

Transitions

Genesis 12:1-9

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Before we launch into today's scripture reading from Genesis, I want to make sure we understand the difference between change and transition. This is something that Pastor Paul on our staff has been helping us to understand over the course of the last few years. **Change** is what happens outside of us. Moving to a new community. Switching jobs. The birth of a child or grandchild. Sometimes we create the change, and sometimes change happens to us, but change is what happens outside of us.

Transition, on the other hand, is what happens within us. It's our inner adjustments. It's the stew of anxiety, uncertainty, hope and expectation, learning and growth that happens within us as we move from what we have known to what is yet unknown, to a new reality.

Let's put some flesh on those concepts by diving into our scripture reading today from Genesis 12.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you."

So Abram departed as the Lord had instructed, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. He took his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all his wealth—his livestock and all the people he had taken into his household at Haran—and headed for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in Canaan, Abram traveled through the land as far as Shechem. There he set up camp beside the oak of Moreh. At that time, the area was inhabited by Canaanites.

Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "I will give this land to your descendants." And Abram built an altar there and dedicated it to the Lord, who had appeared to him. After that, Abram traveled south and set up camp in the hill country, with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. There he built another altar and dedicated it to the Lord, and he worshiped

the Lord. Then Abram continued traveling south by stages toward the Negev.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Let's start by looking at those concepts of change and transition through the lens of this story. The change for Abram and Sarai is a physical move from what had been their homeland to a new home that God would show them. How many of you have experienced a move from one town to another, or even one state to another? It's a pretty common change, though unlike Abram and Sarai, most of us at least know where we've moving to. Abram and Sarai had no idea where God would lead them. Can you imagine?

But let's think about the transitions that would have been happening within Abram and Sarai. Remember, transition is what happens within us as we navigate the changes outside of us. And to do that we'll have to use a bit of imagination. We can imagine the internal struggle for Abram and Sarai between holding onto to what they've known and letting go and obeying God. We can imagine the fear and uncertainty...where are we going? Will we like it? Will it be safe? Will we encounter enemies along the way? Will we ever see our family and friends again? Who are we if we are no longer connected to our family and friends? Can we trust that what we think we heard really was the voice of God? And all of that is just the transition happening within them before they left their homeland!

And we can relate to all of that, can't we? We've been doing ministry together for almost 15 years. We've established a sense of "home" with one another, a sense of comfort, a feeling of familiarity and family. But that's going to change as I retire, and that change is accompanied by lots of transitions that aren't unlike those of Abram and Sarai. How will Prince of Peace be different with a new lead pastor? Will they be a good preacher? A good teacher? A good shepherd? Will they try to change things that I love and value? Will they lead with integrity and care for the staff? Will they bring new vision to revitalize our church? Will they be anywhere near as good-looking and witty as our last lead pastor? All of those questions...well, at least most of them...and the feelings that accompany them are a normal part of the process of change and transition.

Now, let me share six quick lessons that we can learn from Abram and Sarai's change and transitions. First, **God often calls us into the unfamiliar**, the unknown. God did it with Abram and Sarai. It happened with the Israelites as they traveled through the wilderness. Moses, David, Isaiah, the disciples...all were called into the great unknown of God's work in the world. Change is not only a normal part of our faith journey, but a necessary one if we are going to grow and go with God. Abram and Sarai's "yes" to God's call changed human history, and our "yes" to this journey will change our history.

Second, **God will show us the way**. While God often calls us into the unknown, God will also show the way through the unknown and into a new reality. Sometimes that happens through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, as it did with the Israelites. Sometimes through prayer and listening for God's still, small voice. But we can trust that just as God guided Abram and Sarai on the journey, God will guide us.

Third, **the purpose of change and transition ultimately is to bless us to be a blessing**. God doesn't call us out of the familiar just for the fun of making us uncomfortable. God calls us forward to bless us and increase our capacity to trust and be a blessing. If you think about it, virtually all growth entails some discomfort, from leaving the womb, to putting our head in the water in order to learn how to swim, to mom or dad letting go of our bike seat so that we can learn to pedal on our own...after falling a time or two. You and I are both letting go of what we've known to follow God's calling. And while that's scary, let's not forget that it's all for the ultimate purpose of growing in order to be a blessing to others.

Fourth, **let's take this journey together**. Abram and Sarai didn't journey alone. They took a community of people with them. We need the strength and comfort of community when we venture out of the known and into the unknown. And taking the journey together means more than being physically present with one another; it also means being emotionally present for one another. We need to be gentle with ourselves when we're feeling weak and afraid, and kind and supportive to others when they are struggling. Let's hold one another up, pray for one another, grieve with one another, and encourage one another along the way.

As I wrote those words, I was sitting in the waiting room at the Mayo Clinic while our son, Jacob, was having surgery. Talk about a moment of uncertainty and anxiety! But I took great comfort in knowing that dozens and dozens of people from this faith community were praying for our family in that very moment. We all need community like that in times of uncertainty, so let's be that community with and for one another as we navigate the changes before us.

Fifth, **we journey in stages, and that requires patience**. Today's scripture reading ends with these words, "Then Abram continued traveling south in stages toward the Negev." I have no doubt that Abram and Sarai wanted to arrive at their destination ASAP. It's draining to travel through the wilderness of the unknown. But they patiently traveled in stages as God led them. In the same way, there will be moments when we'd like to be done with this period of uncertainty. We'll want the process to move faster, for things to get clearer sooner. But we'll need to grow in our capacity to be patient, to pray and to trust that all will be well and that we will arrive where we need to when we need to, just as Abram and Sarai did.

And finally, **let's worship the Lord along the way**. Our scripture reading today let us know that along the journey through the wilderness Abram and Sarai paused to worship the Lord. And I imagine that that wasn't always easy. It can be hard to worship God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength when you're tired and anxious. But perhaps that's when we need to worship the most, to be reminded that we are not alone, and that God is good even when all we see is the wilderness and all we feel is lost. So...

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
And you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'

...and that means that God is up to something good in you and me.