

I

When I say this airplane was small, I mean it was essentially a minivan with wings. I was traveling from Key West, Florida, to Atlanta, and the fuselage of this aircraft was so short and narrow that as I ducked my head and shuffled my way to my seat, I felt like I was on the inside of a mechanical pencil. I stuffed my 6'5" frame into my seat as best I could, and I looked out the window. That's when I noticed a fuel truck pull up alongside the airplane, and a man got out and began adding fuel to the aircraft.

Shortly thereafter the pilot made an important announcement. He used the PA system, although he probably could have just turned around in his seat to talk to us. Although it was sunny and bright in Key West, the weather forecast in Atlanta had changed, and consequently, more fuel was being added to the aircraft in case we ended up having to do laps around Atlanta. He went on to explain that more fuel means more weight, and Key West International Airport has a very short main runway, what with it being an island and all, and now our airplane was over the maximum weight limit for takeoff. So to solve this dilemma, the airline was seeking two volunteers who might be willing to get themselves and their bags off of the flight and spend another day in Key West, at the airline's expense.

Hands immediately shot up throughout the aircraft, although not too

high for fear of punching a hole in the roofline. I was not among those selected, although I would have pointed out that if they selected a big guy like me, they might have only needed one volunteer to stay behind.

Yet even after the volunteers left the aircraft, we had to wait another few minutes while the baggage crew rearranged the freight in the cargo hold so as to properly set the aircraft's center of gravity. If the aircraft's center of gravity was not properly calibrated, it would not handle correctly during the takeoff from the very short field, and things were liable to get exciting in a hurry if that calculation wasn't done precisely.

Every pilot knows the importance of the center of gravity, because the center of gravity affects everything else about the flight. If the center of gravity is off, the aircraft will not perform as expected during takeoff. If the center of gravity were to suddenly shift during flight, it could cause the aircraft to rapidly become uncontrollable.

II

Of course, we don't need to be pilots to know about the importance of the center of gravity. We learned that lesson the first time we ever tried to ride a bike. And we learned that adding weight to the bike, like say, having a friend ride on the handlebars, can drastically affect how that bike handles.

Gravity is a funny thing, isn't it? Whether we think about it or not, gravity affects every aspect of our lives, every minute of every day. We can't see it, but we can sure experience it. And when we lose our center of gravity, things can get out of control pretty quickly, and in some cases, when we lose our center of gravity, our travel can become uncontrollable.

And that brings us to our Scripture passage for this morning.

III

This fall, we've been making our way through the Hebrew Scriptures, also called the Old Testament. Last week, we read the story of Ruth, which is set in a time period in Israel's history called the time of the judges. After the people of God escaped from their slavery in Egypt and finished their wandering in the wilderness, they returned to the Land of Promise. But at first, they functioned more like a loose confederation of tribes, rather than as unified, independent nation. They had no king, no capital city, none of the trappings of other ancient Near Eastern nations. When disputes would arise between the tribes, they would appoint judges to settle them, so that's why this period in Israel's history is called the time of the judges.

But before long, our ancestors looked around and noticed how all of their neighbors had kings, and so they said to God, in Ryan's paraphrased translation, "We want a king." But God said to the people, "All I've ever wanted

is for you to be my people and for me to be your God. You don't need a king." But the people said to God, "All the other nations have kings. No one will take us seriously if we don't have a king. Give us a king." And God said to the people, "Look, a king is a bad idea. A king will tax you into oblivion. A king will take your sons into his army and take your daughters as his concubines. A king will do terrible things if the king ever finds that his power is threatened. Trust me, you don't want or need a king." But the people said, "Give us a king." So God said, "OK, but don't say I didn't warn you," and so about 1,000 years before the birth of Christ, the first king was appointed over Israel, a king by the name of Saul.

For a little while, things went OK for God's people and King Saul. But then things began to unravel quickly, so much so that God was compelled to anoint a new king over Israel even while Saul was still alive, a king by the name of David.

