



Proper 5 / Pride Sunday
Sunday, June 11, 2023
The Rev. Linda McConnell
Genesis 12: 1- 9; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

**TRANSITION:
EMBRACING IGNORANCE, INCLUSION, IMPOTENCE**

I am keenly aware that we are all in transition. We are all being called out from the known to the unknown - and judging from the amount of sleep I'm losing - it's a bit terrifying.

As your rector of the last fourteen years, this is my community. This is my home. This is my purpose - leading and protecting and nurturing this church and preschool. And I could continue - believe me, I have re-thought this retirement many times.

But I continue to come back to the sense of the fullness of time. That this is the fullness of time for a change of leadership for you and that this is the fullness of time for me to honor and protect my health and the health of my family.

So... along with Abraham and Sarah - out of the settled life of Haran we all go - into the wild, not really knowing what is going to happen next, except that God is going with us.

There is also in the readings this Sunday, a lovely connection to Pride Sunday - because the truth is that being called out of the known to the unknown, to walk as a stranger among strangers, is an experience many of our gay and transgendered brothers and sisters know all about.

This experience of being called out - for whatever holy reason - is described in our scriptures and is a shared experience within our faith heritage. So we can learn much from journeying alongside Abraham and Sarah for a bit. So come with me....

About 4,000 years ago a family of semitic nomads left Ur of the Chaldeans, perhaps in southeastern Iraq near Nasariyah. They settled in Haran, Turkey, on the Syrian border.

In Haran, after the father Terah died, his son Abraham heard the voice of God to continue the journey: "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."

In an act of audacity, he believed that God had spoken to him, and so, at the age of seventy-five, "Abram left, as the Lord had told him."

Now my friends, we naturally want clarity and safety and security. And the older we get, the more we want that. I'm sure Abraham was no different. The known is almost always preferable to the unknown. And at 75 - that's definitely true. Those of you who have moved in those latter years of life can testify about the toll it takes- even if you are moving in order to be closer to family - even if you are going someplace relatively known. Can you imagine uprooting and taking off into uncharted territory, among unknown people?

But 75 year old Abraham seems to have acted whole-heartedly without any certainty other than that God was in the lead.

In doing so, he defied the inner pull of human nature towards security and the outer pressure of cultural conformity. It's no wonder that Paul uses Abraham's chutzpah faith to ground his entire theology expounded upon in his letter to the church in Rome.

When Abraham took God at his word - and trusted - he was able to walk into three very human and very powerful fears - and come out the other side in freedom - changing human culture along with his own transformation.

So I want to suggest that this summer, as we are in transition, that along with Paul and the early Christian communities, we learn from Abraham, Father Abraham, about faith and trust and hope as we celebrate living in ways that move beyond fear.

Thank you to theologian Dan Clendinin who provided the framework - the three fears of course all being with I:

- 1) Ignorance: in other words, fear of the unknown. We fear what we don't know and cannot control.
- 2) Inclusion: we tend to fear others who are different from us. Witness all the exclusionary policies passed over many many years.
- 3) Impotence: we fear being powerless. Witness historical and current extreme backlash over perceived powerlessness.

So let's take these one by one:

Ignorance: whether you are semi-nomadic or settled - Moving is disruptive partly because of all the work involved - but mostly because of the loss of routine and comforting rituals and friendships you can no longer count on. Abraham and Sarah had their memories of Haran, but not much else. Day to day life was different.

Unknown and uncontrollable challenges could and did pop up at any time. Change - whether its outer - or inner - is necessarily and uncomfortably disruptive. Our gay and transgendered friends can testify that moving from the inner truth of who you are to being out and about with who you are might be freeing, but it is also highly disruptive - and it can be dangerous. How your friends and your relatives and the general population are going to receive you is unknown, and coming out calls for exercising faith and trust in your own being as well as faith and trust in the One who made you and who calls you forth.

Abraham embraced his ignorance - and moved forward anyway. As Paul writes to the Romans, “he believed the Lord - and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

As we all move into transition, can we embrace our own ignorance? Our own lack of foreknowledge? Can we trust that God who has called us and been faithful to us in the past, will lead us tenderly and surely and faithfully into a future that is unknown but, as we listen and obey, promises to be rich with blessing?

The letter to the Hebrews says:

“By faith Abraham obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.” (Hebrews 11:8–9)

And that brings me to the second fear - fear of others who are different.

Our common tendency is to fear the other, to suspect and marginalize the stranger, to dismiss all that’s different from who and what we know. We can see this happening now in brutal ways as our transgender friends face growing discrimination. When the 2023 legislative session began back in January, politicians across the country had already introduced 124 total bills restricting LGBTQ people, targeting their freedom of expression, the safety of transgender students, and access to health care for gender dysphoria. This is happening alongside increasing restrictions on access to healthcare for pregnancy and abortion needs. This also accompanies increased attacks on immigrants and those of differing faiths.

Abraham not only had to leave his comforting rituals and routines, he also had to leave behind a parochial mindset. What is a parochial mindset? It means being narrow-minded - not open to new or different ideas or people. In order to journey among those he did not know - who were not like him - he had to open his mind and his heart to receive the stranger. Actually, he had to endure the discomfort and awkwardness of being the stranger. Right? He was the one journeying. He was the immigrant.

But as Manuel Villalobos Mendoza, a gay theologian writes, "A true coming-out demands acceptance of the other as brother and sister. In a true coming out, blessings flow; cultures are exchanged and enriched; the stranger becomes a friend, the sojourner becomes a citizen."

Genesis says of Abraham that "*all peoples on earth* will be blessed through you" (12:3). And so the challenge of inclusion is always before us Christians who share Father Abraham with two other religions - Judaism and Islam. In Abraham and later in Christ God is always setting us towards widening the circle of blessing and faith.

So how can you use this time of transition to widen the circle? To invite more voices to the table? More perspectives? More wisdom? More blessing - even blessing that may not initially look like blessing?

Now here's the rub - widening the circle, including more voices and perspectives into leadership, necessarily means giving up some power - and so I want to address this third fear of powerlessness. In keeping with the words beginning with i - impotence.

One of the central promises Abraham hears from God is the promise that his progeny will be as many as the stars in the sky. But he is 75. His wife Sarah is far beyond child bearing years. And so - right? How can this be?

He scoffs at God, and God rebukes him, asking him, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (18:14). And so Abraham makes another counter-intuitive choice; he believes that God has the power to perform what He promises.

Now the truth is, Abraham also hedged his bets. He had a plan B and a plan C. But the point is - he tried, in spite of his fears, to live faithfully. He aimed to trust that God is a God who, as Paul writes to the Romans, “gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations.” (Romans 4:17, 21).

Our own faith is built on the same rock - God’s ultimate and infinite power to bring life out of death, something out of nothing. Resurrection.

Of course doubt lives right alongside trust. Fear lives right alongside faith. That’s the human condition. But, like our faith ancestors, we are graced by the Spirit to land more and more on the side of trust and faith and hope. Along with Abraham and Sarah and Paul - we lift our own hearts and voices saying Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. *Ephesians 3:20,21* This verse undergirds me every day. And it undergirds this community. God - whose power can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Ok - transition. We are going to be fine. We are named, called out, and sent out as God’s own church. Beloved. Inspired. Inflamed. Ignorant, inclusive, and impotent - fully relying on God to do what God does. Bring life. And hope and healing and blessing, for ever and ever. Amen.