

Thirty-two years ago was the first time I wrote a sermon based on Genesis 12. I had been out of college several years and was teaching, but Doris saw something else in me. She was a grey-haired woman at First Christian Church in Martinsville, where I moved after graduating from college to develop a new Head Start Center and serve as a lead teacher.

As is often the case with young adults in their twenties, I was struggling to discern my path in life. I enjoyed my job in early childhood education, and yet, difficulties entered my life that prompted me to consider a change. That's when Doris asked me to fill in on Sundays for a month at the Kennedy Home, a retirement center in the town. The chaplain would be on vacation, and she wondered if I would lead worship and preach while he was gone. Although I was uncertain about the task, I accepted her offer.

Somehow, I selected this passage from Genesis, where God called Abram and Sarai to leave their home and to travel to a distant country. Maybe I identified with the transition they faced since I was facing my own set of changes. Or maybe I wondered what it

meant for God to bless someone going through a life transition.

Throughout the three decades since I first explored this story in Genesis, today is the eighth time I have again used this text as the basis for reflection. I became a bit nostalgic this week as I reread that first sermon I wrote in my twenties, recalling the events happening in my life that eventually led me to seminary and ministry. Each time I have explored this text, my life was at a different point, and although I sometimes resisted the changes swirling around me, encountering this scripture repeatedly reminds me that God is present in all the changes that happen throughout our lives.

Abram and Sarai, later called Abraham and Sarah, heard God's invitation to leave their home in Haran, in present-day Turkey, and travel to an unknown land. The name *Haran* is related to the Akkadian word for crossroads or highways, for this community existed in a strategic location between two major cities. It was located partway between the place where Abraham's father had grown up and the new land to which God called Abraham and Sarah to move.¹

Making a transition to a new place is difficult, even for those of us living today. Families with children often discover how much stuff they have accumulated over the years, making a move more complicated than when one could put everything in the back of a U-Haul. Moving from one career to another includes the challenge of learning new skills. Moving from one town to another requires finding new doctors, banks, and local resources. Moving from independent living into assisted care or to a nursing home means giving up some possessions and independence.

Moving from what's familiar into some unfamiliar place can be scary, as was the case with a little boy who was afraid to go anywhere in the dark.

One night his mother told him to go out to the back porch and bring her the broom.

The little boy turned to his mother and said, "Mama, I don't want to go out there. It's dark."

The mother smiled reassuringly at her son. "You don't have to be afraid of the dark," she explained. "Jesus is out there. He'll look after you and protect you."

The little boy looked at his mother real hard and asked, "Are you sure he's out there? Is he real?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Jesus is everywhere, and he is always ready to help you when you need him," she said.

The little boy thought about that for a minute and then went to the back door and cracked it a little. Peering out into the darkness, he called, "Jesus? If you're out there, would you please hand me the broom?"²

Along with fear, transitions often contain a spark of hope, and when God invited Abraham and Sarah to head to a new land, God offered them not only a challenge, but a promise filled with hope: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

God's promise of blessing came with a responsibility—to be a blessing to others. Abraham and Sarah were blessed to BE something more than themselves. Without their willingness to follow that invitation, the other stories in the Bible would never have been written, for from Abraham and Sarah's

3

move flowed the rest of the story: Isaac and Rebekah, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, King David, the prophets, Esther, and after several thousand years, Jesus. From the seed of that one invitation to Abraham and Sarah to follow God into a new adventure emerged four major religious groups: Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Baha'is.

I can't even imagine what the world would be like if that couple had resisted God's invitation. What if Abraham replied to God:

"I don't know, God, we've become comfortable here. We like this land. If we follow your idea, we'd have to move our animals, find new wells for water, carry our belongings, and meet new people. Can't you just bless us here, for I like your promise of being blessed, but this whole world-blessing thing sounds like too much responsibility for me to handle."

In a similar way, just imagine what life would be like if others in our church history had resisted God's invitation?

What if the women who gathered in the home of Mrs. Frances Stillman 140 years ago on October 22, 1878 decided it would be too difficult to form a

church and never encouraged the completion of the first church on the corner of Middlebury and Monroe? What if in 1897 church members never decided to move to the triangular corner of West Lexington, Vistula, and Fifth Streets? What if those who came before us never placed a cornerstone on September 13, 1925, for the first portion of this building? Imagine if the cornerstone for this sanctuary was never set on November 23, 1952. What would our lives be like?

The people who felt blessed by God 140 years ago to begin this congregation have passed on that blessing to us. Today First Christian in Mishawaka celebrates their 175th anniversary, remembering those who have passed on a blessing to them.

Each of us has been blessed to BE a blessing to others, as Emily Tubman realized as she held her dying husband Richard in her arms in 1836. He had been ill before they began their annual journey of three weeks by horse and carriage from Augusta, Georgia to her family in Frankfort, Kentucky. "Emily had promised Richard in his dying moments to do two things: free their slaves and to continue their custom

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of traveling each summer in Kentucky to avoid the yellow fever plague that was always an imminent threat in the hot humid summers of Augusta.”³

At age 42, Emily found herself blessed with the management of a large financial estate, quickly learning from her family the principles of business. “Despite the calamities that beset her world, she would more than double her inheritance. She would enlarge the Tubman plantation and other landholdings, as well as build a textile mill and become a major stockholder in a railroad and several banks.”

Through her blessings, Emily became a blessing to the slaves she promised to free. “She returned to Georgia and called her slaves together and offered them two choices. She would pay for their passage to Liberia or they could remain with her. If they remained they would be set up on individual parcels of land and paid wages for farming. ...68 voted to go to Liberia

and start a new life there.... An interesting footnote is that one of the descendants of this Liberian group became president of that nation in the 1970s.”

When she met Alexander Campbell, an early leader of the Christian Church (DoC), she was impressed with his vision of church, and she became a charter member of the First Christian Church in Georgia and attended First Christian in Frankfort during the summers. She provided funds for new church starts throughout Georgia and paid for a new church in Frankfort after it burned down.

Little did Emily know where her life would go after her husband died, but she chose to BE a blessing by using the blessings she had received. You and I and our church have been blessed in abundant ways, even during times of uncertainty and struggle, so may each of us continue to BE a blessing to those around us.

¹ *New Bible Dictionary*, “Haran.”

² Adapted from *Homiletics Online*

³ This and following quotations from

www.discipleshistory.org/history/people/emily-tubman