



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**"Listening to the deep: An Accidental Pilgrimage"**

**Genesis 12:1-9, Mark 1:14-20**

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I gather that the word has a least circulated somewhat here while I was away studying, about the Naramata Centre closure. 10 days ago, the Board of Directors of the Centre announced that it would be closing, and the future of that gorgeous piece of paradise would be decided in the coming months. Although I have known that the Centre was in trouble for some time now, it is devastating news for an incredible number of people both within the church and beyond it whose spiritual lives have been shaped through the Centre. It has been a place of joy, freedom to grow, test young wings, discover the self and God and life. How many of you have had a connection there, a child, grandchild go. Generations have sensed the presence of God with them in profound ways through the Centre. It's closure is bewildering. It is hard to imagine the United Church without it. Its closure sends shock waves and deep questions throughout the church.

Throughout January and February, since Epiphany, we have been exploring what it means to discern God's voice in life- how to listen to the deep in the midst of life. We have talked about God's deep commitment to our life: "I am with you, I am for you, I want your life to flourish," and how we might listen to the wisdom of the heart. We have talked about how so much of life is foggy, ambiguous, uncertain, but that listening together, whether it is through a "board of directors for your life", in a small group, with a spiritual friend, we need each other to hear the wisdom at the heart of things. Today I want to explore what happens when we think we know God's direction for our life and then, for whatever reason, we get knocked off course. That is how this Naramata Centre decision feels, but it happens to us personally as well, when you thought your life, your family, your marriage, your career, was going one way, and you discover it is going another. Need I mention that it can happen to churches when they discover that their roof is not all it was cracked up to be? Knocked off course.

I was wondering this week as I was thinking about our scripture stories for today, how it felt to be Sarah. We often talk about God calling Abraham and Sarah to leave and follow not knowing where life would take them, and the faith that took. But it actually said, God came to Abraham. I wonder what the conversation was like when Abraham then went to Sarah. "Umm. Darling Sweetheart. Can we talk?" I wonder if what felt like a call to Abraham felt like being knocked off course to Sarah. And the disciples by the sea of Galilee. We often think of Jesus' call to them as a no brainer- follow me, and they left their nets and followed. But what about the boyfriend of the young disciple who followed Jesus, and the girlfriends, and mothers, and fathers, and children and husbands? What felt like a call to them must have felt like an unwelcome change of course, vulnerable, bewildering... "What is happening to my life?"

The Christian tradition has a special place for the idea of going on a pilgrimage- a trip, and adventure in which we take ourselves out of our lives for a time, deliberately. We go off the beaten track of life and this allows us to listen to life and the voice of wisdom differently. We walk the Camino, we trudge the dusty paths of the holy land... This concept of pilgrimage is well established for people of faith. What I am talking about today though is an accidental pilgrimage, when we don't so much step off the path of life, but are knocked off, not by choice but simply the course of life takes a radical change. In her wonderful book "An Alter in the World," Barbara Brown Taylor talks about getting lost in life, and the value of stepping into the unknown. She

says we should practice getting lost in life, stepping off into unknown territory because if we don't then, "how will you ever manage when one of life's big winds knocks you clean off your course... In my life, I have lost my way more times than I can count. I have set out to be married and wended up divorced. I have set out to be healthy and ended up sick. I have set out to live in New England and ended up in Georgia..." And the question becomes not so much how do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land, but how do we find a voice at all, let alone sing, when retirement looks all wrong, or family looks completely unfamiliar, or work ends up feeling completely different than we thought it would.

I am sure you have heard the saying, "If you want to hear God laugh, tell her your plans." And that is a light hearted way of giving a nod to the unpredictability of life. But life can sometimes not just feel un[predictable- it can feel downright bewildering; out of control. And when this happens it is like we are standing on the shores of an unfamiliar life faced with the task of moving into the water. There are times we just don't want to and we stand on the shore, unable, or unwilling to move. Sometimes we will gingerly place a toe in the water- tentatively. Sometimes we find ourselves with one foot in the water and the other foot firmly planted on dry land- we can stay there for a good long time. Are you getting the analogy. It actually works pretty well. Because in my experience, if the water is even a little cold, even going in, there are sensitive bits. Some people just choose to just let go, and dive in. Inevitably it is a process, when life's big winds blow us clean off course.

I remember talking to someone who found herself dealing with a colostomy unexpectedly. I am sure dealing with that any time is no fun. And at first nurses and others would say to her "you'll get used to it. It will become the new normal..." but inside she was screaming, "there is nothing normal about this!!!" The truth was, a big wind had blown her life clear off course, and she was in the surreal process of moving from feeling like she was living someone else's life, to finding herself in the life she was now living.

And where is God in this? Well, I need you to know that I don't believe in an interventionist God, who steers our lives either into or out of danger. That doesn't mean that I don't believe God is powerful, only that God does not manipulate things- control life like that. I do, however, believe that God is in the midst of it all, that there is a spirit available to us at all times, helping us manage our panic, drawing us together for warmth and strength and company. I have seen it more times than I can count: people discover an amazing presence within themselves and their unfamiliar life, resources that they never noticed before both within themselves and beyond themselves. When the big winds hit, we discover that God is not just on the path of our life, but off it too.

And eventually, in this new place that we never would have chosen but that we find ourselves in, we are given the strength and the presence of mind to look around, to take a good look around, and when we do we begin to see what this unexpected development has to offer us. There is, over time, a turning that takes place, in which this disastrous development that offered nothing but loss amazingly also takes on the character of an accidental pilgrimage in which we become, if not the daring adventurer, at least a reluctant pilgrim in our own lives.

I will leave the last word to Barbara Brown Taylor:

"While none of these displacements are pleasant at first, I would not give a single one of them back. I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path. I have lived through parts of life that no one in her right mind would ever willingly have chosen, finding enough overlooked treasure in them to outweigh my projected wages in the life I had planned. These are just a few of the reasons I have decided to stop fighting the prospect of getting lost and engage it as a spiritual practice."

God be in our lying down and our rising up, in our going out and our coming back. God be on the well beaten path and the wild place. God be our everlasting home. Amen.