

Sermon Title: March 1, 2015
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Romans 4:13-25

It all Depends on Faith

Life always seems to be throwing us new curves that test our faith, that call us to deepen our sense of trust that everything is going to be okay, whether it is beginning a whole new adventure which we embrace or whether it is learning to let go and trust when changes seem to happen to us, especially difficulties.

A few days ago my son Luke had a job interview with Google in California, an exciting opportunity after so many years of study in computer science. He had to fly out to San Francisco on Thursday, then rent a car to drive on the freeways to Mountainview to prepare for a full day of interviews. He was both excited and somewhat overwhelmed, not just anticipating the day of interviews, but the possibility of beginning his career in California, away from everything he has ever known. Although I have not spoken with him in these terms, I imagine that his personal faith is being tested as he discerns his future and wonders if his education will give him the skills and confidence to take the next step.

This is all very new and exciting for me as his mother as well, but when it really hit home that I might not be having my son so close by anymore was when he took the flight and for two days kept his phone on air-plane mode so that there was not contact with him at all. Had he arrived safely? Had he crashed the car? Did he know where he was going? Did he remember his VISA card? Had he bought new pants? Where was his hotel anyway? Where is Google anyway? As the hours turned into days, my normal calm demeanour began to crack and I contemplated (momentarily) calling Google to see if he had actually arrived. Eventually I came to realize that I was struggling with those feelings of having to let go, yet again of a child, now a man, who was possibly setting out on the first journey of his working life – setting out to a new land. Yet again I would have to have faith that all would be well, that God would be walking with Lukeand with me.....and his sister Jess.

This experience of setting off in a new direction, to a new land, into the unknown with nothing more than the promises of God's presence is foundational to our story of faith, our salvation story. It began with the call to Abram (Ch 12) – “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....he was seventy-five years old when he and his wife Sarai left. That inclusion of his age is there to remind our elders in the crowd that the possibility of change and adventure never does end.

After ten years and many adventures, Abram is wealthy and successful by the world's standards, but still childless. In that culture, the lack of descendants meant that when a man died, all that he had lived for was lost. But again, God promises land and blessing and descendants (15:1-21). Sarai, his wife, is along for the journey, too. Knowing she's barren and too old to conceive, she provides a solution. She wants to be faithful too and give her husband children, so she gives her servant to Abram as a wife. But to make a long story short: Ishamel is born, Sarai is angry, Hagar is mistreated, and no one is happy. Hagar is an important matriarch in the Islamic faith as is Abraham.

After thirteen years go by, God speaks, renewing the covenant once again: "Walk with me and be trustworthy. I will make a covenant between us and I will give you many, many descendants: At ninety-nine years old, some of us would find the invitation simply to walk to be difficult! But God urges Abram to be utterly trustworthy and faithful in everything, to trust with all of his heart. If Abram can do that, then there is more to this adventure. God will continue to keep transforming his life, and his family's and the family of nations that will grow from him and Sarai.

The idea of covenant, closely related to the word promise, is an ancient practise of human beings. What is unique in the story of Abraham in the book of Genesis, is that the initiator of the covenant is God. God is the subject of faith, God initiates faith. God gives faith as a gift. God called Abram; God promised Abram. Here faith begins and is sustained in a relationship of response and trusting the God who calls.

The sign of the rainbow which God set in the sky in last week's reading of Noah and flood, served as a reminder to God never to destroy the earth. Now the covenant is refined, directed more specifically to people - to two people in particular - Abram and Sarai. It's not entirely a one-sided covenant however, for God asks Abraham to do two simple things - "to walk before me, and be

blameless”.

It is a marvellous union, a profound change for the life of Abram and Sarai to have been contacted by the living God personally at such an old age -99! It becomes the occasion for a new name - from Abram to Abraham, from Sarai to Sarah! The letter H, a letter from the word for Yahweh is now embedded in their new name. It is the occasion for new markings - the men who are the offspring of Abe and Sarah, shall all be circumcised as babies and this will be the sign of their new identity. Just as the sign of the rainbow was a sign to all of creation of God’s eternal love, so now the human body would bear the marks of God’s love and ownership.

Sometimes I think that this fascination with tattooing today is at root a deep human search to feeling that you belong, that you are marked in some special way, for a special service, and leaves a more visible mark than the water that is splashed on our foreheads at our baptism.

Many Christians have forgotten that we are already marked at our baptism. What God did for us in Jesus was to extend the covenant of God to all people - whether Jew or gentile. The invitation to have faith in Yahweh was open to all people. Baptism is the ritual which assigns or extends God covenant love to us. The sign which we live through is the cross of Christ, signifying death and resurrection. The God who initiates a relationship with us is the God who brings life out of death, who creates a people where there were no people – creates a community of believers.

