

Stepping Out in Faith

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You probably did not expect to be worshipping here in the Fellowship Hall this morning, did you? While I am aware that it's not the first time you've worshiped here, still, it is somewhat unfamiliar territory when it comes to worship, since we are used to being in the sanctuary.

And while you will find much in the service today that is familiar, the order and the songs (or at least the way we sing), the way we are seated are all different.

For the next few Sunday's we'll be considering how God calls us to the unfamiliar and how we are blessed with God's promises and presence when we are willing to step out in faith.

Change in our lives is not uncommon. In fact, everything continues to change all of our lives. We sometimes handle it well and sometimes we don't. But wouldn't you agree that each time we deal with change that is somewhat difficult, we look back at that time and discover that we've grown? We're stronger in our character and stronger in faith and our closeness to God? At least that's how it should work!

All through our lives, we have changes in relationships, families change – we have babies and just when we adjust to one phase of their lives, they grow and change and another phase begins! We have jobs that just don't stay the same year after year. Sometimes we even have to change jobs, which might require a move – new town, new home, new friends.

And even if none of those things ever changed (which is highly unlikely, it's for certain that we will change – we grow up, we get old, our bodies and our minds go through that aging process.

Sometimes, we choose change. We have this strange sense of something bigger than ourselves moving us to make a choice and to step out of our comfort zone and into the chaos of uncertainty – but with a sense of confidence that it will all work out because it is just what we are supposed to do.

Consider Abram and Sarai. They are a great metaphor for the Christian pilgrimage.

They weren't young by any means. Abram was 75 years old when he determined that God – Yahweh – was calling him, inviting him to pack up his wife Sarai and his family, his nephew, Lot, his servants, his camels and goats and sheep and chickens, and donkeys and to load up all their tents and supplies and to leave Haran – their home town – and to say goodbye to the rest of the family and take off into the wilderness, heading out to the land of "who knows where.

He went because God told him too. He heard God calling and he answered. Do you ever wonder if there had been Caller ID's in Abram's day, if Sarai might have seen it was God and ordered her husband – "Do not answer that!"

Don't you wonder what Sarai thought about all this? Did she have anything to say about it? Did she have a voice or a choice? Did she hear the call too and believe as much as Abram did? I want to believe she did. She certainly played a major role in this story!

This passage in Genesis has been said by some commentators to be a kind of "going back to the beginning" again. But instead of the creation story, it is the beginning of God calling a people and of someone beginning the journey of faith with God.

In the creation story, humans chose to turn away from God and to put their trust in themselves instead of the Creator. In the story of Abram, there is a reversal of that turning – Abram turns to God, chooses to trust and to obey. Abram steps out in faith, even though he has no clue as to where he is going or what the end of the journey will bring.

Abram stands in line at the beginning of a faith journey that even you and I have been walking. Now, while on this journey, Abram has a dream or a vision where God is talking to him. God tells him he is going to have many descendants and that Abram will be the Father of many nations.

Now, of course, Abram has a hard time understanding this. He isn't a spring chicken. The thought of having a baby at his age is probably somewhat humorous and unbelievable. Besides that, Sarai, his wife, has been barren all her life.

Throughout this saga of Abram and Sarai, we learn that, while Abram was a man of faith and while he answered God's call to trust, he was as human as you and I. We learn that he tried to help this promise along (with the blessing of his wife) by taking matters into his own control. He soon has a son by Sarai's servant, Hagar. He named his Ishmael. But when he went to talk to God again, God said, "no, no. That's not what I meant! You will have a son by Sarai!

At some point, Sarai heard this promise and laughed out loud about it as she herself was getting way beyond childbearing years. God asked, "why did you laugh?" Sarai denied laughing but God knew she did. A year later, Sarai had a baby boy, whom they named "Isaac" which means Laughter.

God changed Abram's name to Abraham, which means "Father of a Multitude," and Sarai's name was changed to Sarah, meaning "Princess" for "she will give rise to many nations. Kings of people will come from her." Talk about change! Even their names changed!

Even though Sarai and Abram kept getting off the straight, God-intended path, God continued to bless them, to provide for their needs and to be present with them wherever they went. God kept speaking and promising. It's like our yoga instructor whose voice calls our wandering minds back to focus by saying "Begin again." God did not give up on humanity. Begin again, Abram.

God promised to give Abraham a son, to give him generations of descendants, to form a people whom God would bless – with land, with a faith, with God's own presence.

If you think about it, the church today is much like the place Abram was in. The church has seen many changes over the years. What we know today as the church isn't exactly how the church looked years ago.

Don't you feel that we are in this time of transition? We have one foot in the familiar land of comfort – the place where we know what to do and how things feel – but also, looking around in our culture and how fast our world is changing – somehow it seems we are being called, invited to step out in faith and trust and see where God is leading – even though it is the unknown – the unfamiliar land.

We are always moving, changing. My dad used to say a little phrase to me when I was so anxious about something. "It won't matter a hundred years from now anyway."

I wonder what the church will look like a hundred years from now. I suspect what we do and how we respond to God calling us to trust and step out of our comfort zone into a new place that we can't see yet – will matter a hundred years from now.

It matters that Abraham and Sarah trusted God and started the faith journey. It matters that Martin Luther and John Calvin stepped out in faith into the unfamiliar. It matters that those before us came and built a church here in Holly, Michigan and name it Holly Presbyterian Church.

We continue the journey of stepping out and trusting – that faith journey that was started so long ago. It will matter a hundred years from now what we do today to carry on the faith.

Here are three things we can count on:

1. God speaks to us wherever we are. In the sanctuary or in the fellowship hall; in our homes, or at work or in the car. God doesn't need us to be in a certain place to speak to us. But God does need for us to be open to listening to the call.
2. Second, God invites us to believe, to trust, and to follow – to step out in faith. Faith is believing even though we can't see. It's like driving at night. Our

headlights light up the road so we can see. At least we can see the road ahead enough to stay on it. We can't see our final destination, however. But we believe it is there. Isn't the Holy Spirit like that light that lights the road and gives us the courage we need to keep going?

3. And last, God promises provision (to take care of us, to provide the things we need), God promises blessings (we never know what amazing things are in store for us in this unfamiliar place, but God knows and God has it already being worked out).

God promises provision, blessings, and best of all – God says, “They will be my people, and I will be their God.” God promises God's presence. We couldn't ask for anything better than Creator, Redeemer, Almighty, Loving God to abide in us and with us wherever this journey takes us.

Our memory verse for this week reminds us of that great presence: “God said to Abram, ‘Do not be afraid. I am your shield, your very great reward.’”

The best treasure we could seek is with us all along! God's presence. The Spirit saying to us when we fall away, “Begin again. And don't ever forget – I will be with you always.”

God speaks to us wherever we are.

God calls us to believe and trust and follow.

God promises provision, blessings, and God's presence always.

No matter what is going on in your lives, and regardless of the change and transition happening in the life of the church, God will always go with us and bless us. Thanks be to God for the promise – we are His people and God is our God! Amen.

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