

Covenant Word

The Fifteenth State of the Church Address

Genesis 12:1-4a; I Corinthians 1:1-9; Matthew 4:12-25

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
January 22, 2017*

My imagination often gets the best of me. You see, I live with this fantasy that on a given Sunday, I will greet you and then hand you the name and address of a church within the greater city limits of Birmingham. Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to look, listen and worship with whichever congregation I have assigned you. Then we would return to process together all that we have experienced.

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**

Now the truth is, you already live with this freedom.

The fact that you choose to worship here is a gift for which I am incredibly grateful. But you see, I do not have this freedom, **unless I am on sabbatical!** So while I was on leave, I went to a different worship service every single Sunday. No mainstream denomination was spared my curiosity, and I have returned with a gratitude that is profound.

I discovered that from East Lake to Tuscaloosa, the Methodist, Presbyterians and Episcopalians have a vibrancy that is encouraging. (There is an obvious omission there. I hope you caught it!) I witnessed infant baptism and the immersion of four young men who had made a pact to profess their faith and be baptized together. (They will be bound for life!) I sang from hymnbooks and screens. I sang "Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost" during the doxology and people turned to stare. I also had to hold back on my singing volume. Apparently, nobody sings with the confidence that we do at Baptist Church of the Covenant. How I ached for your voices raised in praise to God! I experienced smoke on a stage with light-pulsing backdrops. There were outlines of sermons inserted in the bulletin and projected on screens. I stood in que lines to enter, and I rattled around in massive space that bespoke of former glory. I received communion from the hands of priests and from the hands of all white, male deacons all dressed in navy blazers and khaki pants. Professional clergy gave all the leadership in every worship service I attended. The only exception was when choirs sang. While Baptist Church of the Covenant is far from perfect, may I just say that our

worship stands out as one that possesses excellence and integrity? Each Sunday's genuine offering of praise to God for God's gracious mercy can compete with the best of churches.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not also say I realize there are those within this congregation who long for a testimony rather than a sermon; who might enjoy a chorus or two with a gospel hymn attached. Some like to participate with worship stations. Some crave weekly communion. There are those who prefer a more relaxed worship order that requires no bulletin. There are guests who won't come to a 9:00 a.m. service, but who might darken the doors at 5:00 in the afternoon. This meeting time might even allow those interested to grab a quick bite afterwards at a local eatery. So, I am going to the Worship Committee in 2017 to propose that we have a trial run for a Sunday Vesper Service. It will begin the Sunday after Easter and continue until the first of June. This service will not be for everyone, so don't feel an obligation to show up each week. I do, however, believe that it will speak to the needs of some within and without this congregation. I hope we are courteous and hospitable enough to give it a try.

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The fact that you choose to worship here is a gift for which I am incredibly grateful. But you see, I do not have this freedom, unless I am on sabbatical! So while I was on leave, I went to a different worship service every single Sunday. No mainstream denomination was spared my curiosity, and I have returned with a gratitude that is profound.

Our neighborhood is changing rapidly. Perhaps you heard on the local news just this week that the SouthTown property has been given over to Bayer Development Company to construct multi-income housing and retail space. There is no government grant to dictate the development. This revitalization project will be led by individual contractors and investors whose sole intent is profit. Every day there is evidence of this change coming our way. Residential construction continues within a one mile radius of our facilities and there are U-Hauls every day in the SouthTown development as residents are moved out. This change will not only bring us new neighbors, but it will cause a re-organization of our ministries' focus. There is a meeting this afternoon of The Neighborhood Study Committee. Come if you are interested.

The changes within our neighborhood make it an even more critical need to bring a Director of Ministries onto our staff. They can help us create



**Baptist Church of the
Covenant**

Where Faith Comes to Life.

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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

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new and prioritize old ministries. This selection committee continues to interview candidates faithfully.

While ministry partnerships in Cuba and Uganda will take some on international trips this year, we continue established local ministries like Saturday morning groceries, Trunk or Treat and the Living Nativity. These are obvious, out of the church building events that make gentle forays into our neighborhood. I am suggesting that we step these efforts up.

