

SERMON: “Journey into Newness”

First United Church, Waterloo – LENT II – Sunday, February 28, 2021

PRAYER: “God of call, God of transformation, God of the enlivening Word, as we continue on our Lenten journey help us to hear your voice, notice the activity of your Spirit among us and around us, and deepen our trust in your guidance. Keep us open to growth, renewal, and change as followers of Jesus, the Christ. We pray in his name. Amen.”

Leaving home and re-creating home is one of the most arduous of life’s transitions. Leaving and re-creating home is always a mixed bag of anxiety and excitement, sorrow and joy. It’s both a situational and emotional roller-coaster; and each time, it’s a different ride. Beyond place, home is an experience of being comfortable, at ease, having relational support, and that vital human feeling of belonging. Home is both literal space and metaphoric place. Home is more than just a bodily awareness, a mental construct; it’s also a sensation of the heart and a longing of our human spirit. God knows that. God is all about yearning for us to be at home, and helping us find it. God may even nudge us into relocation or transition. The journey, the pilgrimage matters as much as our arriving, even if we never do. With every new situation and/or sense of home, adapting, moving into that newness is key.

I ABRAHAM AND SARAH

I believe Abraham and Sarah experienced that in every fiber and atom of their being and spirit. When we first meet them, they have already been on the move. They are known by their Chaldean names, Abram and Sarai. Abram’s father has taken them and, his grandson Lot, all their servants, livestock, chattels over 1,000 kilometers upstream along the Euphrates River from the ancestral home in Ur to the plains of Haran. They have separated from their larger clan leaving behind Abram’s brother Nahor and his family and a dead brother named Haran, Lot’s father. Were they nomads? Or caravan traders? Or was that just about moving to fresh prospects and opportunities in a new locale? We don’t really know. Abram’s father Terah’s original intent was to head to the land of Canaan. But when they arrived in Haran, he decided to settle in instead. What we do know is that God calls Abram and Sarai to leave Haran and to head to Canaan. It is not a command or expulsion ordinance. It is an invitation. An invitation into promise. *“Go from your country and your kindred and parents’ house to the land that I will show you.”* The promise, you may recall, is three-fold: Abram and Sarai will be the progenitors of a great nation. They will have a stellar reputation and be beacons of blessing. Through them, *“all the peoples of the earth shall become blessed.”* (cf. Genesis 12:1-4)

And Abram and Sarai went. They become the quintessential exemplars of persons of faith, persons of faith who recognize that faith is a journey, and a calling into differentiation and newness.

They do make it to the land of Canaan. But they never really settle anywhere for long. On the way, by mutual agreement, Lot and his entourage separate to the east of the Jordan. Abram and Sarai meander around the west and the Negev to the south, have a near disastrous sojourn in Egypt, and kind of wind up hovering around Hebron. But they never really claim any portion of the land of Canaan as their own. They just figure out how to creatively co-exist with those who occupy the land seeking to model how a God-centred life is different, more healthful, more wholesome, in a word “blessèd”.

They live by faith in view of a promise of fullness of life in true community that they will not see, that they realize will unfold over many generations hence.

As it is summarized in chapter 11 of the Epistle to the Hebrews, verse 13:

“all these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.”

There was, however, what seemed to be one serious barrier as they lived into promise.

How were they to be progenitors of a great nation, when Sarai was barren?

And their God of the promise said, “Guess what, you shall have a child even in your old age.”

And Abram laughed, because that sounded truly ludicrous. And so did Sarai, when she heard.

But it happened, and they named their son “Isaac” which in Hebrew means “he laughs.”

And, then God also gave them new names, new identity as “Abraham” and “Sarah”.

And with whatever lingering incredulity still resided in them, they still trusted in God.

They received faith and promise as gift, as invitation, as grace.

But consider who and what and how much they left behind in all their journeying:

members of their own family, friends and neighbours still resident in the old locales.

