



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Trusting in the Living God
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

June 8, 2008
Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
Genesis 12:1-9

Rabbi Stephen Fuchs, a rabbi serving in Nashville, once made a wonderful observation: “I have come to realize,” he said, “that almost all of those who have done truly great things were ‘out of touch’ with the perceived reality of their times.” He then went on to describe the lives of some of the great Hebrew characters—Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Hosea and Jeremiah—reminding the congregation of these heroes of faith, as well as of their eccentric ways. And then he concludes about them: “We revere them today because their unwavering faith allowed them to see what others could not and do what others would not.” In other words, we admire them because they were out of touch with reality.

Our passage from Genesis today introduces us to some new characters in the biblical story. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are concerned with the world as a whole. In fact, we hear in those opening chapters of Genesis how God’s word calls the world into existence, and then we are led through the stories of sin and betrayal, rejection and anguish, murder and deception, flood and promise, and, at almost every turn, the disobedience of God’s people comes into play, and the language is highly poetic and mystical. At chapter 12, though, a shocking shift occurs—a shift so large that one OT scholar declares this to be the “most important structural break in the entire Old Testament” (Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*, 116).

As chapter 12 begins, “instead of moving deeper into poetry and mystical language, ...the text seems to get smaller, and scandalously specific” (Chris Joiner, *Lectio Jubilate Paper*, 2005). It places these huge stories “into a man with a name, a wandering nomad, in real geography, located in space and time, summoned, as it were, by faith, to listen to the voice that spoke creation into existence...” (Joiner).

It is in the midst of this chaos of existence that we first hear about Abraham and Sarah. And what do we hear about them? We hear that Abraham took Sarah as his wife. And then we get this shocking piece of news: “Now Sarah was barren; she had no child.”

And God said to Abraham, “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. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Talk about being out of touch with reality. God, I mean. What on earth could God have been thinking? I mean, here was a man who was so old that he was described as being “as good as dead.” And besides that, his wife was barren. She had no child. And it is into this situation of barrenness—of hopelessness—that God chooses to speak. How utterly out of touch God must be.

But before we discuss the irrationality of God, let’s talk about us.

You don't have to be an expert in sociology to recognize that we live in a culture marked by major life transformations—where people re-invent themselves as a matter of routine. Sort of an extreme life makeover. People all around us are trying to find themselves in all sorts of ways—from traveling the globe to radically changing their diets to going back to school to working on their relationships to going into therapy to joining prayer groups to learning to be more assertive to revitalizing job skills and making scores of other adjustments on their life journeys. We are a people who know what a change in lifestyles—a life makeover—is all about.

And it doesn't just happen during a mid-life crisis or at some rite of passage time like a graduation. No, change is a constant part of us.

And these attempts we make at change reveal something about us. They can point to a deeper restlessness, a more urgent quest. However silly or trivial they may appear on the surface, the changes people make in their lives are often signs of a crucial, frequently desperate, sometimes courageous search.

If this is true, then what are we searching for? What is it that causes people to consider making significant changes in life? What, in the terms of Abraham and Sarah, motivates them to leave a place of settled circumstances and values and venture off into a new and uncharted region?

Well, it could be boredom. In other words, many of the shifts people make in their lives are made because they're bored where they are. In other words, they aren't planned trips to a new destination; they are tickets on the first plane out of town. The playwright Arthur Miller put it this way in an essay: "People no longer seem to know why they are alive. Existence is simply a string of near-experiences—and the good life is basically an amused (life)."

But many people have already discovered the futility of making changes out of boredom. They're tired because they soon realize that the new place where they've landed soon develops its own routine and boredom begins again. They may be in a new place (literally or figuratively), but soon enough the same tired story emerges.

So, instead of running away when we grow bored, we are learning to seek meaning in life. Our life changes are made not in rebellion against boredom, but as a hunger to discover our own true selves. In this case, it's not boredom but anguish that we seek to leave behind. And, as Garrison Keilor once observed, anguish is something we all got inside us.

We are willing to leave the land of anguish in favor of a calling land of peace and meaning. Personal or religious renewals are often changes of this sort.

When life is confusing and disorienting, we are eager for it to stop anywhere there is the promise of identity and meaning, be it losing ourselves in work or finding ourselves in God.

The problem with this kind of change, though, is that when we go looking to find ourselves, we often find ourselves alone. There is a sadness in a culture like ours, which bravely promotes the virtue of the inner-directed, risk-taking, self-sufficient people who don't need anybody in order to be fully human, and which, at the same time, is full of aching lonely people. It's a sad reality that people have made great changes in their lives only to find as someone once described it that "they have written themselves into the

starring role in a one-person play with no audience.”

There is a certain element of nobility in this goal we have to “be our own person.” After all, no one wants to be pushed around, overwhelmed, or controlled by another. But just the same, there is a deeper sense in which none of us wants to be our own person. We long to hear the sound of another’s voice calling us, valuing our life enough to make a claim upon it.

There is somewhere within each of us a dread which is deeper than boredom and greater than our anxiety that we will not create a satisfying self, and that is the fear that we will be ultimately uncalled for. It’s the fear that no one will ever say to you, “Come, I want you. I need you.” This is the fear that who we are, what we do, and what we say do not matter to anyone else. Like children choosing sides for a game, each desperately worried about being the last one chosen, we make most of the changes in our lives in an effort to make ourselves desirable enough for someone to call us. We want desperately to be called for.

That is what makes this story of God’s call of Abraham and Sarah a moment of sheer wonder and grace. We have just met Abraham and Sarah. We know virtually nothing about them. We don’t know if they were restless or calm, bored or satisfied. What we do know is not what was going on with them, but what happened to them. And what happened to them was this: They were called for. It was a call bigger than self, broader than occupation, deeper even than family. It was a call from the very heart of God. And they weren’t called because they had somehow made themselves desirable or competent. They were called for because it is the very way of God to call his people.

“Go, and I will make of you a great nation. And through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

How utterly out of touch God must have been. Couldn’t God see that there was nothing in Abraham and Sarah but barrenness and hopelessness? Why would God call them?

“Go, and I will make of you a great nation. And through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

“So Abram went, as the Lord told him.” How utterly out of touch Abraham and Sarah were. Why would they believe the promise when everything around them screamed that the promise would never come true?

Why would they leave the land they knew for an unknown land?

Why would they believe that they would become a great nation when they had been barren all these years?

How could they trust in that which they could not see?

They could trust the promise because they sensed at the most profound level of life, that someone was calling them. They could do those things because they had faith in the God who was calling them.

Since their story was first told, Abraham and Sarah have been looked at by all of us who follow after them for what is involved in the life of faith. And what we get from looking at them is not a definition of faith, but a story—“a story in which traveling, journeying, walking, running, coming and going on roads and paths under the commands and

promises of God” (Eugene Peterson, *The Way of Christ*, 46) overwhelm the story. This is why one of my favorite writers, Eugene Peterson, notes that it’s a fatal thing to reduce faith to an explanation. He writes, Faith “is not an explanation, it is a passion. To tell the story of Abraham (and Sarah) is to enter a narrative that throws self-help, self-certification, self-discipline—all our paltry self-hyphenations—into a junkyard of rusted-out definitions. No, faith is understood through story as we hear of a way of living in which God is embraced and followed and in which God speaks and is obeyed. And while that can be seen in Abraham’s life, it can also be seen in yours.

God is, after all, still in the business of calling folks—ordinary folks like you and me. And the call of God will not always seem predicable or even rational. In fact, if you ever discover yourself hearing a call from God that seems particularly out of touch with reality, you may want to pay particularly close attention. God’s calls are like that. And so are those who answer.