

Sermon: The Future is Open Text Genesis 12:1-7 January 15, 2023

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Imagine you are sitting in the courtyard of your family home. You live in the Babylonian city of Ur. The year is 1800 years before the birth of Jesus. Ur, even in 1800 BCE is an ancient city. It has been home to your family for as long as anyone can remember. And you can remember a long way back. You can go back 10 generations in your family tree and find your 9 times great grandfather Noah- Noah of flood and ark and rainbow.... Before Noah are many more generations as your city was founded by the ancient Sumerians, some 2000 years before you were born

Your nation, Babylon is the heart of the known world. Your land is fertile and has been developed for centuries. It is rich in culture and history, in a world with little recorded history or settled culture. Your people were the first to build cities, the first to write down their stories.

And it obvious to anyone surely that your gods are the most powerful gods; proof is found in the great temples of your people, in the written narratives about the gods that you created. Your city is named after the moon god, whose light rises and sets in a repeating, regular patterns, giving all a sense of order and continuity.

On this day as a you sit in your courtyard, or in your kitchen, or on your rooftop, here in the orderly, eternal center of the world, you hear a voice... or did you nod off and have a dream...or did you begin to get a feeling, a growing restlessness that you cannot shake.... However, it happens you feel called to do an incredible, maybe crazy thing. You feel called to leave your ancient, settled, comfortable, ordered world... to leave the center of everything and to head to the wild margins... to embark on a long and arduous journey, to a land you have never seen.

You feel a call to leave the world you and your ancestors have know for 2 millennia and to go to place where the customs and language are strange, where you may not find welcome, where you will not be a person with roots and heritage, where you will be a stranger and an alien.

You are leaving behind all you know- family, friends, your history, your home, familiar routines, known landscapes, a familiar climate, and customs...

And why are you doing this utterly disruptive thing? Because an unknown, unfamiliar god, a god you do not know, not the moon god or a familiar Babylonian deity... this stranger god has called you out to a land that you will be shown... just 1500 kms distant, across desert and wilderness

This the story of the call of Abram and Sarai, or of Abraham and Sarah as they will be known after leaving Ur and it is a seminal scripture story. It's the start of a bigger story, one that leads to many of the stories of Jews, Christians and Moslems.

The story of the call of Sarah and Abraham is foundational in another way. It opens us to a new way of seeing the world. It gives humanity a new way of thinking about time, life, and future.

Go back for a moment to your courtyard in Ur. It's nighttime. You look up at the sky, at the moon waxing and waning, at the stars and planets moving in predictable paths, as they have season after season, year after year.

In the ancient world view, the one that you know, the night's sky was a window into the heavenly realm. The gods of Sumer and then Babylon were seen in the stars. The stars, and the gods revealed in them were regular and predictable. Everything happened in an established order. And the pattern repeated year after year, century after century. Nothing really changed.

The world of the gods revealed in the sky above was predictable and regular. The night's sky reminded the ancients that the world was predictable and orderly. The earth and our lives just reflected the heavenly reality; just as the sky was an endless predictable cycle of events, so life below was part of an endless predictable cycle. The future was as the past. There is nothing new under the sun. Nothing new under heaven.

And then... Abram went out... the author Thomas Cahill calls the words we read today in Genesis 12; "then Abram went out" ... the most significant words ever written. Sarah and Abraham broke from the predictable order of ancient life, left cyclical certainty and struck out in a new direction, following a mysterious god, into an uncertain future.

They left life lived in a predictable circle and went out in a straight line towards the unknown...

Thomas Cahill suggests that with Sarah and Abraham, all people break out of a journey of sameness into the freedom of an open future filled with promise and possibility... or at least God extends the invitation to newness to us all...

So, we are moving into a New Year, 2023... What will it bring? What challenges? What gifts? What new possibilities?

In our world, what cycles might we like to break free from? History is marked with cycles of violence, which we may long to break out from... Cycles of poverty trap people in need. In families, generational patterns persist for good and for ill.

In the pandemic many people had to work from home and in some constituencies there is hard data that showed productivity and morale improved when people left the office and worked remotely, but the pull of the old patterns is drawing people back to the office again. One public service union has written: "The frequent use of the term "return to work" when referencing the mandated return to the office for Canadian federal public servants gives us a hint as to why there's a mandate - because there's a deep cultural belief that work is an activity that belongs in an office building."

Studies in many places have shown that a 4 day work week is a good thing for both employers and employees but the old pattern of 5 days and a two day weekend is entrenched.

Providing a Basic Income for people has been proven but trial and study to break cycles of poverty in a sustainable way but conventional approaches to poverty with all their flaws and failings are followed instead.

In the church are their past practices and ways of thinking that we might need to break free of...? There are good, life giving traditions and we can learn from the wisdom of past generations, but do we feel free to break away from patterns that are no longer faithful or workable? Does God call us to work in new ways?

In Ottawa we might look with frustration at our new light rail system and its various problems. But we can always say with certainty that the train wheels of our LRT will be 4ft 8 1/2 inches apart. All train tracks in the English speaking world are 4ft 8 1/2 inches apart. Our railways were built by British expatriates and English tram ways, the precursor of trains, had wheels set 4 ft 8 1/2 inches apart. Tramways were built with tools and standards set by wagon makers who built wagons with wheels 4 ft 8 1/2 apart. Wagons were built for the rutted roads in England. The roads were first built by Roman legions to accommodate soldiers and wagons and chariots which made ruts 4ft 8 1/2 part. That width of Roman wheels was established by the width of the backsides of two warhorses being held in tandem, 4 ft 8 1/2 inches

It is easy it seems to get set in a rut, and to stay in it for a long time.

Old patterns and habits can set the course for the future. But God may also call us out into something really new. Like Sarah and Abraham we can go forth into a future of hope and newness.

The future is open with possibility. And as someone has written, "We do not know what tomorrow brings but we know who will bring tomorrow to us"

The future is in the hands of God. Hearing God`s call to newness, we can journey out into 2023 in that promise and with hope. Amen