

New Beginnings: Abraham – July 3rd, 2022

Acts 7:1-8 (NIV)

Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”

To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. 3 ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’

4 “So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. 6 God spoke to him in this way: ‘For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. 7 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’ 8 Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

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Today we are beginning a new sermon series titled “New Beginnings.” I thought this might be appropriate because not only are you as a congregation beginning a new journey with me as your senior pastor, but I am beginning a new journey here in Huntsville as well. Plus there are so many things changing in our world now that it would be good for us to look to scriptures and explore the new beginnings that many of our heroes and heroines of the faith experienced.

Today I chose Abraham to begin this series not because I am going in alphabetical order (with the last name of Wintermute I have never been a fan of alphabetical order), but because he experiences such a massive change in his life that he and Sarah would be a good place to start.

Now there is some confusion as to this person’s name. Abram and Abraham are the same person. God changes Abram’s name to Abraham as part of his covenant with him. And he changes Abraham’s wife’s name from Sarai to Sarah.

We heard in our first reading today from Genesis 17:1-8 that God makes a covenant with Abram/Abraham. Now a covenant is a serious thing back in biblical times. It is a big-time

agreement, more so than a pinkie promise. It's like a legal contract between two parties. In the case of the scripture we read today God makes a covenant promise with Abraham. God promises Abraham not only millions of descendants but also that they will inhabit the promised land. Abraham's part of the covenant is to obey God and to circumcise all males. That was the contract.

But obeying God is not always easy. In this case Abraham and Sarah are called to trust the plans God had for them. They are to leave the nice, secure place they are living and to move everything they have to Canaan, where they live as foreigners.

Moving is tough. I know, I'm a Methodist preacher! I'm very familiar with moving. Do you want to know the scariest part of moving? The unknown. Thoughts go through my head like, "What are the people like? What if they don't like us? Where will we live? Where and what are the 'landmines'? (I think I've already stepped on some of those.) What if the congregation was wanting a young, physically fit, attractive pastor with young children and instead they got ... well.. me? (I ain't no spring chickens...)"

As humans we fear what we do not know. In our quantifiable world today we want good, hard, statistical data in our hands before we make a decision. We become comfortable with the "known," with our weekly routines, and avoid the "unknown" which we fear.

Let's try a little experiment. How many of you have tried a new food, something you haven't had before, say in the past 6-months? Raise your hand. Hmmmm. Okay, how many of you have tried a new food in the last year? How many hands? Not many, huh? We are creatures of habit that prefer the "known" over the "unknown."

Abraham and Sarah didn't just wade out a little bit of the swimming pool of change when God called them to go to Canaan. Nope. They took a big ol' jump into the deep end. They left their relatives, their friends, their land, their way of life, and probably even their language to go to where God called them. They had a huge, massive, life-altering new beginning.

The second reading today was from the book of Acts, or more accurately, "The Acts of the Apostles." The person speaking is Stephen, an apostle of Jesus Christ who, we are told in Acts 6, was "a man full of God's grace and power, [who] performed great wonders and signs among the people." – Acts 6:8

But Stephen, while doing what God called him to do as a follower of Jesus Christ, made some enemies of some religious leaders, specifically a group called the "Freedmen" who were Jews of Cyrene, Alexandria, and from the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. They didn't like what Stephen was saying about Jesus. Why?

It was change. It was unknown. They weren't familiar with it. They weren't comfortable with it. They liked the comfort of the status quo, the way things were.

They debated and argued with Stephen, but the Holy Spirit gave Stephen the right words at the right time to refute them. When they figured out they couldn't win a debate against him, then they went to plan B: get rid of Stephen.

So they made up some false accusations against him and filed them with the authorities of the day. Stephen was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, a group of rabbis who served as a legal court of sorts to settle religious matters.

When Stephen is brought in asked if it was true what was being said about him. They wanted to know if he spoke "against this holy place and against the law," or if he said that "...Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.") Acts 6:13b-14

So Stephen begins his response by going back in Jewish history to Abraham and how he was called out of his own country into Canaan, the land that God promised to his offspring.

Stephen told the Sanhedrin, "He [God] gave him [Abraham] no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child."

Stephen's speech goes on for a long time. You can read the entire speech in the 7th chapter of Acts. But he ends with this:

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it." – Acts 7:51-53

Wow. Pretty strong words, Stephen. And how did the people react? Well, they stoned Stephen to death. Yep. They said, "We're right, you're wrong, so we're going to kill you." And they did.

Stephen's new beginning of being a follower of Jesus Christ resulted in his death. Abraham's new beginning of being obedient to God resulted in years of traveling, tense and scary moments (to the point of convincing kings that Sarah was his sister and not his wife), and even being called to sacrifice his son that he and Sarah had waited and longed so long for. (God stopped that from happening, though, if you remember.)

God rarely if ever calls people to the easy and comfortable places.

We forget that, though, don't we? Somehow as Christians we think that if we are good and obey the 10 Commandments, if we go to church and if we drop a little something in the offering plate regularly, that God will magically make our lives perfect. We will be healthy, our bank accounts will always have money in them, our children will behave and make good grades, our breath won't stink, and our hair will never turn gray or fall out.

But that's a myth. That didn't happen to any of the disciples or apostles. And it won't happen to those who choose to follow Jesus. Being a Christian does not guarantee a pain-free, trouble-free life. Just the opposite, actually. God calls us to the uncomfortable places, and sometimes that means new beginnings.

What new beginning is God calling us to today?

Change is everywhere in our world. War in Ukraine on the other side of the world is affecting our lives here. COVID is still around and causing supply chain shortages. There is great political change in our country, especially with the recent Supreme Court rulings. There is profound religious change in our country as more and more people turn away from religion and prefer to be known as "nones," people who do not practice any religion. There is change in our own United Methodist denomination as disagreements and purposeful disobedience of our Book of Discipline by some of the bishops and elected leaders drives a wedge of division into our denomination.

Change brings new beginnings.

One response to new beginnings is to try to insulate ourselves from them, ignore them, and hope they go away. We try avoidance. But avoidance doesn't work. New beginnings are going to happen anyway.

Or we can be like Abraham, we can be like Stephen, and rely on our faith when we experience new beginnings.

Hebrews 11:1 gives us a definition of faith: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." If you know it, if you can see it, it ain't faith."

New Beginnings are coming. Some of them are already here. (Me being your pastor, for example.)

But no matter what new beginnings come our way we can face them unafraid because we have faith. Like Stephen, we have faith that Jesus Christ was the messiah, son of God and son of Man, and that through his sacrifice on the cross bridges the chasm between ourselves and God. Our sins are forgiven. We, who are imperfect, have been reconciled to God by the one who was perfect. Not because we earn it, not because we deserve it, but because of God's grace toward us, because of God's love given to us.

So my challenge to you this week, as we celebrate our country's birth and as we experience new beginnings in so many areas of our lives, is to trust in faith. Put your trust in Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith, the proof of God's great love toward us.

And try to eat something you haven't had before. You might be surprised.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.