Sarai and established a household. One day the Yahweh God calls Abram to leave his father's household and travel to an unknown land hundreds of miles away. All he has to go on is a divine promise:

“I will make of you a great nation ...and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

We are not told the reasons why of all people God should pick Abram and Sarai for this sacred destiny. He is 75 years old. He and Sarai are without child. Their journey will consume the rest of their lives. It will be full of adventure, danger and risk with no guarantees of success other than this God who will remind them of the promise again and again (Gen. 13:15-17, 15:5, 7, 18-21, 17:2-8, 22:17-18, 24:60, 26:2-4, 28:3-4). Sarai will bear her first child at the age of 90. Sarai's name will be changed to Sarah and she will live to 127 but will not see God's promise fulfilled before she dies. Abram's name will be changed to Abraham, he'll live till 175 but like Sarah will die before he sees God's promise fulfilled. From their family come the tribes of Israel, the kingdom of David, the prophets of God and eventually the savior of the world, Jesus. Indeed, over a thousand years after Abram and Sarai begin their journey their family will be a blessing to all the earth.

But in that moment of calling in our Hebrew scripture lesson this morning, the only thing we are certain of is that they took that first step in faith.

“If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

Henry David Thoreau

Hilda Pacheco knows all about first steps and leaps of faith.

“When Hilda Pacheco got married....she made sure to invite a special group of guests: the orphan children of La Mision. They held a treasured place in her heart, these lonely souls from a small town between Tijuana and Ensenada. She had worked with them for ..... eight years, persuading her Irvine employer and other donors to help refurbish their crumbling orphanage, La Puerta de Fe, which means door of faith. Pacheco can honestly say she knows what it's like to be in their shoes. For eight years of her own childhood, she lived at the Door of Faith. She entered as a young girl and left a young woman, passing through adolescence without her parents. They had not died, but marital problems and poverty had left Pacheco and her siblings without a home. .... she knows the sorrow of growing up without a family, just like the children she has watched grow up at the orphanage over the....years. [Many of] those children are teenagers....around the age Pacheco was when she left La Mision to rejoin her mother in Santa Ana.” (Agustin Gurza, “A lifetime putting a family back together”, Los Angeles Times, November 25, 2000”)

She took the first step as a young woman to legally immigrate to the United States and start a new life, get an education and develop a professional career. Today she is Vice President of Operations at an Irvin, California corporation and has helped to established a non-profit organization supporting 14 orphanages in Northern Mexico (Corazon de Vida: A Landmark Education SELF Project started in 1994”, [www.landmarknews.info](http://www.landmarknews.info))

On her wedding day, Pacheco “invited the orphans so they could imagine new possibilities for themselves. So they could see that love and commitment between a man and a woman are possible. That having a family is possible, even for children who have

never known one. [The children] gathered for the wedding.... along with Mexican peasants and prosperous Americans representing both sides of this new union ... “That was my dream”, Hilda Pacheco said, “to be able to unite my two worlds and have harmony”. (Gurza)

Just a few months ago, we were engaged in a controversy regarding the building of a workroom addition to the Christian Education facility that is home for our Children’s Center Pre-school program. Decisions regarding the proposal have been postponed while we form the Building Study Committee required by our Book of Discipline for a project of its size. Our Children’s Center Pre-school is a huge success for our church and community serving over 360 children, with a staff of 45. They have succeeded without adequate storage and teacher preparation space. How to meet that need will be a top priority of the Building Study Committee’s work in the next months. But as we learned in the controversy the issues involved are much larger than a room here or a closet there.

The Book of Discipline charges the Building Study Committee to analyze the needs of the church and community, project future membership for our congregation and report to the congregation the vision of the church’s ministry (para. 2543, p. 697). In other words any one significant building project on a church campus must be done within the context of the current and future ministry and mission of the entire church.

Under the excellent leadership of Becky Everett and Pat Stout, the Building Study Committee has been formed and they are beginning their important work. As you may have seen in the bulletin, and as you will be seeing in the newsletter, website and in a letter from me, the Committee wants to hear from you...in fact from all of us.

How will we as a church contribute to our congregation, our community and the world during the next 12 years? If we could somehow transport ourselves to the year 2020 and look back, how could LAUMC have developed by then and what might we have accomplished? What goals, directions, visions, aspirations, dreams, should we be working toward now that will be meaningful, important and inspiring?

A clear vision of the future we desire in 2020 will provide the basis for a thoughtful, integrated approach to implementing the contributions we want to make. It will help us focus our plans and resources to develop our programs and campus for the best advantage.

We want to hear from our elected church leaders, all standing committees and in fact everyone what their dream for LAUMC might be and suggestions how to resource that vision with facilities, staff and goals.

There will be a variety of ways to respond in the next few months described in detail in a letter I will be sending out next week, repeated in our newsletter letter and on our website.

Our intention is to make a report to the congregation by this fall. As large as our dreams must be, they will not all come to fruition at once but in phases and steps; I can assure you addressing the needs of the Children’s Center for workroom and storage space will be a top priority.

That being said, the first step is to share the dream of the future to which God is calling us.

That was the inspiration that motivated Abram and Sarai to pick up tent stakes and journey toward the promised land of God. That is the spirit that moves anyone to risk and grow towards a better life and more loving relationships.

That is true for the high school senior going off to college, that is true for the couple about to be married, that is true for the addict being the road to recovery.

That is true as well for us as a church.

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

Eleanor Roosevelt

To what dream is God calling us here and now LAUMC? Let's take that first step together.

Amen.