

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Journey Through the Wilderness: Throw Away Your GPS
March 8, 2009
Lent 2009

Genesis 17:1 *When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.*

We come to Abram as an old man – 99 to be precise, and I don't mind saying, that is old. Abram is the grand old man of the Old Testament, for that matter, all the Bible. Christians and Jews trace back our respective spiritual heritage to this patriarch of the faith. Abram will be known as Abraham, father Abraham actually, and his name will be great from generation to generation, including to this present generation.

But right now, he is just an old man, and he and Sarai still have no children. Sarai, by the way, is no spring chicken herself. She is 90. This is the age when one has a right to slow down and let others do all the heavy lifting. At 90, it is completely acceptable to sit in the rocking chair, while the children and grandchildren get dinner ready, and the neighbors cut your grass, and someone else drives you to the grocery store. Ninety, however, is not the typical age to start planning a family.

Abram and Sarai are well along in years; old and childless and also landless. Their investments have not worked out like they planned. Instead of retiring and taking stock in all that they have amassed in nearly a century of living, they are aliens, without a home of their own.

When we pick up with their lives in this story, God sounds like a stockbroker huckster or a slick visiting preacher, by making what sounds like foolish promises. God says, Abram, your name will be great. In fact, God changes his name to Abraham, which means "ancestor of a multitude." Inexplicably God does the same thing for Sarai too. She is renamed Sarah. These old-timers get new names and new promises including children, lands, and generations of nations that will call them their own.

Right now, however, all we have and all we know is that these two are sojourning through the wilderness without a peg on which to hang their hat. All they have is a promise, new names, and a name for God: *El Shaddai* – the Hebrew name that means, God Almighty.

I wonder if Abram and Sarai wanted more exact plans on how all this would take place? In fact, a bit later in the story, Abraham responds to God in verse 17 by falling on his face and laughing – did I mention this was in front of God? "Oh, that is a good one, God, Sarai and I wrinkled like prunes and old as dust, are going to be in the labor and delivery wing of the hospital next year. Very funny." Perhaps God joined in their laughter and with a wry smile said, "No, I am serious." It is all just too unbelievable, these wild claims of God for their lives.

Abraham would be justified by insisting for more exact directions, instead of this meandering in the wilderness. It is a good thing a GPS was not yet invented.

Most of you know what a GPS – or Global Positioning System – is, and many of you own one. I do not own one, but if anyone needed one, it would be me. I get lost going home. Amy and I had one in a car we rented a couple of weeks ago, and I must admit they are handy devices. Not only will it give you exact directions to where you want to go, it will gauge your direction, estimated time of arrival, distance before your next turn, and all with a friendly voice. By the way, I can still get lost and take wrong turns with a GPS.

Wouldn't life be great if we had a GPS to guide us? *Turn right here...take a left there...prepare to slow down...in two more miles you stop...* Even when we take a wrong turn in life – and of course, we all lose our way from time to time – have a voice tell us, *turn around...make a U-turn at the next intersection.* Instead, we are not much different than Abraham: aged feet in the desert, wilderness with little more than a promise and a hope.

I ask you, what guides you when you face the crossing of something big, even insurmountable, in your life? You, the college student – what gives you direction when you are asked to choose a major, choose a career, or choose a relationship? You, the good son, what gives you direction as you contemplate healthcare decisions for your aging mother? You, the young family, what gives you direction as you face raising your family, paying your bills, and providing, all the while, with the threat of a diminishing paycheck? What is it that gives you direction when the maps are no longer up to date, when there is no GPS to tell you clearly where to go, and you find yourself in new territory and the prospect of a wilderness sojourn is terrifying?

This is Abram and Sarai—Abraham and Sarah. And so, we have a right, indeed a duty, to ask what kept these two senior citizens going, after all those years, as they faced the vast wilderness of the unknown?

Abraham remembers which is sort of ironic. We clumsily assume that when you get old you forget or you at least have permission to forget. Not Abraham – he *remembers*. Abraham remembers that he is the custodian of a promise from God. While he was promised all kinds of material things – land, children, and that he would be a father to the nations – Abraham was promised that **God would be God** to Abraham and his descendants.

Like most any promise, God's promise would require Abrahams accepting and acting on the promise. God's words would not be wholly comforting or easy, "*Go from your country,*" says God, "*and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you.*"

Sacred journeys often begin with separation – leaving something behind.

The promise of God is not simply about treasures or things, but a claim. All relationships, at their core, are based on nothing more than a promise. When I officiate a wedding, which I am often blessed to do, I ask the bride and groom the question that was asked of Amy and me on our wedding day: *do you promise to take one another as husband and wife, to be faithful, to love in all circumstance, until death parts you?* A promise holds a relationship together when the world throws its worst at you. A promise sustains when the bottom drops out, when the health fails, when time moves from good and blissful, to terribly wrong. Take away everything from a marriage, and all you really have is a promise. And if you believe, the promise is enough. It is enough.

The Hebrew name, *El-Shaddai*, can be translated as God Almighty. Yet, language scholars confess they are not completely sure. It is a mysterious word, and deep within the layers of etymology, behind *El-Shaddai*, it also means or implies "enough," as in God is enough. In the Bible, Job uses this name for God more than anyone else in all of scripture. Job, the very embodiment of long suffering, called God *El-Shaddai* – Almighty, Enough. Abraham remembers the promise of *El-Shaddai* and that is enough.

Oh, I am certain that Abraham thought of his home, his place, his friends, and people that he and Sarah left behind. I imagine him musing over the corner café, where he would take his coffee with his old cronies, where they would discuss politics and market prices. Perhaps, Abraham had a favorite tree that he would rest beneath during the scorching afternoons.

Many of you are traveling the same road as Abraham and Sarah. You have moved or contemplating a move. Your job may require it. Or, maybe your children are concerned for you and want you near them, where they can look after you. Perhaps you are considering making the transition to an assisted living facility. It takes a lot of courage getting older, of this I am certain. You remember your past, perhaps more glorious in memory

than reality, but it is your memory.

We all are sojourning forward, and while glancing back, we also have a call to move forward. I am certain that from time to time Abraham thought of his past that he left behind, and no doubt missed aspects of his former life. But Abraham remembered that God would be God to him, and that kept him oriented and centered, balanced, amidst desert disorientation.

Dear one, what is it that you remember when confronted by the banal landscape of “not-yet-fulfilled” promises? The hope of God’s good news is to transform forgetters into “rememberers” of God’s claim, that “God will be God to you.”

When we find ourselves clinging desperately and anxiously to our idols of security and our illusions of prosperity, we forget. When we forget and find ourselves in the inevitable wilderness, our hope in God’s claim seems laughable at best.

When we forget God’s name, we forget God’s claim, and soon others will name and claim us. Throughout this story we have read and heard much of God naming: first God states, *I am El-Shaddai* – Almighty, Enough. Then God gives both Abram and Sarai their new names: Abraham and Sarah. Perhaps what is most important to remember when we find ourselves wandering or lost or simply trekking through the wilderness is that when God names us, God claims us. “I will be God to you...”