

Lent 2A
Peace, Seattle
March 12, 2017
Genesis 12:1-4, John 3:1-17

BEYOND WHAT WE KNOW

America, says author Tyler Cowen, is standing still. People are becoming more risk averse, more reluctant to switch jobs or move to another state. Communities are self-segregating by income, education, and race.

As a result, the core American trait of initiating and embracing change, which has defined America and Americans since its inception, allowing them to reinvent themselves again and again, is disappearing in the rearview mirror. And this, Cowen says, is not a good thing.¹

The communities where we live are becoming echo chambers. And even if we do move from one place to another, we tend to connect with the kind of friends, neighborhoods and communities in those new locations that reinforce our worldview.

Tyler Cowen's book has a telling title: *The Complacent Class: The Self-Defeating Quest For The American Dream*.

“What happens when we live in communities where we are not challenged or where we're just reaffirming our own biases all the time?”

According to Cowen, “We become complacent... [for when] you ceased being challenged, and you think your way of life is the only way, ultimately that way will become weak. It will be subject to less improvement. You will enter a kind of bubble and continually be surprised by the challenges the outside world keeps on throwing at you. But you're not very well-equipped intellectually to handle them.”²

America is at a crossroads. And that's precisely where we find Abram and Sarai in our first reading this morning. In fact, not only are Abram and Sarai at a crossroads...God is also at a crossroads.

God's earliest ventures with the human creature shaped from clay were not the successes we might have expected them to be. The ancient stories of Genesis chapters 3-11 tell the tragic tales of human disobedience, mistrust, hubris, and violence; and God openly wondering whether this all wasn't a huge mistake.

By the time we reach Chapter 11, God has already hit the RESTART button once, and as readers we have reason to wonder if the human story has a future at all.

For when we meet Abram and Sarai for the first time, [11:30] we learn that...

(1) They have no children; (2) their capacity for bearing children doesn't exist; and (3) their family has already made one attempt toward a new beginning, an attempt that failed.

By the end of chapter 11 things seems destined to come to a halt, for there is no way—no human capacity—to move this story forward.

¹ From an interview by Rachel Martin with Tyler Cowen on National Public Radio's Morning Edition, March 2, 2017. Copyright © 2017 NPR. All rights reserved. Tyler Cowen's book is: *The Complacent Class: The Self-Defeating Quest For The American Dream*. The full interview can be found [HERE](#).

² Excerpt from *ibid*.

But then, into this bleak scenario, God breathes a word of new beginning, and it comes in the form of a command:

GO FROM YOUR COUNTRY & YOUR KINDRED & YOUR FATHER'S HOUSE, says God.
AND I WILL MAKE YOU A NATION, AND YOU WILL BE A BLESSING. And Abram went.

Thomas Cahill calls these words “**two of the boldest words in all literature.**”³ ABRAM WENT.

God calls Abram and Sarai to move beyond what they've known—beyond the very things that have defined them: beyond their national identity, beyond their clan, beyond their family home, toward a new place and destiny and blessing to which God is calling them.

And the message is clear: I who call you am not limited by the boundaries of your self-interest. I who call you am not limited by your links to the past. I who call you am no “little patronal god,” but the God of heaven and earth.

We have no way of getting into Abram or Sarai's head. We have no way of knowing how they understood the promises that came with this Call from God.

We do know they stumbled along the way to obedience; that journeying in this new territory of faith wasn't automatic or easy. And we shouldn't minimize their struggle to comprehend this promise of blessing—scripture certainly doesn't!

But it's worth asking: what might this story tell us about our mission as people of faith?

It seems to me this story could be read as a welcome corrective.

At a time when we're growing more insular, more focused on self-preservation, more economically stratified, more suspicious of the other, this story reminds us that our God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, calls us to go beyond the boundaries of received wisdom, beyond what we've been told.

When God called Abram and Sarai to move beyond country, clan, and family ties God said, in effect, “You can't be the blessing I intend for you to be unless you move beyond the patterns of the past—beyond what you know.”

To move away from what you know into the unknown requires a trust in the one who calls you there. Abram and Sarai, despite missteps and misgivings, learned to do just that—they learned to trust.

THROUGH YOU, God tells them, ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH WILL BE BLESSED. And so Abram and Sarai become immigrants. Abram and Sarai go. And what do they find? They find they are companioned by a sojourning God who travels with them all along the way.

There is something about this call story that gives us a way to understand the dynamics of our gospel story—the story of the Pharisee Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night.

As a scholar and teacher of Jewish law Nicodemus possessed the highest educational pedigree, but in the company of Jesus, he found himself at a loss for words.

³ Thomas Cahill. *The Gifts of the Jews*, (New York: Anchor, 1998) p. 63

You must be born “anōthen”— anew, again, from above— Jesus said. But how does that work?

Nothing in his seminary education, nothing in Nicodemus’ carefully honed understanding of the spiritual realm prepared him for this. He’d come looking for an explanation of what mechanism was a play in Jesus’ ministry... “tell me the rules, Jesus, and how it relates to what I already know” ...and what he got instead was the wind.

Throughout this whole scene we get the impression that Jesus and Nicodemus are speaking different languages, talking past each other. But there’s more to it than just this.

John is letting us know that if we want to hear the depth of what God is telling us in Jesus, then we have to be willing to put our assumptions aside and be drawn beyond the surface of Jesus’ words into their deeper meaning.⁴

Faith isn’t a mechanism. Being born anew or born from above isn’t an intellectual construct. It’s an experience of envelopment in the light of God so complete, so total, that only the language of new birth can capture its meaning.

And like all things of the spirit, it is a mystery; not something we can control, not something we can chart on paper, and yet it is something we can participate in—by the grace of God.

In Jesus the mystery of God, step by step, reveals itself as a story of love for all the world to see; a message all the world needs to hear:

God so loved the world that he gave his only son. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Notice: there’s nothing here about who qualifies for God’s love, or what factors determine whether one is loveable. There’s not one whiff of commentary here about who deserves love! Only the simple truth that the world, this world, needs saving, and God is about the work of doing that saving—and doing it by means of the Son.

Twenty centuries later, we still strive to understand how it all works together—the son, the cross, the empty tomb—but we don’t have to understand the gift in order to get the gift. We simply receive it. And we simply share. And lo and behold, in that sharing God’s age-old promise to Abram and Sarai comes true—“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Let us pray.

God of Abraham and Sarah, God of Jesus, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by pathways untrodden, through perils unknown, give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us, your love supporting us, and your Spirit is guiding us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

⁴ Susan Briehl, *That You May Have Life* Scripture Study, GIA, 2005.