**Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17**

**March 12, 2017; Second Sunday in Lent**

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 A holy crossroads. That’s the image I get when I read today’s scripture.

Abram and Sarai live literally at a crossroads, the city of Haran located halfway between their home of origin in the eastern land of Ur and the home God will show them as they travel west. Haran is also a spiritual crossroads, preparing Abram and Sarai for life in a new place where God has promised to use them to bless others. Likewise, in John’s Gospel, Nicodemus stands at a crossroads, invited by Jesus to come into the light and experience the reign of God.

As we continue the Lenten road toward the cross and new life, God invites us to notice the holy crossroads in our own lives. They may appear suddenly, like a fork in the road, requiring decisive action, or we may hardly notice them at all. They may appear as obstacles or opportunities. They may move us forward or force us to retreat.

As a pastor, it is my greatest privilege to accompany people in the holy crossroads of their lives: whether that is navigating life without a loved one or caring for an aging parent, anticipating the birth of a child, participating in the process of discerning whether or not to claim the faith of the church as their own or discovering the ministry to which God is calling them, among others.

These crossroads or milestones, as our friend and Lutheran educator Debbie Streicher calls them, are opportunities for noticing how God is at work in our lives and learning to help others notice where God is working in their lives as well. Using the stories of the Bible, we see how God shapes us and our world and our role in it. They help us understand who we are and to make meaning of our lives and those around us.

Take the story of Abram and Sarai. Imagine what this crossroads must have felt like to them. To leave Haran, they had to give up everything that defined who they were and gave them security and peace of mind: their country, their family, their home.

We don’t know much about them. The story tells us they were immigrants from Ur of Chaldea and that they were on their way to Canaan with Abram’s father and brother and wives but ended up settling instead, half way along the journey, in the town of Haran. Abram’s father died there. The most significant piece is the comment, almost in passing, that Sarai, when she married Abram, was barren. She could not have children.

So here they are in Haran, Abram and Sarai at a virtual dead end, by now old, with no heir, and by ancient standards therefore, no future. They don’t know it, but God has a plan, a big plan for their future and so calls them to chuck what they know and go God only knows where to do only God knows what. They were never going to have much of a future in Haran, but they had their siblings and in-laws. They had a home. They were comfortable.

God promises to work through their lives in a remarkable way, giving them a future they could never imagine themselves:

I will show you the land;

I will make you a great nation;

I will bless you;

I will make your name great;

I will bless those who bless you;

I will curse those who curse you;

I will bless all the families of the earth through you.

Standing in this holy crossroads, it is clear that God is the mover and shaker in their story and their future lies in God’s hands. And what an extraordinary future God promises to these two nobodies. Barren and unable to have children when they married and now too old to have children, God chooses this most unlikely pair to establish a great nation, using them to bless the whole world.

Of course, they don’t know what we know. They have no idea what is about to happen, so they must step out in trust.

Often, our own stories are like that. Sometimes we stumble on a holy crossroads, but it feels more like a rope bridge suspended over a deep canyon. God may be pushing us toward it but we can’t yet see the other side. We have no idea what our future might look like so we have to trust that God does.

One young woman writes of a recent crossroads she faced:

Today I took the plunge and put my two week notice in at work. I have been working for a real estate company based out of San Diego for eight months now.

The day after the presidential election, the owner and CEO sent out a company-wide email about how this election is going to rock the boat so badly that people are going to be scared. And when people are scared, they buy and sell their homes hastily. This email said our realtors needed to step up and take advantage of that fear to make as much money as possible.

I couldn't believe what I read. I fumed with anger. I wrote and re wrote an email to my boss saying that I quit. I wouldn't work for a company like this. But it was also November, and with Christmas coming up and three kids, I needed the money. So I sucked it up.

After four months and a continual barrage of other heartless comments by this CEO, I couldn’t take it anymore. I have a six year old daughter who looks up to me. I want her to grow up to be a strong woman, and I can't model that if I let money outweigh my beliefs. I don't have another job lined up. I'm doing this on a whim and prayer at this point.

She has no idea what her future might look but she is trusting that God does and that God will lead her wherever that may be.

Today’s story is particularly appropriate for the season of Lent, when the focus is to “try to pry loose our fingers, one by one, and plunge us into unknown baptismal waters, waters that turn out to be not only our death tomb, but surprisingly our womb of life. Rather than falling back into nothingness, we fall back on everlasting arms. Held by God, we learn that we *can* let go of our fears and anxieties; we can cross that rope bridge, we can move toward the future that God has in mind, toward the abundant life that God offers.

In the gospel story, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he won’t see the kingdom of God (or, in other words, he won’t experience the fullness of life that God offers) without first being born again or “from above”. In the original Greek, the word meaning “again” also means “from above”. Nicodemus takes Jesus literally, asking how it’s possible to be born twice.

But what Jesus wants him to hear is: Hey, Nicodemus, let go of your old ways; let go of the security that your position in life gives you; let go of the anxieties and fears that keep you from being who God called you to be, that keep you from stepping out in trust. Nicodemus, there is new life available to you from God.

As a community of faith, we draw on this image of rebirth every time we participate in the sacrament of baptism. In the prayer over the water, we thank God for the water of baptism, saying, “Through it we are reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit.” We ask God to send the Spirit to move over this water that it may be a fountain of deliverance and rebirth, raising the one we are baptizing to new life, and joining them with the community of believers. We ask God to pour out the Holy Spirit upon them, that they may have power to do your will, and continue forever in the risen life of Christ.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This image of rebirth beckons Nicodemus, like Abram and Sarai, to let go and step out, trusting God with his life, which Jesus promises will be abundant. And it beckons us.

Standing at a holy crossroads in his life, a friend of mine wrote me about his struggle to step out into the new life that God offers. Speaking of a recent worship service, he said:

The confirmation service last week made me realize that the public acknowledgment of a need for God as part of a spiritual life is important. Practicing a spiritual life only in the privacy of home may, as I am beginning to experience after all these years, be too one dimensional. I've been aware of God all my life, but I have never known God.

We lawyers don't like to admit that we need anything. After all, we are called upon often to be the client's Rock of Gibraltar. We are "tough". We need no assistance. That view is a mirage for me. I finally realize I need God, and the church, for help. I have friends, a job, family, material things, good health, and so forth. But, there is something missing in my life. In any event, for now, I am going to suspend all words and intellect for a while and be open to what God might have in mind for my future.

In what holy crosswords are you standing this Lenten season? To what newness is God calling you? Can you loosen your grip? Can you let go? Can you take a step? Can you move into the future God has promised and receive the abundant life promised by Christ?

1. Thanksgiving over the Water, from the baptismal liturgy in *Book of Common Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 410-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)