

A Journey to New Life

Lent 2A 2008 | Genesis 12 and Psalm 121 (John 3)

Imagine packing up all your stuff and moving to a new place when you're 75 years old. Imagine leaving behind a community you've known for 50+ years. Imagine leaving behind a lifetime of memories and friends and starting a new life in a new place you've never lived before. Imagine that it's very likely that this is a one way trip, and that you'll never be back again.

Can you imagine doing this?
How would you feel making such a trip?
Do you think it would be easy?
What would you miss?

I was back in IL this week helping my mother begin to get organized for her move to CA next month, and I got to thinking a lot about the new life she will enjoy here in Fresno. We can imagine life will be rich and rewarding with her here. We can also imagine there may be a few speed bumps in getting her here and getting her through the transition to being here.

Given what's going on in our life right now, I resonate a lot with Abraham and Sarah striking off on their new life in Canaan. Unlike them, we know what Fresno is like and we can prepare mom for her new life here. Abraham and Sarah, though, had an unknown journey ahead of them, and I can only imagine what might have been like.

We're on a journey here at Hope, aren't we? In one sense, we often describe our faith walk as a 'faith journey' and it is. As a whole, our faith journey is filled with lots of ups and downs; with many twists and turns. It's unpredictable. We can look back and give thanks for God seeing us this far. But it's hard to see very far ahead.

On a practical level, we're on another journey of sorts – a journey between senior pastors. Talk about the unknowns:

Who will be on the call committee? (please come Mar 2 to the congregation meeting when we'll elect them)

When will an interim pastor arrive? What will s/he be like?

What sorts of needs and ministry goals will we identify as being important for Hope's next chapter of ministry?

Who is God preparing to be our next senior pastor? How long will it take until we're through that transition?

What does God have in store for us in the future?

This journey, too, is filled with lots of ups and downs; twists and turns. It's unpredictable. We can look back in thanksgiving for God seeing us through nearly 50 years of ministry. But it's hard to see very far ahead.

As God's children and as a church, we often sing with the psalmist,

*Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.*

Ps 119.105

But ancient oil lamps aren't mag lights or arc lamps; they're often small bowls with floating wicks that throw off just enough light to see your feet and a step or two down the path.

And so, into the murky darkness we step out in faith, whether it's Abraham and Sarah and the new life that awaited them in this new place called "Canaan." Or a new life for my mother at age 80 in this new place called Fresno. Or a new relationship with a new senior pastor and the ministry future God has in store for us.

Thankfully, our readings today guide us on our journey to new life.

First, following God means leaving behind everything that gives a person meaning or identity or security. Abraham and Sarah leave behind "country, kindred and family" to enter the new life that God offers them. Much later, Jesus tells the crowds who are interested in him,

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

Luke 14.26

God calls us to a new and entirely different focus of trust; not ourselves or our own efforts/skills, but God. Life in the Spirit is living in trust, even in the midst of despair/uncertainty/a future whose shadows we can only glimpse. And the Spirit blows the breath of trust into us at the times we most need it.

Second, God's nature is to support and help us. God's fundamental desire is to bring us blessing and not harm. The prophet Jeremiah states this beautifully,

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

29:11 (NIV)

Did you notice all the promises in the lesson from Psalm 121?

*My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.*

The story of Abraham and Sarah is just one in a long line of encounters between humans and God that underscore this fundamental reality that God's default setting towards us is grace and not judgment. In Genesis 1-11, every curse or judgment against humans for their sin is balanced by a renewed blessing or other grace moment.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate from the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the stated judgment was that they would die (Gen 2.17). However, the judgment against them and the serpent in Genesis 3 doesn't include that. A beautiful grace gesture is that God sewed clothes for them (Gen 3.21).

When Cain killed his brother Abel, God protects Cain and works it out so that no one will kill him in retribution (Gen 4.15).

When evil ran rampant on the face of the earth (Gen 5-6), and the humans and divine beings were cohabitating, God judged the world and caused the flood to wipe out the animals and humans . . . except for Noah and his family and the animals that were spared on the ark. Judgment; sign of grace. God's default setting towards us is grace and not judgment.

Finally, God's invitation to new life requires a response from us. Abraham and Sarah invited to new life, and they went; but not without some reservations. God told them to leave their family behind, and who (in vv. 4-5) goes with them?

*Abraham took his wife Sarah and his brother's son Lot,
and all the possessions that they had gathered,
and the persons they had acquired in Haran;
and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.*

Nicodemus exposed to new life and what it entails, and he hesitated, at least at first. Unclear from later encounters with Nicodemus whether he fully comes around to accept Jesus' invitation.

And this is the point at which, finally, the promises of God touch our own lives, especially in Lent. This season is a time for engaging our new life in Christ more deeply, risking new levels of trust. The purpose of Lent is not to dwell on suffering, or to spend 40 days bemoaning our manifold sins and wickedness for the sake of feeling our pain.

Lent is about engaging in the ongoing process of renewal, regeneration, and new birth. It's about experiencing Jesus' healing and renewing touch which restores our spirit and gives us new life. It's about encouraging us to trust, and to risk, going forth and being sent out to be a source of blessing, of extending Hope in Jesus, for others.

Lent is for careful thinking about how to step into the as yet unmapped future for our lives and for our congregation, seeking to deepen our relationship to God and trust the picture of new life in Christ. It includes identifying the breaks with the past that we need to make in order to respond to the promises of God.

May it be so for us as well.

Amen