Perhaps you noticed the front fence on University Boulevard as you came to church today. On it are scarves, gloves and caps that the Prayer Shawl Ministry along with our missions' education organizations, made for whoever needs them. There's a simple note with each one that says, "Stay Warm! Come worship with us at 9:00 on Sunday mornings." The simple premise is to take what you need. So what if what is needed are umbrellas in the Spring or a bottle of iced water in August or a Bible verse or an encouraging word printed on a little tag of paper to take to work. And what if one person, because of our very simple evangelism, accepts the invitation to worship with us and suddenly realizes that what they need is Jesus Christ? Wouldn't our efforts, then, be worth it? Take what you need. Take what you need!

Along these same lines, what if on Ash Wednesday we joined forces with the chaplains at UAB and Children's and Veterans Hospitals and any other interested area church, and we stood on corners of busy pedestrian traffic at the lunch hour to offer ashes? Might we give away what we know to be necessary and good to address the needs of people everywhere?

There is a growing collective pain in our current world that intensifies daily from the fear of terrorists, political tyranny and our personal vulnerability to disease and illness. The rhetoric of the day causes us to be afraid of anyone who is the slightest bit different from us. Our loss of control gives us a chaotic world picture to which we are called to take GOOD news. Never before has Christianity looked so naïve and ineffectual, and never before has grace been more necessary than it is at this very moment.

Grace is what I wish Rick Burgess knew. Rick is the co-host of the syndicated Rick and Bubba show that is broadcast from Alabama. He has a unique public platform that could be used to extend grace. Instead his judgment about any LGBTQ person, much less his very own daughter, creates unnecessary division and hostile judgement. (If you don't know about this, check John Archibald's columns in AL.COM later today.) These types of public conversations have become very personal for me, and not just because of my own family. They are especially personal because of my church family.

I know that some of you wish that I would move on in regards to the LGBTQ conversation. You say to me, "Pastor, haven't we

talked about this enough? We've moved ahead. This is settled in this congregation." While this is true to some degree, it is more important than ever that we "walk the walk and talk the talk." Here is one reason why.

My first week back in the office, I received a phone call from a fellow Cooperative Baptist Fellowship pastor. I, of course, serve here in an urban congregation. He is in the suburbs at a large, established and wealthy church. Even though friends from seminary, our paths rarely cross. It was nice to have a kind conversation. He said he had been selected to serve on the National Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Illumination Committee. Don't feel badly if you don't know what that is. I did not know either, and so he caught me up.

You remember, he said, that some years back, CBF made an unfortunate decision to put into their personnel policies that they would not hire any actively practicing homosexual?

Oh yes, I said. I remember.

Well, there is intentional research and conversation taking place now through the Illumination Committee to address this matter.

He then went on to say that the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship receives funds from churches all over the southeast, and so the committee decided to look at the top 300 givers to see who might be identified as welcoming and affirming. You will be glad to know that Baptist Church of the Covenant is not only in the top 300 givers to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship but that we are 1 of 11 churches in those top givers that is welcoming and affirming. 1 of 11! Only 1 of 11 in a MODERATE Baptist fellowship. My friend then said, "*I appreciate what goes on down there at Baptist Church of the Covenant, Sarah. I really do, because it sets the example for us all.*"

WE talk in terms of enacting justice—of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves—of doing "the right thing." I guess because my focus has been narrowly placed on making sure the log is out of my own eye that I haven't thought in terms of our setting the example for others to follow. I am more aware that our

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acceptance is tied to a sense of calling that both laity and clergy feel in their personal as well as their corporate lives. While rarely identified, this mutual calling is found in the unspoken give and take that is so very evident in our worship and programming. It is a gift that connects us. It is this gift that was

missing for me as I worshipped all those weeks without you. It is a gift that I believe to be rare.

