

High St Uniting Church Frankston
Genesis 12: 1 - 9

Newness of life



The, then, Presbytery of Barwon was discussing the extension of their Youth Worker which involved all the congregations of the Presbytery contributing to a fund, and one minister disagreed quite strongly. He argued that the congregations shouldn't be putting their resources into youth, didn't they remember the story of Abraham and God's faithfulness in providing a son, and a future, even though Abraham was in his 90s and Sarah was barren. A seemingly eloquent argument that actually sidesteps the heart

of the Abram/Abraham stories. He didn't sit around doing nothing waiting for God to do something, as we heard in today's reading; "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him". The heart of the Abraham stories is Abraham's willingness to embrace newness, change, and challenge.

An unspoken part of the story of God's call on Abraham is that things weren't too bad for Abraham in Haran, where the family had stopped on their way out of Mesopotamia. He had flocks and herds, and slaves; a lot of possessions. There was no drought or famine in Haran. He had no reason to go anywhere. Until God called. And as we know from every story in scripture about God calling, it is never a call to remain the same. God calls for change, for newness, for growth. You could argue that Abram, and his father Terah and all the family had already journeyed from Ur to Haran, on their way to Canaan, and so this call to carry on and finish the journey isn't such a great challenge. But consider the whole story. Abram had been a part of a big family group in the journey to Haran, along a fertile river valley. Now, after possibly fifty years of living in Haran, he was being asked to leave the family, to leave his father's house, now run by his brother Nahor, and set out on his own, to face the hardest part of the journey. Setting aside all that we know about the nation of Israel and the land of Canaan, from looking back on this event, try to imagine the enormity of the change and challenge that God is calling for. And based not on a promise that things will be better or go well for Abram, but a distant promise of becoming a nation and being both blessed, and a blessing. It is no wonder that Abram/Abraham sits as the patriarch of faith and not just national lineage. The faith to step out into change and challenge at the call of God.

We don't all get a call from God to gather up our possessions and family and head to a new country, so how are we to understand this concept of God's call to change and growth and new life? The matching text for Abram's call in this week's Lectionary is Nicodemus's night-time visit to Jesus from John chapter 3. The delightful argument in word play about being born from above versus born again. The concept of change at the call of God being captured in this metaphor of birth. What God is asking for in response to Jesus is nothing

short of new life. Nicodemus tries to understand Jesus from within his current frame of reference about God and faith, and Jesus responds, “You need a new frame of reference, forget all you know and start a new life.” And then, intermingled in that conversation, is the further word play about Spirit and wind, and the birth metaphor being extended into baptism – born of water and the Spirit. And it’s not a logical process of ‘deserving’ or ‘earning’ or ‘the right sort of person’ determining who is called to change or welcomed into the faith – the Spirit goes where the Spirit wills. Was Abram the right person for God to choose for a new nation? Reading through the stories of Abraham’s misadventures you might begin to doubt it. But that is at the heart of the story of faith; God sees in ways that we can’t and chooses from entirely different criteria. How many times in scriptural stories do we get the “God calls but I’m not worthy” dialogue?

Extending the birth metaphor into baptism isn’t such a stretch, it isn’t just scriptural support for the sacrament. The water of baptism is not just about cleansing or refreshment or making like new. The deeper symbol is about new life – we die going into the water and are reborn on the other side. Water is for us a symbol of change and newness of life.

Last week we began our Lenten journey looking at what it means to call Jesus the Son of God, and more particularly what it doesn’t mean – that Jesus is the Son of God for our service and security, or our safety net. And this week that continues by taking up the idea that God is not calling us to remain the same; Jesus didn’t come so that we can just go on being us. The call of God is to change, to newness of life and to growth; that’s what it means to follow Jesus. In response to God’s love in Jesus we are called to step out into new life like Abram’s call to a new country. Leave your preconceptions about God and worthiness, leave your culture of image and reputation, leave your preoccupations about yourself and your comfort, and head out in faith on the way of God. All the symbols and metaphors in today’s readings – journey, calling, birth, spirit, and water – all lead us to change. Change in outlook, change in understanding of the way of Jesus, and, because it is always the way of God’s call, change in our representation of God to the world through compassion, justice, and love.