They must have left all kinds of chattels and stuff behind so they could keep on travelling light.

Just enough livestock to keep on breeding and meeting their needs, maybe some for sale.

Goodbye to pretty much all of the bells and whistles of Chaldean, or ancient Babylonian culture, which would also include other gods (household gods, weather gods, etc.) and theologies.

Seems they also had to learn or even develop a new language: Hebrew not Urdu or Parsee, and pick up some familiarity with Canaanite tongues like Hittite and Jebusite.

And as long as they trusted and sensed God’s presence with them, they were at “home”, wherever they were.

It all came with a price:

a big disconnect from the culture and societies where they did live out their lives.

Abraham and Sarah were called to relinquish, renounce, let go of everything in their ancient Near Eastern world that defined norms and security, that sought to create life and the future on its own terms since there is only us.

Their departure is an indictment of that culture framing it not as life-giving but vacuous.

God turns the barrenness and hopelessness of Abram and Sarai into blessing, promise.

That did not automatically make it easy for “other peoples” to feel blessed through them.

In the words of American biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann:

“The ‘Abrahamic minority’ lives always as a threat against a world that has embraced barrenness and called it vitality.” 1

Abraham and Sarah and company are models of how to be “in the world, but not of it”.

II OUR FAITH JOURNEY

They are the founding parents of three of our present-day world religions:

Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. All those current communities of faith are people of promise.

So that is our calling. That is us, even if we don’t physically relocate.

So, where are we on that journey? How fervent is our trust in God as people in transition?

For indeed, here at First United, Waterloo, we are in transition as are other churches around us.

Churches, like humankind and other institutions, have life-cycles,

stages of development and redevelopment.

George Bullard is one notable analyst of this reality. His rendition of the pattern is like this:

[show graphic]

Congregations pass from infancy through death, and usually rebirth, and the cycle continues.

In my first several months on this Intentional Interim time I have reviewed your history.

I have conducted interviews with former ministers, and various congregational members seeking to discern where First United is currently at within such a cycle.

The window of history in my survey was from the 1960s to the present.

During the long-term ministry of Rev. Ray McColl, during which this present facility was built,

First United pretty much passed through all those congregational life cycles.

Since 1988, First United has been in the process of being reborn and growing up again.

The first decade was somewhat rocky, but in new infancy you did begin to walk again.

Then, you had a rather joyous and fruitful time as you passed through childhood and on into adolescence over the next couple of decades.

That means that already, during those years, some former ways of being the church

were retained, others were left behind, and new innovations and practices came into being.

And now, as we move on into the year 2021, and during the past couple of years,

you have been moving into another phase of young adulthood. That’s my perception.

How much like Abraham and Sarah leaving Haran is that?

Quite a bit, even though First United Church still sits at the corner of William and King.

Young adulthood is about leaving home into greater independence and responsibility.

In young adulthood, we become able to discern how much of our family upbringing, tradition is helpful, still viable; and in what ways we will learn and develop new practices,

ways in which we will differentiate ourselves from our past and find our own new place,

our own vocation, our new relational partnerships, our own worldview and faith perspective.

So, yes, it is a time of great excitement, adventure and anxiety and trepidation.

Honouring the past, we seek to move into our own new and different future.

That’s one perception of where and who First United, Waterloo is at present.

A few Sundays ago, there was a congregational exercise built into our service of worship that asked “Who Is Our Church?”, inviting people to imagine First United as a person. Six small groups of people reflected on and wondered about that, answering some guiding questions. They shared their versions of a profile. Then, those six profiles were blended into a composite one. And ... here’s how it came out:

Hello! I am First United. I am a newly retired person who is in my early 60s, and who may have a partner or spouse at home who is supportive but not as involved. I have grown-up children, grandchildren and aging parents. Sometimes I feel I am being pulled in several directions and that can, at times, be stressful and tiring. My gender could be either male or female, or non-binary. I like to dress in business casual clothing when out and about and comfortable clothes at home. I have some minor health issues which have slowed me down, but I do what I can to stay active and healthy. I usually have a simple but nutritious breakfast: e.g., porridge or granola with fruit, toast and coffee. I enjoy cooking, gardening, puzzles, reading, and, most importantly, music! I enjoy all types of music, from classical to contemporary. I really hope to be able to travel again soon.

