

"YOUNG ABRAHAM"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

The Book of Hebrews provides us with a one-sentence summary of the Old Testament reading for today. We read that,

"By faith...Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out...not knowing where he was to go."

But why - you might be tempted to ask - why focus on this story of Grandfather Abraham on this Sunday when we celebrate the Confirmation of two young men? Friends - possess your souls in patience - for all will be revealed.

DEVELOPMENT

At 75 plus, Abraham, to be sure is no Michael Jackson of the Pepsi generation on tour; and with all his possessions and descendants along, he's not exactly travelling light. Yet, how many of us...half his age...would be so willing to pull up stakes and take off for parts unknown? For as Dr. Schuller said in his sermon on TV two weeks ago this morning, "It takes guts to get out of ruts". (And if any of you are wondering how I know he said that, I'll tell you after the service).

But I can just hear some of the townsfolk in Haran upbraiding him. "What is this, Abraham...what gives...some wild dream, some fantasy of yours?"

"Look, Abraham, the future isn't what it used to be. You don't know where in the world you're going..."

"Abraham, have you talked this over with Sarah?" ("Maybe Sarah will talk some sense into him...maybe he's getting a bit senile...")

"What about that promising nephew of yours...what's his name. Lot? You know the one who was valedictorian in the Schul last year. Is this fair to him?"

"Although you're probably too humble to realize it, Abraham, to all of us here in Haran you've become indispensable."

To this last observation Abraham gave one of the best answers of his life. It's not recorded in Genesis, but I happen to know it. He said, "No one is indispensable, except to God."

No one is indispensable, except to God. Dig that one out of your eyes, mothers and fathers! How do you like that, senior executives and senior ministers. Sure they need us - our children, our employees, our parishioners - but not that badly. No one is indispensable...except to God, because God is the eternal Creator and requires every one of us in every corner of this world to continue the work of creation. Let me take this a few steps and sentences further.

THE CREATOR'S TASK

The Creator's task is to make humanity more human, and so he wants - more than that, he needs - each of us to affirm, to protect, to dignify life. And when you stop to think about it, who should be better suited to further the work of creation - affirming, protecting, and dignifying life - than elders like Abraham.

For elders have at their disposal memory, and memory, as Frederick Buechner reminds us:

"Is more than a looking back at a time that is no longer; it is a looking out into another kind of time altogether where everything that was continues not just to be, but to grow and change with the life that is in it still."

Memory, properly used, is a bit like a running broad jump; it takes you back only to launch you further forward. And so the senior years ideally are the formative years. Like Abraham, elders should look out and see and respond to the life that still needs to be affirmed, protected and dignified. If they look back, it should be primarily to remember - as did young Abraham - who they were created to be - God's guiltless, cared-for, and caring co-creators of this universe.

ABRAHAM'S STORY

During the month of May we pause to think about the needs of our senior citizens. And this story of Abraham is a powerful one for a year in which, in this country alone, two million citizens will be turning 65, bringing the grand total of those over 65 in America to upward of 25 million. From 1900 to 1984, life expectancy has increased from 49 to 74.5 years. And in 1984, science and daily experience are steadily destroying some of the myths about aging.

For example, contrary to popular belief, there is no automatic loss of brain cells in later life. Senility is not a sign of age, it is a sign of a disease. Senility, dementia, Alzheimer's disease - call it what you will - someday, scientists now say, like cancer we'll understand it and we'll cure it.

"Age-ism" is therefore shot full of lies - like racism, sexism and "classism". Only a fraction of "OP's" (as demographers affectionately like to refer to Old Persons) are severely disabled. In short, the expectation of decline almost becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Almost any "OP" who remains socially involved, mentally active, with a personality flexible enough to tolerate ambiguity and to enjoy new experiences, can pull up stakes and take off for parts unknown, exactly as did Abraham, if and when God calls him or her to do so.

All this should be music to old ears, and to young ones as well.

"Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be.
The last of life
For which the first was made.
Our times are in His hand
Who said, 'A whole I planned'.
Trust God. See all. Nor be afraid."

