**20th March 2011**

**Genesis 12.1-4March 20, 2011**

Some people are control freaks. I am a little myself.

We control freaks count every contingency, manage every moment. Each step we take in life is precisely plotted, its trajectory traced, before our foot leaves the ground. By controlling the actions of others around us we live the illusion that we are in control of our own lives, and our own future is fixed.

The truth? We "control freaks" are no more in control of our lives than anyone else. On March 11th, 2011 all of Japan was dreadfully reminded how little control we actually wield. When the earth shifts suddenly and unpredictably, everyone for hundreds of miles stumbles.

Last week's earthquake and tsunami may have made the "out of controllers" among us feel justified. By taking big risks, refusing to plan ahead, springing into spur of the moment decisions, "out of control" people might seem to be embracing the unknown, courting chaos. Yet in reality "out of control" people have simply found a different way to control their own lives. They plan to have no plan. "Out of control" people lead the way and live their way. They cannot follow another.

So the "control freaks" and the "out-of-controllers" are really just flip sides of the same disc. The repeating message of this one control disc is "This is my life and I will live it my way."

But there is a true opposite to this "control central" attitude. We encounter the alternative in the archetype Abraham. Instead of "control" Abraham opted for faith. Already an old man, wandering in a land where he was a resident alien, Abraham listened to the words and promises of a deity he barely knew and in the crucible of that commencing relationship, "Abraham believed God."..

Most of us know difficult and uncertain places of decision. Whether it be about choosing avocation or finding a new job, looking for a

new location to live or finding the right sort of medical treatment, there often appears to be no clear signposts or even a safety net if all goes horribly wrong.

Moving ahead with faith and in faith is like that. We take tentative steps forward in trust and hope, for not to move anywhere is to give into lethargy and despair.

Throughout our Lenten journey toward greater openness of heart, mind, and will, the strong and endearing biblical figures of faith, such as Abram and Sarai, show us that creative movements of spirit are not simply careful strategies. Rather, they are daring responses of the heart to a greater vision for life.

God calls Abram and Sarai to leave home and country and go to a new land.

One of the common interpretations of God's call to Abraham to travel to a far country suggests that Abraham's response involved a brave and costly leaving behind of all that was familiar, setting out on a journey to some place unfamiliar, waving a choked--up farewell to kith and kin in order to set out on a noble sojourn, a quest.

To begin with, consider the fact that Abraham was a nomad. His people were wandering shepherds. One rocky hillside looks pretty much like another when one spends most of the time looking for good country on which to graze livestock. They weren't really settled people at all. They didn't have "a country" in the sense that we do. Consider also that Abraham's father, Terah, had already died - as reported in Genesis 11:32, What was left there to exercise a hold on Abraham?  
  
 And finally - perhaps most importantly - consider the fact that just before our morning passage, Genesis reported, rather matter--of--factly, that Abraham's wife, Sarah, was "barren; she had no child" (Genesis 11:30). In the culture of their time, barrenness was thought to be a sign of God’s disfavour  
  
 God had managed to single out a dead--end family living on the edge of oblivion to offer to them a call to go to a new country, a new start. Sarah's barrenness was perhaps the most visible reminder of what was by then an obvious human dead--end. Here was a family destined for extinction.

It was just such a family, empty of hope, which God singled out for a call, not some brave, responsive, forward--thinking hero, but a dusty, dead--end, wretched family. When Paul wrote in Romans 4 that Abraham had nothing to boast about, it was this that he meant, at least in part. Abraham's response to God's call reflects no particular credit on Abraham. What other choice did he have, but to sit down and die?

God promised this heirless old man not only that he would have a son, but more, that he would become father of a great nation, and even more, that he would be a name that would serve as a blessing to every family on earth. That's a pretty good stretch in just four verses - from childless vagabond to a blessing for humanity!  
  
Saint Paul - in his theological genius - saw this more clearly perhaps than anyone before or since. Just when humanity had realized in one tragic event after another - disobedience in the garden, murder of Abel by his brother Cain, the Great Flood, the confusion at the tower of Babel - that it had no power to invent a future, a future was given through a man who personally showed utterly no signs of promise.  
  
Humanity, barren of potential of its own providing, is precisely the sort of ground where God speaks the word of Good News.

**Dead ends are the places where God begins to make highways of hope.**

From the story of Abraham we can see that God clearly does not depend on some human potential residing in the ones needing rescue. God's work is always a sort of resurrection. Paul says as much: God "... gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Romans 4:17).   
  
