

A FAITH ON THE GO!
2) Abraham: "On the Road Again"

Genesis 12: 1-9 / Ephesians 4: 1-6

Rev. Ron Dunn

September 13, 2015

If there is one historical figure that holds the potential to unite the divergent strands of three main faith traditions, it is Abraham. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim believers all look to "Father Abraham" as founder and primary shaper of their faith tradition. In this respect, Abraham plays a unique role in the unfolding story of faith as experienced and expressed by these faith traditions.

There is something about his story that appeals to people across the lines theology and belief—something that has to do, I think, with his openness to God's call in his life and faith. As we have been reminded in our reading from Genesis this morning, Abram was willing to listen to the call of God--even if it proved to be a most inconvenient proposal that God was presenting. God called Abram to pack everything up--and go to a place to be named later--a land not even mentioned, but one to be discerned at a later time. In return, God promised that God would make of Abraham a great nation and would bless him and make his name great.

While it was an impressive promise that God made, it is important to keep in mind that Abram was getting up there in years. He and Sari were not exactly "spring chickens" and in fact, had little spring left in their step. We could have understood, I think, if Abram would have made God a counter offer... something like this...

Listen God, I'm not exactly a young man any more. I've worked very hard all my life and my work has been rewarded with an abundance of cattle and crops. I have a nice little 401 K and I have invested what you have given me wisely and well. And now when retirement is finally a reality, when I have the opportunity to relax and enjoy the fruits of my labors, you want me to pick up and pick up and move forward on some mystery quest that you have in mind.

I'm sorry, but I want to stay here. I want to live in the land that I have loved, the land that I have cultivated, the land that I have tended for the better part of my life. Don't Sari and I have the right to do that? Don't we have the right, at this stage of our life, to relax and tap into our pension--do a little traveling, see some sights, enjoy our "golden years?"

It would seem to many of us as a pretty reasonable argument--a well presented case that would be hard for anyone--even God--to refute. Abram would have had a point and it would have been understandable, at least in our thinking, if he would have begged off and simply promised to be a faithful servant of God right where he was--without going through all of the heartache and hassle. No muss, no fuss!

But, as we are well aware, Abram didn't do that. In spite of these understandable arguments, Abram simply responded to God's call by putting his place up for sale and calling the movers. This wasn't a time to equivocate. It wasn't a time to debate. It was a time to consecrate his desire to be a faithful servant of God. God said, "Go!" and Abram and Sari and servants and livestock were on their way.

And, as they set out on their journey, I can imagine them singing a little song together...

"ON THE ROAD AGAIN, I JUST CAN'T WAIT TO GET ON THE ROAD AGAIN...THE LIFE I LOVE IS MAKING MUSIC WITH MY FRIENDS AND I JUST CAN'T WAIT TO GET ON THE ROAD AGAIN..."

Well, maybe that didn't really happen, but I would like to imagine that I did.

A primary reason that Abraham became the central figure, the father, if you will of three faith traditions, lies in the fact that he was willing to trust in God's promise to make him a father of nations by leaving the comfort and security of his familiar home to venture out into the uncertainty and insecurity of a new destination and a new plan.

Beginning this morning with the story of Abraham and continuing over the next couple of weeks, we will be considering the ways in which God is calling us to live out a faith that is dynamic--not static, a faith that is progressive--not regressive, a faith active--not passive...a faith that is fulfilled "on the go."

When you stop to think about it, many of the stories contained within the Bible, are stories of God's call to move forward, to travel in trust and hope, to a new land, a new idea, a new way of living and being.

From God's call to Moses and Israel in the Hebrew Bible, to Jesus' call to the disciples in the New Testament, the invitation is to leave behind the comfort and security of the present moment of time and venture forth "into a land that I will show you." This is a calling that may be literal in terms of land and location, but it may also be metaphorical--a calling that has more to do with an inward journey of heart and soul rather than an outward one.

Given this consistent witness of scripture, I can find little reason to suggest that it ought to be any different in the context of your life and mine--or in our life together. Our God is still a God who says, "Go!," a God who summons us to leave those places of security, comfort and convenience in favor of those places that will stretch us, challenge us, change us and invite us to grow. We are still called to embrace a "faith on the go!"

The only problem is that, as human beings, we are not necessarily wired to think in those terms. By our nature, we like that which is familiar. We like that which makes us comfortable. And we REALLY like that which provides us with a certain sense of security. Change is fine as long as it involves other people—not ourselves.

