

Call of Abraham and Sarah

Years ago, our family went to visit one of Daryl's college friends and her family in Cortez Colorado. We flew into Albuquerque and rented a car to drive to Cortez.

Our navigation system was Daryl's palm pilot. Anyone remember palm pilots? They were really the first hand-held computers. I don't really even know how the navigation system worked. I don't think it was GPS. Before 2000, GPS was primarily used by the military and because of signal scrambling it wasn't reliably available to the general public.

When you used the palm pilot, I think you just put in your starting and ending points and it found the route somewhere. Before that trip I'd only ever used an actual map – the kind you unfold and then can't get folded back up, or maybe an atlas.

What I do know is that the palm pilot only gave you one stage at a time...go to Elm street and turn right. Then you'd get the next stage. There was no map you could see. You couldn't see anything but the next step. There was no friendly voice telling you in 1000 feet, turn right. And there was certainly no friendly voice warning you of traffic jams, speed traps, and roadkill. In fact, there was no voice at all. The instructions just came up on the screen.

After we got out of Albuquerque, the screen read simply drive 175 miles and turn left on 43rd street...or something like that. It was all immensely unsettling to me. I wanted to see the whole trip laid out on a map...I wanted to have a better idea of what lay ahead. And above all, I wasn't sure I could trust this strange new-fangled device.

Now, here's Abram and Sarai without even a palm pilot. Or even a destination had they had one. Just go...go to the land I will show you. I mean that's worse than the palm pilot.

But they went. And their story has been a model for the life of faith ever since.

We are never told why God chose this particular man...this particular couple. There is nothing that says they are especially deserving of this tremendous gift...and challenge...from God. We are told at the end of chapter 11 that Sarai was barren. We learn later that not only had Sarai not been able to get pregnant, but she was past the age of being able to.

So if anything, this couple would seem to be poor candidates for God's new project. But God chooses whom God chooses. Everything flows from God's grace. Abraham and Sarah choose to trust that grace and that blessing.

So what is God's new project? This project is again a creation. But this time it's the creation of a new community...and in fact a new kind of community.

Abraham and Sarah are promised land, descendants, and blessing. But it's not just about them. There's a so that. They will be blessed *so that* through them all the families of the earth will be blessed.

That's a hefty promise. How does that even work?

Well, God intends to form a new community...a new nation...of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. It is to be a covenant community...a people who lives in a covenant relationship with God. It's an alternative community centered on the relationship with a God who blesses.

But it all starts here...with a promise and a journey. A journey to the unknown. It would have been safer to stay put...to live out their lives in the security of the family fold. Abram's father moved them to Haran from Ur. They may not have had their own land. But family was there. Security was there. Safety was there.

But to remain in safety would mean to remain barren. The command to go to a new land was linked to the promise. And so they set out. We jump next week to the story of Joseph, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. A lot happens between today's story and the one we read next week.

During that time, Abraham and Sarah's journey to blessing will be marked by twists and turns, their own failures, and repeated disappointment. The promise for many descendants was not fulfilled in their lifetime, but rather in a future generation. And they had times when they did doubt God's promise. But they hung in.

I think the contrast between taking the safe course and staying put versus heading off into the unknown is where this story gets some traction for us.

Just before the Abraham narrative begins...nestled between Noah and Abraham...is the story of the Tower of Babel. This is the one where the people build a tower that would reach the heavens. According to the story, God stopped them by scattering them and confusing their language.

Sometimes people think the main point of the story is to explain the origin of different languages. That's actually kind of silly. What the story really does is reveal the folly of a people who want to establish their own security and prominence. After the flood and the ark, God told people to go out into the world and be fruitful and multiply...to join God in creating a beautiful world.

Instead, they built a tower meant to serve themselves. A tower that would keep them secure and show their power and glory. That's why God put a stop to it.

And then God called an aging childless couple, living in a land that wasn't even their own. They went and did as God asked. And although it took a long time, the promise did finally come true.

In many ways, the western church has been more into tower building. Sometimes it's been literal tower building. But even the churches with modest buildings have built metaphoric towers. Towers of programs and traditions that became almost untouchable, even if they no longer served their purpose, because we've always done it this way.

When we look at the church today and see how the numbers of people not affiliated with the church rise, when we see church attendance decline, it's very tempting to want to build towers...to cling to safety.

But to cling to safety...to cling to the known and secure...is to remain barren.

We have received God's blessing. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus we have received God's grace and are born anew. And like Israel, we as the church are also called into an alternative community. We're called to be a community that shows to the world what life in relationship with God can look like. We are blessed so that we too can be a blessing to the world.

But this alternative community has truly got to be different from the surrounding culture. It's got to be a community that can have difficult conversations without the vitriol the culture around shows. It's got to be a community that looks at the poor, the refugees, the immigrants, documented or not, as beloved children of God, even as we debate the best way to care for them.

It's got to be a community that listens to the voices of those on the margins, a community that respects, that forgives... community that seeks peace and justice. It's got to be a community that looks to the well-being of neighbors. It's got to be a community that prays, even for its enemies. It's got to be a community that joins God in creating and caring for a beautiful world.

And if we haven't been doing that so well, if we've been more concerned with our own security, it's no wonder we're being scattered. It's past time to stop clinging to what's safe and familiar. It's time to be a community that's willing to step out on a journey into the world

without really even knowing where we're going...and simply trusting that God will show us the way...no matter how unsettling that might be.