As you might imagine, having two kings claiming to be the rightful leader of Israel created an incredible amount of political uncertainty among God's people, and violence, bloodshed, and intrigue were the orders of the day. The southern tribes claimed that David was the one true king, while the northern tribes rallied around Saul. And yet in the middle of all of this chaos, God promised to David that his descendant would rule over Israel forever, and of his kingdom, there will be no end. File that little note away for a few weeks from

now when we begin hearing stories about a certain Joseph from Bethlehem and his fiancée Mary, and how Joseph was from the house and line of David. But that's still about 1,000 years in the future from today's story.

When we come to today's story, King Saul has died, as have most of his key advisors. And so the northern tribes come to visit King David, and finally, ancient Israel has all of the hallmarks of a nation-state. David has consolidated his power and now rules as the undisputed king over both the northern and southern tribes. David has established the city of Jerusalem as the political capital of his newly unified nation.

But David's first move as king isn't to set economic or military policy. His first move as king isn't to develop a national defense strategy. David's very first move, the very first thing he does, is to retrieve the ark of the covenant from deep storage and to set it in the center of things.

The ark of the covenant was essentially a big, elaborate box that contained the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. But it was so much more than just a box with some stone inside. The ark was believed to mediate the very presence of God on earth. It was the connection point between the holy and the ordinary. It was the visible sign of God's invisible grace and power.

And so David's first act after becoming king is to move the ark of the

covenant into the center of things. As Israel is becoming a unified nation under David's leadership, as Jerusalem is becoming its capital city, the ark, the very presence of God on earth, is placed at in the very center of the national life of the people in the heart of the capital city.

David was not a perfect man. Scripture pulls no punches about his many sins. But he is remembered in Scripture as ancient Israel's golden king. He is remembered as the one who brought the presence of God into the center of the lives of the people.

IV

And I wonder, my friend, what is that you have placed at the center of your life? What is your center of gravity?

When I was a young boy, I remember our football coach trying to teach us about priorities. He said, "Men, put God first in your life, and then your family, and then your schoolwork, and then your athletics."

And on the surface, that seems like sound advice and an eminently appropriate ranking, especially for 16 and 17 year old boys.

But in my mind, I wondered how do you know when you've finished with number one and are now ready to move down the list? How do you know when you've checked God off the to-do list?

So I wonder, my friend, if instead of thinking about your list of priorities

like a ladder, with God at the top rung, if there's a more helpful image? What if instead of a ladder, you think about life as a bicycle wheel. A bicycle wheel has a hub at the center with spokes radiating in every direction.

I don't think God became incarnate in Jesus Christ and lived among us and was betrayed and crucified and died and was raised again and reigns in power and is coming again just so God can be at the top of our to-do lists. I think God wants to be at the very center of our lives. I think God wants to be at the center of your relationship with your family. I think God wants to be at the center of your career. I think God wants to be at the center of your checkbook. I think God wants to be the hub through which everything in your life connects.

So my friend, what is the center of gravity in your life? Is there something that needs recalibrating? Is there some weight redistribution that needs to be done? If your center of gravity is correct, you'll fly just fine. But if it's not set correctly, things might become unmanageable in a hurry. So check that center of gravity before you take off, not just for your sake, but for the sake of everyone who's traveling with you.

V

And what about us? What about our life together, here at First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia? Lord knows there's plenty of palace intrigue these days in the halls of

power in the nation's capital. We may not have much say over what happens in the White House, but we have lots of say over what happens in this house.

What's presently at the center of our life together? The building? The budget? The upcoming church anniversary? The desire to be a "purple church" where people of differing political views can worship together?

What should be at the center of our life together? Our ancestors in faith who commissioned the building of this room over 160 years ago left us a clue in the architecture of this room. Notice, friends, the focal point of this room. It's this pulpit, upon which sits this bible. Just like the ark of the covenant was the vessel that mediated the presence of God to the people of ancient Israel, the bible is the vessel that mediates the presence of God to us. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is our center of gravity. Not our politics. Not our finances. Not our personal preferences. This. This is what must always remain at the center of our life together – the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ, written in Scripture, and proclaimed with our very lives.

May it be so this day and always.
Amen.