

Called by God

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
August 5, 2012

Genesis 12: 1-4

A couple stands before the pastor. They make promises to live together forever. They have no experience of marriage, of living together as a married couple. Neither of them knows what the future holds, what tomorrow might look like for them. All they have is this promise – a promise to live and to share life together, no matter what.

But what happens, as soon as that promise is made, is believed, is trusted, is that a new reality is created which had not been there previously, the reality of their marriage. And the promise goes with them into the future, shapes that future, give them hope and reassurance in that future.

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.’...So Abram went as the Lord had told him...”

You know, I have always wondered what Abraham said to his wife, Sarah, when he got home that night. “Honey, you’ll never guess who I talked to today...And, by the way, tell your Mom good-bye and start packing.” I once read that Abraham was someone who seemed fully convinced that God can do what God says God will do. And let’s give some love to Sarah. She must have been in a state of shock even as she got out the suitcases and cancelled the newspaper subscription, but she also was willing to believe this unlikely promise...to go to wherever it was that God might call her.

Like that couple repeating their marriage vows, Abraham and Sarah are about to step into a new reality, about to answer what in many ways is an outrageous call – pack up all your things, turn your back on all you know and follow me to an unknown destination that lies in an unknown future. They are willing to venture forth, betting their lives on nothing more than a promise, nothing more than trust. Kind of makes me wonder if Abraham was ever involved in a church building project?

Last spring, in our Men’s Bible study, the question was asked...why Abraham? And my carefully thought out, theological response was, “I don’t have the slightest idea.” We don’t know why. We don’t really know anything about Abraham. Was he a faithful church attendee, did he get good grades in school, go to a prestigious university? Or was he just a guy, working hard to get by day to day, take care of his family...rather like us? We don’t know why. All we know is that when the call is issued, he is ready – he is the one prepared to say, “Here I am, send me.” It would seem that God isn’t the least bit interested in who Abraham and Sarah had been. No, God was looking ahead to who they would become – symbolized by their name change; looking ahead to a life and future they could not even imagine.

On the one hand, that is wonderful news, isn’t it? For it would seem that God can use anyone, will use anyone, even the likes of you and me, for God’s great purposes. But, on the other hand, it can be rather terrifying news, the realization that God can use anyone, will use anyone, even the likes of you and me, for God’s great purposes. My life is pretty good just the way it is. Do I really want God tapping me on the shoulder, whispering, “I have a job for you...start packing.”

I think of Abraham and Sarah. I think of a young peasant woman, long ago, poor, unmarried, living in a dusty, nowhere town. She is visited by a robed stranger who tells her, “God has heard the cry of his people. I have been sent by God to give you the good news that you are going to have a baby, a baby who will redeem God’s people.” Her first response to this Good News is, “How can this be? I am not cut out for this line of work.” And yet, despite all her misgivings, confusion and wild wondering, Mary finally says, “I don’t know what all this means, and I don’t know where all this is going, and I don’t even know if I am the most qualified one, but here I am, willing to be a part of God’s purposes.” In that moment, she dares to believe the promise, to embrace a new reality, indeed a whole new world. But wait, preacher, that was Mary, that’s not me.

Well, how about George? George had never had the benefit of much education after high school. Yet he always enjoyed reading, especially the Bible and books about the Bible. He had become a popular adult Bible study leader in the congregation. But he

couldn't have been more shocked when his pastor asked him to lead the newly formed young adult class on Sunday mornings.

"Me?" George asked in disbelief. "Those kids all have college educations. They are all so smart. And I'm so much older than they are. They will laugh me right out of that classroom." But the pastor persisted – don't you just love those persistent pastors! – and finally George took a deep breath and agreed to teach the new class. Today his Bible study, affectionately called, "Bible...By George," is attended by dozens of young adults each week and is one of the bright spots in the congregation's life."

Call and response...even when the destination is not at all certain or clear. That's faith – the continued, daily willingness to respond to God's promises spoken over each of our lives. It is longing for God and responding to God's longing for us; it is wishing that God may exist and then acting and feeling as if God does exist; it is a willingness to believe and trust and risk; a willingness to embrace newness and relinquish what has been. For a cautious person like me, it is even a willingness to venture forth without a clear road map – worst nightmare.

Casey Thompson, a Presbyterian pastor, tells this story about himself: "A year before my ordination I shadowed a seasoned pastor as he visited some of the saints of our church at a care facility. We went from door to door and sat and listened and prayed. 'We have one more to see,' he said as we stepped into the elevator. 'Miss Fraser. She's normally unresponsive, but we'll check on her.'

"We exited the elevator and stepped into a semicircle of wheelchairs in a small alcove, a kind of welcoming committee for expected visitors. No one paid us any attention. Miss Fraser sat alone, her head dipped low, hands upon her knees. The pastor said, 'Miss Fraser, it's Jim. I brought someone to meet you.' He clutched her hands, but she looked only at her feet. 'I want you to meet Casey.'

"After a few moments, the nurse interrupted, 'She's been like that all day. We'll tell her you came by.' But just then, Miss Fraser tilted her head up and fixated on me, her eyes vibrant. 'You're a preacher, aren't you?'

" 'Yes, he is,' Jim answered. ' He's working with us this summer.'

" 'Yes, you're a preacher, all right. I can tell. I can see it on you.' I assumed she meant like you can smell stink on a skunk. 'What's your name, young man?'

'Casey.'

"She smiled and caressed my hand. 'You're a preacher. I can tell.' She repeated it, but then deflated back into silence. I thought we had lost her, but suddenly she clutched my arm and pulled me toward her. 'But not yet. You're not a preacher yet. Something's holding you back. Not a preacher yet...but you will be.' She didn't say another word."

He concludes, "I still remember this story when I reflect on what holds me back from full discipleship...I know that God has not brought to completion the good work started in me and that my conversion into the ways of God continues, but I know that God is working. You may not be the person God is calling you to be either. But you will be."

"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go...' This is the point in the sermon where I could move into the prosperity gospel which is selling so well these days and tell you that God intends for all of us to be happy and wealthy, successful and completely fulfilled, with all our questions answered and no lingering doubts...wants us all to live in a place "where all the men are strong, all the women are good-looking and all the children are above average."

But instead, what I want to say is that God intends to work with us on overcoming whatever is holding us back...the fear, the hesitation, the lingering wound. I invite you to give some thought to that. What is holding me back and do I have the trust and faith to turn it over to God? Can I, like Abraham and Sarah, dare to trust the promise, dare to trust God's ongoing activity in my life? For, in the words of William Willimon, "Out of real doubts and deep questions, Abraham ventures forth with God. The venturing forth does not erase those doubts and questions. Rather, he gathers up his doubts and stumbles on behind God into a future on the basis of nothing but the promise. This continuous response to the promises of God, is what we Christians mean when we say, 'faith.'"