It was Charles Kettering who once observed that, **“People are very open to new things—as long as they are exactly like the old ones.”**

Robert Quinn, in his book, “Deep Change,” tells the story of a friend, Michael, who was taking his children to the San Francisco Zoo. The first stop on this family adventure, was the playground where his son quickly ran to the swing set and began to enjoy his favorite pastime. That was fine—for a few minutes—but the family had another agenda. They wanted to see the zoo. The little boy, however, was quite content to remain in his swing, pumping his legs and exhilarating in the thrill of it all.

When Michael tried to persuade the boy to stop swinging and join the rest of the family for their trip into the zoo, he flatly refused. Michael then tried to persuade the boy that just around the corner from the swing was the carousel—something he enjoyed even more than swinging. But the father’s plea fell on deaf ears. The boy would not be moved.

In mounting frustration, Michael finally pried the boy’s hands from the swing chains and dragged him, kicking and screaming, to the next stop which happened to be the carousel. Upon see the carousel, the boy’s eyes grew large with excitement. The tears stopped and he eagerly ran to take his place upon a wooden horse. Crisis averted.

Quinn shares the story to illustrate his point that when it comes to the dynamics of change, we often find ourselves feeling a bit like that little boy—clinging tightly to the chains of the status quo while refusing to entertain any thought about what might lie ahead and the opportunities it will afford.

Change does not come easily for little boys or anyone else, little or big, who happens to be human. It is something that many of us are inclined to resist. And yet, change is, without question, the essential ingredient in a life that is rich and diverse and meaningful.

It is not by accident that so many of the stories of the Bible are stories about God’s invitation to leave behind the land of the familiar and comfortable and venture out into the land of the unknown. This was true of Abraham. It was true of Moses and it was true of a few fishermen and a tax collector that Jesus encountered on the beach at Galilee. And that’s just for starters!

Suffice it to say that the willingness to venture out, the willingness to risk, the willingness to experience and even embrace change is, often times, a pre-requisite for the growth and meaning that we seek. Abraham and Sarah set out, with nothing but a vague promise from God and yet, it was this act of faith and trust that is today cherished and celebrated by three of our world’s great faith traditions. Abraham’s willingness to “put on his traveling shoes” and venture into the unknown was the choice that made all the difference not only in his life, but in the lives of generations to come...including the generations that gather here this morning.

This story, you see, is really our story and its invitation is really our invitation.

We too are called by our dynamic God to venture out into an unknown land in an uncertain time. We too are being called to “let go of the swing” and trust that our God has something more in store for us around the corner. Yes, it is tempting to be satisfied with where we

are, to live within the comfort and the convenience of this present moment of time. And some will choose to do just that. But I happen to believe that God has more in store for us—much more than we might have hoped for or dared to dream.

I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the instruction provided in our reading from the 4th chapter of Ephesians: ***"I want you to get out there and walk—better yet, run!—on the road God called you to travel. I don't want anyone of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere."***

Good advice, don't you think?! While there are lots of reasons that the Church, as an institution, is struggling to find its footing in the brave new world of the 21st century, one of the primary causes of decline has to do with the failure to understand that our faith, by its very nature, is dynamic. It is progressive. It anticipates what is yet to be and eagerly participates in its unfolding.

I am afraid that in too many churches—churches that have now been forced to close their doors—there has been a lot of "sitting on one's hands," a lot of "strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere." Somewhere along the line, they forgot, as business visionary Peter Drucker once noted, that **"the minute an organization begins to exist for itself, it begins to die."**

As we move into this new season in the life of our congregation and our witness in the community, I would like to invite you to reflect, once again, upon why we exist as a people. I would like to have you consider just why we are "in business" in the first place.

Is it to connect with each other and enjoy the depth and beauty of life together as a community of faith? Yes, but there is more to it than that.

Is it to instruct and instill the values that we believe are essential in our children and youth? Yes, but there is more to it than that.

I believe that it is our purpose to essentially open our hearts and our minds and yes, our very lives, to the transforming power of God's Spirit...a Spirit that has the potential not only to change (transform) us, but to change (transform) our world through the witness of our lives. I believe that our God is calling us, both as individuals and as a congregation, to move out of our comfort zone, to stretch ourselves and challenge ourselves as we seek to make a difference for good and for God in our world.

I think these words of wisdom from Corrie Ten Boom are especially appropriate for us as we think of all that is before us. With the unfolding of our new strategic plan, with the advent of our new recreational center, it is clear that God's Spirit is at work. While, at this point in time, it simply isn't possible to know all of the details and to have all of the blueprints in place. But what we do know for certain is this: Our God is doing a new thing and we have the opportunity to join and participate in the new thing that God is doing. We have, before us, a unique opportunity to step forward in faith and seize this moment...a unique opportunity to place our trust in the God of Abraham and Sarah...a unique

opportunity to travel the road of faith together, as Peterson suggests, on the same road and in the same direction, both inwardly and outwardly. Amen!