Now, in every time there have been - as there are in our time - people who thought it was still possible to gain salvation the old fashioned way, by earning it. God's relationship with Abraham was not based on his leading a pretty good life - we really have no idea what sort of life he led up to age 75 - but on his neediness and his response to the rescuing love of God. Emptied of self, he was willing to be filled with the promise of God. Void of any rightful claims on God, he was open to a gift when it came his way.  
  
If we are not quite like Abraham - that is, if we have not reached a dead end, we have plenty to live for - we might not find it easy to accept the idea of God's purpose for our lives and our world as a gift which we don't deserve. It seems impossible. We subscribe to the human tendency to try to earn God's favor. To make our own way in life. It is just when we are in such a state of mind - especially if we're failing at it - that it is so helpful to reflect on the likes of Abraham. God's gift - made available to a dead--end straggler like Abraham - will surely be made available to us.

Can we take the risk?

A temporary office-help agency in Washington DC recently began offering a $100 bonus to the employee who makes the biggest mistake of the month. He doesn't get a reprimand. He doesn't get demoted. He gets a $100 bonus.  I read about an executive for a company called Sara Lee Direct who thought he was getting a great deal on a shipment of belts, so he acted quickly and bought a whole warehouse full. Only later did he discover that what he bought was not manufacturing belts for the conveyor system at the factory, but a bunch of those three-inch-wide paisley belts from the 1960s. Instead of getting fired, he was awarded a bronze plaque that proudly commemorated the "Worst Buy of the Year."

When you hear these stories, you can have two reactions. The first is: Are these businesses nuts? Have they gone crazy, or what? And then the second thought was that maybe we could talk the church meeting into adopting a similar policy. Maybe there could be a bonus for the worst sermon of the month. I could use some extra cash!

Seriously though, there's a strategy behind rewarding mistakes. The president of that temporary help company explained it this way: "The object is to get people to take risks." An official at Sara Lee Direct where the employee got promoted instead of fired for making that terrible purchase put it this way, "If you don't go up to the plate and swing hard, you're never going to hit a home run. If you're not willing to make a mistake, you're not really trying."

The bottom-line is that risk-taking is the only road to success. And companies are finding that it's worth rewarding a few mistakes along the way if it encourages their people to take the kind of risks that can bring huge rewards. And the same is true for people of faith.

How much faith does it take to follow? How much risk are we willing to take? Risks are sometimes necessary for growth and change. It is anathema in this health and safety climate. Parents try to protect their children from any risks. We want to be seen as responsible parents – we don’t want to expose our children to unnecessary risks. And of course that is right and makes sense to a degree. Yet risk taking also leads to growth.

Abraham, got blessed by taking a big risk and became a blessing to others. **Genesis provides an illustration of a characteristic feature of god’s work in the world, taking hold of some people in order to make them a blessing to other people.**

Abram and Sarai are receiving a bold blessing – God will give them a multitude of descendants and bless them, so that through them all nations will be blessed. The world will want to know about this God who brings such salvation. God’s gifts are given for the sake of the world. The scriptures are the unfolding story of what it means to be “a great nation” of God’s people.

The text tells us nothing of why Abram and Sarai were chosen by God; what is significant is their response. They do not know where this country is or what the journey will entail. They could have refused, but respond in faithful obedience to God. Abram and Sarai choose to step out into the unknown. They set out with relatives, servants, and possessions – a great caravan beginning a long journey. We do not know how the others in the family reacted, but Abram and Sarai were confident enough in God’s call to begin

the journey.

Their journey would take them around the Fertile Crescent (a term for the great valley of the Euphrates River) and down into the land of Canaan from the north. It was a journey of several hundred miles.

Even more important, it was the start of a spiritual journey into a relationship with the God who creates and redeems. In a later story, they will be given new names – Abraham and Sarah – as a sign that God has established a covenant with them. A covenant is a solemn and binding agreement between God and humankind. Three great religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – find their origins in Abraham’s story. The story is not yet finished; we are part of that

journey today.

On Thursday we will share where our journey has taken us in the last year. We will see pointers as to where it may take us in the next eyar – but we can’t control the future. The future is God’s – but we do know that in the future God wants to bless us. God is a God of blessing.

And of course, we are doubly blessed, because we know of God's care not as a misty promise of land and descendants, but as the saving love expressed in a savior who is Jesus, who came to us - like God's promise came to Abraham - quite apart from our deserving, quite in spite of our non--deserving. It is ultimately this hand which reaches out to save us. This hand, crucified, nail--pierced, and beckoning to us, is extended on this day and forever.

*Beckoning God,*

*you call us to journey with you into the unknown. Help us to respond in faithful obedience.*

*Strengthen us for what lies ahead so that, secure in the knowledge of your loving care, we like Abraham may be a blessing for all.*

*Amen.*