We can hope for the future and trust God with our lives. This is the foundational belief I want us to hold in our hearts as we contemplate our Mission Statement which was created and approved last March at our Annual meeting and as we continue to pray for and build for the future ministry here at St Pauls-Eastern. While we value the close relationships that we nurture within our family of faith, we continue to be called and challenged to look beyond ourselves, our own Christian circle, to grow as an Inter-cultural church, to consider the needs of the wider community, the poor in our community, and the students who are here for only a short while they study, and to reach out to the newcomers who seek the richness of life in downtown Ottawa.

Many here in our congregation believe that we have been called into a deeper relationship with Canada’s First Nations peoples, living out reconciliation through our growing friendship with the Odawa Native Friendship Centre which is meaning that we are having a greater sharing of our space with them and hopefully our lives. To ensure our own viability as a congregation, many of

us believe we are being called to re-imagine how we might re-purpose not only our hall, which has already begun in very simple ways, but how we might re-purpose our sanctuary so that we might have more space for ourselves for small groups, for counselling space, for washrooms, for inviting musical and theatre groups to be able to use this awesome and beautiful sanctuary.

In three weeks from now, Rev David Sherwin, the new Presbytery Minister will be joining us to help us imagine and discern together what that might look like, to discuss what is important to each of us in order to experience our church as a place of sanctuary, beauty, learning, nourishment and creativity – a place where we can seek and find God and Christ in our lives. As part of our discerning, we also need to contemplate what space we can let go of to allow for new opportunities for growth, to allow for new ways of being the body of Christ in the twenty-first Century.

In all the reading I have done and the Conferences I have attended in the last decade or more, it was envisioned that the family size churches, the small and close knit congregations would be the way of this century, embodying the early Christian movement, and would be the churches which could be most resilient and responsive to the many needs of our changing world. For some of us, the possibility of change, a new adventure in our lives, is exciting, welcome and even feels necessary for survival. For others of us, we may feel we have seen enough change for a lifetime and just want everything to stop moving and stay the same or at least retire from life. The possibility of change may disturb us and touches off in us those places where losses or hurt in the past are still unhealed. I know what that feels like and how weighing it can be.

I know that sometimes we get discouraged as we see so many empty pews, not surprising that we are still in a space designed for the people of the late 1800s, or wish there were more people to stand on committees or work teams. Although we live in a culture that values size, quantity, and financial success, bigger and richer.... I believe in who we are. I believe in the spiritual gifts that you people bring to this ministry, your many strengths, your questions, your humanity, your love of scripture and music, your creativity, your divinity.your faith. I still feel called to be in this place, amongst you as we seek to serve the community, to forge new relationships of trust, to be open to experiencing how God continues to walk with us, surprising us in so many different ways. In fact I can't seem to go into the church kitchen on any given day and

wonder “where on earth did that thing come from? Who left it and what was it for? And who gets it now?”

Paul reminds us in Romans that the story of Abraham is central to our story –“ it all depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on graceas it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” We remember that we are on the road of Lent, a new journey into the wilderness, a new adventure that leads us to Easter, to resurrection, to remember that the one who leads us can create life beyond our death.

What are the essential elements of the covenant God made with Abraham and Sarah? Firstly, God planted in their hearts a sense of hope in the impossible - Even though they were 99 years old, without any heirs of their own, God would make of them a great nation - a people. God would give them an heir. If that isn't hoping, I don't know what is!

Late Bloomer by Barbara Brown Taylor

It is a hard thing, to believe in a promise- to live by it, day after day, to see it in the night sky and hear it in your name and see it again in your lover's eyes. It is a hard thing to believe in a promise with no power to make it come true. Everything is in the future tense - the land, the son, the blessing. Everything will happen, by and by, but in the meantime what is there to live on now!

And yet. What better way to live than in the grip of a promise, and a divine one at that? Who in her right mind would give that back? To wake every morning to the possibility that today might be the day. To remain wide awake all day long, noticing everything- how the smell of the fields changes from green grass to yellow hay as the sun heats up overhead. To search the face of every stranger in case it turns out to be an angel of God. To take nothing for granted. Or to take everything as granted, though not yet grasped. To handle every moment of one' life as a seed of the promise and to plant it tenderly, never knowing if this moment, or the next, may be the one that grows.

To live like that is to discover that the blessing is not future but now. The promise may not be fully in hand. It may still be on the way, but to live reverently, deliberately, and full awake - that is what it means to live in the promise, where the wait itself is as rich as its end. All it takes

are some regular reminders, because as long as the promise is renewed, the promise is alive, as vivid as a rainbow, as real as the million stars overhead.