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**Pilgrims of the Faith**  
**Genesis 12:1-4a**

As a college student, I was a member of the college choir at my church and I will never forget the words to a piece that we sang. I can't remember the title but some of the words went like this. "We're pilgrims on the journey of a narrow road and those who've gone before us line the way, cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary, their lives a stirring testament to all who come behind."

I share with you today words meant to tell the tale of pilgrims of our faith. We find those words in Genesis 12:1-4a. Hear these words.

Terah lived in Ur of the Chaldeans and most likely at the forcing of other tribes and shepherds, he and his family—son, Abram and his wife Sarai, grandson Lot and his family—were forced to move along from Ur to find pasturelands that could accommodate them. And so they traveled. Haran was the name of the location, most likely still within the same country where this nomadic people chose to settle. Terah died in Haran.

As the years passed, Abram who longed for a family began to realize the death of his dream. His wife Sarai was barren. There would be no children for them. And then when all hope was gone for he was 75 years old, there came these words of instruction from God. God got Abram's attention. It would have been easy for Abram to walk away from this call. Chalk it up to a hallucination, to dreaming, to anything but reality. But chalk it up, Abram did not. At the pivotal moment of decision making when he could have returned to his life in Haran and never thought twice about that crazy call, Abram chose to pack up his family and walk. . . and walk . . . and walk. . . all of the way to Canaan—the place that had been his father's originally intended destination.

In his gut, Abram knew something—something powerful. He knew that in the face of this promise that made absolutely no sense whatsoever, he had to follow. He had to take the huge risk of leaving this territory, this country that he had known for a lifetime and go to a land that God was promising would be his. Somewhere within him, he had to think this a preposterous situation. He was a nomad, not a landholder! He had to go and in so doing he was going to become a great nation?! He was going to be a great patriarch? But Sarai is barren and way past childbearing years! What was God thinking?! In light of those facts, when he could have said to God, "Look dude, the math doesn't add up on any front" . . . he chose to say nothing. He stood up and went. There was no ounce of hesitation, no questions to be asked. Just faith.

The book of Hebrews tells us that "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." True faith is that immediate response to the call of God that is rooted in trust, built on

detachment from outcome, and grounded in sheer guttural knowing. Abram had true faith. He was a pilgrim on the journey.

God got Abram's attention, gave him a calling and Abram chose to risk everything. He practiced unbelievable patience and came to grips with the fact that he might not know how things were meant to play out at every turn but he did know that God would honor God's promises and whatever the final picture became it would come with an outcome of blessing. That was an assurance. So for Abram, knowing God as he did, trusting God as he did, there was only one clear choice: to have faith and claim pilgrim status.

We know how the story goes. Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah and at 90 years of age Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Isaac married Rebekah and they had twins, Esau and Jacob. Esau's family became known as the Edomites and Jacob became known as Israel. Abraham didn't live to see the Promised Land but through his late and great progeny, God's promise was fulfilled. Abram's faith became a blessing and enabled him for generations to come to be a blessing. True faith is that immediate response to the call of God that is rooted in trust, built on detachment from outcome, and grounded in sheer guttural knowing.

James Henry and Eliza Riddle Woodson. Two people who had known the travails of slavery. They had lived them and by God's grace they had escaped them. As slaves in New Canton, Virginia, Mr. Woodson had helped the Union soldiers during The Civil War. When the war ended and freedom came for the Woodsons, he began to make a living doing carpentry. Neither husband nor wife could read or write but they were driven to be faithful people and they reared their many children to follow suit—exhorting them to not lose their souls. One of those children, Carter Godwin Woodson, heard that message loud and clear. Carter spent much of his young life struggling to squeeze in any effort at education between his responsibilities of working on a farm. His hope of an education was bleak, at best.

Carter Woodson had not been able to attend school regularly enough to receive the consistent and comprehensive education that others gleaned. He was 17 years old when he finally mastered the fundamentals. Inside of him was this urge, this knowing, this drive that somehow he would obtain a great education and do something really worthwhile with his life. He couldn't see how this could happen, at 17, but in his gut he knew that to which he was called.

It would have been really easy for Carter Woodson to lose his faith. He found himself in Fayette County, West Virginia working in the coal mines with little time to go to high school and achieve the education that was his heart's desire. But within his gut was this call of God that said Carter Woodson would be made into a great man educated to make a difference. Carter Woodson chose to take that call of God and pursue it no matter what twists and turns may have come. He entered Douglass High School at the age of 20 and completed his studies with diploma in hand in 1897. From 1897 to 1900 he taught school in Fayette County. He became the principal of Douglass High School and as great as that feat might seem, he went on to achieve his Bachelor's degree in literature from Berea College in

Kentucky. From 1903 to 1907, he lived in the Philippines where he was a school supervisor. He graduated in 1908 from the University of Chicago with a Master of Arts degree. In 1912, Carter Woodson marched with his classmates and bowed to receive his hood that marked the completion of his Ph. D. in history from none other than Harvard University. Here was a man who knew that in the face of God's call to pursue his education there was only one clear choice: to have faith and claim pilgrim status.

“Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” God meant to use Carter Woodson for greatness. God got Carter's attention through his very gut and when Carter could have looked at his life and seen the impossibilities—how the math didn't add up—he chose to have faith and to trust God. It would have been easy for him to believe a son of slaves would never have a Ph. D! It would have been easy for him to work in the coal mines for a lifetime—but there was that urge, that call, that ability to detach from the outcome and let the opportunities come his way as they would, that knowing in his gut that he was destined for some greatness. True faith is that immediate response to the call of God that is rooted in trust, built on detachment from outcome and grounded in a sheer guttural knowing that one is destined for blessing.

Dr. Carter G. Woodson is known as the father of Black History Month having begun the first Negro History week in 1926. Thanks to him, schools now set aside a time every year to study African-American History. He founded The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and the Journal of African-American History. He organized the Associated Publishers—the oldest African American publishing company in the United States. A prolific author, his most famous work *The Negro in Our History* had reached its 11<sup>th</sup> edition by 1966. Dr. Woodson died on April 3, 1950 in the middle of constructing a six-volume work entitled *Encyclopedia Africana*. He never saw the completion of his work but at the completion of his life, his life had been and continues to be a blessing.

As a child, something inside her told her that she was different from other children. It was as if innately she knew that God was going to use her somehow but she knew not how. All she knew was that she loved God with her whole heart and that she wanted to make a difference in the world. As she grew, she came to understand her dream and God's dream for her life as one in the same. She longed to be the senior pastor of a church. She longed to be an encourager to people in their spiritual passageways, to teach them the amazing ways of God and to represent God's peace in their lives. She headed to college at Baylor University in Waco, Texas where she double majored in religion and political science. She met and married her husband, Mark and in 1991 upon their college graduation they embarked on God's continuing adventure. The road took her Ruschlikon, Switzerland where in 1995 she received a Bachelor of Theology degree from International Baptist Theological Seminary. In 1996 she was back in Waco where she finished a Master of Arts degree in Church History at Baylor University. She became a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Missionary stationed in New Orleans where she served as Women's Center Director and as Program Advisor at Lindy's Place. She took a variety of ministry related classes and finally became the Associate Pastor of Membership and Missions at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans, Louisiana. Here she was with most of

her childhood dreams fulfilled—a wonderful husband, three beautiful children and yet there was still this gnawing pain, this urge, this sense that there was something missing. It was that longing to be a senior pastor. Would it ever happen? How could it happen? She was Baptist after all. Baptists seem to have great disdain for women as preachers and senior leaders. But she was Baptist at her very core. She couldn't walk away from the freedoms that her denomination provided for her. She couldn't walk away from the outside chance that somehow she could be a pioneer—that by her suffering she could open doors for some little girl in the future who held the same dreams that she did. Hard as it was, she had to hold to her faith. She knew that true faith is that immediate response to God that is rooted in trust, built on detachment from outcome and grounded in sheer guttural knowing. And, she knew that if she could just hold tight amid the struggles that her current ministry situation brought her, amid the darkness of failing to see doors open for her, then, the outcome would surely be blessing.

“Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Amy Butler knew that in the core of her being and five years ago accepted the call to be the Senior Pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D. C. She has said that the first six months there, people walked around shaking their heads and saying with astonishment ‘we have a woman minister.’ They now love their woman minister and are grateful for the leadership she has demonstrated. She has taught them about faith and by her living has proven herself a pilgrim of the faith.

It is lent. Lent reminds us that we are on a pilgrimage of faith--that days are often dark as we long for resurrection. What is the resurrection for which you long? Maybe it is the ability to know freedom from oppression of any sort—in the workplace, at home? Maybe it is wrapped up in having the deeply lonely places of your life filled somehow? Maybe it is in righting some injustice that plagues our society. Whatever it is, lent calls us to remember that we are all pilgrims of faith. We are all on a journey.

“We’re pilgrims on the journey of a narrow road and those who’ve come before us line the way, cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary, their lives a stirring testament to all who come behind.” The song goes on . . . “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run the race not only for the prize, but as those who’ve come before us let us leave to those behind us the heritage of faithfulness passed on through godly lives.”

“Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Life may not make sense for you right now. The math may not add up when you figure you in the promises that God has offered for your life. Darkness, gloom, hopelessness may be the emotions of your days but the lives of Abram, Carter Woodson and Amy Butler exhort us to hope. They exhort us to hold fast to the faith that is ours and to remember what true faith is—that immediate response that is rooted in trust, built on detachment from outcome and grounded in sheer guttural knowing.

This day, may we simply claim faith that God can and is working wonders in our lives and may we open ourselves to revel in the blessings just waiting to be showered upon us! May we claim our status as pilgrims of the faith! Amen.