So when I consider the calling of Baptist Church of the Covenant throughout its history, I consider it in light of Abraham's call to leave everything familiar behind in Ur and follow the voice of God into the vast unknown. Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament scholar, says this story is the beginning of the Biblical theme that reminds us that to stay in safety is to remain lifeless. To leave, however, and live in risk is to have hope. (*Genesis*, p. 118)

We watch Jesus leave home to live in risk. The text all but glosses over the emotion involved when a young person has their heart so stirred that they relocate leaving behind a widowed mother and younger siblings. The scripture says simply that when Jesus' cousin, John, is arrested, Jesus leaves home for Galilee. He leaves the family home; he leaves the family business; he leaves a steady income; he leaves behind any support for His family, and for what? To walk the shores of the Sea of Galilee where He invites Peter and Andrew, James and John to "follow."

This verb, "follow" is found 87 times in the gospels alone! "Follow me," Jesus says. (Victoria Curtiss, "More Than Just Tagging Along," Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, 1-28-11) This is so much more than just tagging along. This is so much more than just believing in Jesus. To follow Jesus means we begin to ask ourselves:

When I have completed my giving, why do I have so much left over for myself?

Following Jesus means asking why our closets bulge when there are so many unclothed.

Following Jesus means asking why so many of our friends are among the affluent and so few are among the poor?

Following Jesus means asking ourselves about our penchant for overeating and drinking too much when the world begs for bread.

Following Jesus means asking why our security lies in missiles and guns instead of mercy and grace. (Curtiss)

As we witness the encounter between Jesus, Peter and Andrew, James and John, we need to remember that Jesus comes to them where they are. They are working at their nets. No prerequisite exam is given. No advanced degree is required. These first disciples do not appear to be "God haunted," or in earnest prayer in the synagogue, or seekers who have been on a quest for truth. Rather, the initiative comes from God. God calls with the simple summons "to follow" while we are at our nets, working, living, loving, parenting, deciding how to vote, and how to spend our resources. God comes to us and calls us in the matters about which we are most passionate, our strongest concerns and commitments, our most precious hopes and dreams. Michael Ludvall writes, "The journey of faith is not so much to 'find God' as it is a struggle to follow a God who finds us." (John Buchanan, "Found-Called," 1-27-08)

In case you have not realized it, God seems to continually find us on this corner on the Southside of Birmingham. While I sometimes wish God did not knock on our door with such frequency, I am continually amazed at and thankful for your answer of "yes." For that very answer, there is so much more I could say. I haven't even mentioned our excellent programming,

the amazing leadership and encouragement we consistently receive from Dan Lawhon and Valerie Burton. I only glazed over the active process to find a Director of Ministries, and that we will also welcome a new face in the Financial Administrator's position as well as a new face in the Office Administrator's office. We haven't shared in the excitement of the fellowship hall's upcoming face lift nor have I bragged on your faithfulness in giving that allowed us to pre-pay \$125,000 on the loan principle; that we will end the year in the black and that over 86% of the 2017 budget is pledged! There is so much more good news to tell! So if you hear me say nothing more, then hear this: You are an amazing congregation whose commitment to follow Jesus sets a high bar for others to follow.

When we were in Paris, no matter where we found ourselves, we could see, set up on a hill, a beautiful church. When the sun would shine, it would gleam and sparkle like a box full of jewels. It is the Sacred Heart of Christ Basilica in Montmartre. Built on the hill of the martyrs in 1875, there was much criticism. After all, why did Paris need another church? Their answer was simply: at this basilica, every minute of every day (for 130 years now), there are people present to adore and pray over the Eucharist, the very elements that reveal the love of God for people everywhere. Their thought is that this makes the Basilica shine out as such a sign of hope that when people see its dome, they will say to themselves: "Up there, the Lord is present. Up there, somebody is praying for me."

Hundreds of people pass this corner every day searching for hope and encouragement. Churches, fellowships, denominations look to us for an example. What is it they see? What is it that brings you here week after week? I would suggest that the state of this church is such that we shine out as such a sign of hope that others know the Lord is present and that they are being prayed for because we are intent on following Christ. May it be so, amen.

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