What can be worse than at 70 to look back on the springtime of your life and say "Ah, those were the days, my friend" - and be right!

HIS STORY IS OUR STORY, TOO

The story of any one of us is in some measure the story of all of us...which makes Abraham's story ours - even on this Confirmation Sunday of two young men. If we think we have no choice, then we've made the wrong choice. If we think we're too old or too young to choose, then we're wrong again.

Karl Barth was right when he said, "Better something doubtful or overbold, and therefore in need of forgiveness, than nothing at all."

I recall here a Jewish story of a man to whom all manner of misfortune befell. When he prayed to God, he asked, "Why me, O Lord, - I who have conscientiously and consistently fulfilled all of the 613 laws of the Pentateuch? Why me, Lord?" And a voice from heaven replied, "Because God would much rather have us creative than right."

I was in a building recently where I caught this message on a wall poster:

"Do not follow where the path leads. Rather go where there is no path....and leave a trail!"

And think for a moment of the trailblazers among America's suffragettes - many of whose faces were as full as Abraham's of the "credentials of humanity" - as G. B. Shaw once called wrinkles. "Credentials of humanity".

We celebrated Women's History Month, in March, I believe. For a century and a half we American males excluded an entire sex from governing what we like to call the greatest democracy in the world. It was only 64 years ago that women finally won the right to vote, and even then, for years, almost all wives probably voted as did their husbands. Don't protest; my mother voted the way my father did long after he was dead and buried, thereby cancelling her son's liberal voting tendencies - and I dare say the mothers of most of you voted the same way.

But today, thanks to those trailblazing suffragettes, for the first time in American history there is a recognizable gender gap - a 15% difference from men in the way women think and vote on a variety of issues that reflect the values and practices imposed by a white male power structure still in control of both the economy and the government.

What an explosion of needs, self-discoveries and new insights into personal and social relationships we men owe feminists who, in their time, like Abraham and Sarah before them, chose not to follow where the established paths led. Rather they went where there were no paths and left such a wonderful trail.

GOD AND CHANGE Too often we picture God as some immovable rock, when in fact it is God and God alone who never rests. I only quote the Scriptures: "He neither slumbers nor sleeps". It is God who says, "Behold, I create all things new." Therefore God's most persistent enemies must be those who are unwilling to step out and move in new directions. Yes, "Better something doubtful or overbold, and therefore in need of forgiveness, than nothing at all."

Dear confirmands and all the young people of this Church and all the young Abrahams in our midst, remember: "If you choose, you're sometimes wrong, but if you never choose, you're always wrong." And as you choose, "Go where there is no path from time to time and leave a trail".

ONE LAST THOUGHT And one last thought. You don't have to move out, as did young Abraham, to be creative, and to respond to God's call. You can be "born again" in place - born of the water, symbol of forgiveness and of the spirit, symbol of power.

It was on a day in May such as this, back in 1738 - May 24th - that John Wesley was born again - born of the spirit and was a different man thereafter. We call that Wesley's Aldersgate experience and it changed the history of a nation.

I know of a number of people who right now - today - are going through some deep waters...leaning on Jesus, struggling to keep going, to live, or die, as God would want them to. I'm astounded once more at what we human beings can do if we have to. In fact, what we can do when we have to is only matched by what we don't do when we think we don't have to. But Christians have to. We're baptized by the Water and by the Spirit - so watch out.

And so wherever we are we can take them on - these four enemies of God's creation: racism, sexism, "classism" and "age-ism". Whatever our station, whatever our age, we can be faithful by being constantly creative - affirming, protecting and dignifying - by helping God make humanity more human.

While Abraham lived through "summer's parching heat", Jesus died young; but didn't both show us that it is by its content rather than by its duration that a lifetime is measured? So let us, like young Abraham, yes, like our Saviour Jesus, be co-creators with the Creator who said, "Behold, a whole I planned". It's really quite easy. "Trust God, see all - nor be afraid."

PRAYER And now dismiss us, O God, with your blessing. As we go back into the world from which we have come, we pray that Your spirit may go with us....and that the example of Abraham may keep us young, alive and full of a spirit of adventure. All in the name of Christ, we pray.