I consider myself well- educated, and spent some of my working days as a teacher. I like to watch documentaries, the History channel, PBS, series like “The Crown”, some sitcoms, and staying current with the news. On Friday nights, I enjoy dinner and a movie, a Rangers game, a concert at Centre in the Square, or having friends over. Lately, Friday nights have been pizza and tv, although there is still some opportunity for outreach ministry as well. Fridays are also a day when I try to relax, although I usually end up taking stock of what I didn’t get done during the week. Although I am fairly traditional, I have seen lots of changes in my time, which keeps me open-minded and ready for new things. At times, I have trouble saying “no” to people and issues that are important to me, like anti-racism, marginalized peoples, economic justice, and the environment.

I have been a very active church within my walls and in the community around me, but I can’t do it all anymore. I know that change is needed in this changing world, but I am not quite sure how to get there. I’m sure that it will need to be a team effort. Despite some hesitancy and uncertainty at times, my faith, hope and trust in God continues to give me strength and purpose. My challenges are: to be more patient; to ask for help and accept help from others; to continue to dare to try new things and to let go of things that no longer serve me. I seek to identify opportunities to form and develop partnerships.

My friends would say that I am a sincere person of faith who is caring, creative, enthusiastic, questioning, and committed to serving God - idealistic but also practical.

I think I am also seen as someone who welcomes and embraces diversity and who is ready for new experiences in these challenging times.

What is fascinating and intriguing to me is that an older person on the edge of perhaps retirement, trying to adjust to a more cybernetic world, realizing that the future of life in human community and in our world ahead will be creating its own “new normal”, is in many ways similar to a young adult leaving home. And, I suggest, both those perception are accurate.

CONCLUSION

As God once called and invited Abram and Sarai to leave lots behind and move into a not-that-clear, but promising future, so God now calls and invites us. As First United you have already passed through some shifts away from past traditions in practices and programs of worship, faith formation, outreach ministries and such. Some former theologies, gods, rituals, ways and means of being church have been left behind. One of the most significant ones is becoming an Affirming congregation and seeking to create a truly inclusive community of faith.

More changes and shifts are likely to happen in the near and distant future. It's part and parcel of being an “Abrahamic minority” in North America in the 21st century, part and parcel of figuring out how to be “in the world but not of it” as a people of faith, people of God seeking to be a blessing to other peoples and living towards that far country of fullness and wholeness of life in true community that God has in mind and that God is helping to continue to happen.

As we reach this last day of Black History Month, we recognize that next month will be the 56th anniversary of the civil rights marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

That journey to new freedom is not yet complete; and it is part of that continuing journey in which God calls and invites us to participate because Black lives matter, truth and reconciliation with aboriginal peoples remains to be done, thirty-five million people in our world are wandering and stuck in places that are not their home, economic disparities have not shrunk, the human rights of all kinds of people are not yet upheld, environmental damage and global warming have not been fully reversed, et cetera.

The realm of God is still at hand and still unfolding and we have our part to play within it. We are caught up in the movement and motion of an evolving universe, evolving lives, evolving faith, evolving church.

We bring some of our traditions and practices discard others.

We bring our certainties, our questions, and our doubts.

We bring our gifts, our energies and resources, our anxieties and our willingness to dare.

We journey as people of a God of promise. We journey into newness.

We journey trusting in God who may also be an evolving God.

Here we are. Here we come. And on we go.

1 Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, (*Interpretation commentaries*), (John Knox Press, Atlanta, GA: 1982), page 123.