

## **“Finding Direction in the Chaos that Surrounds Us?”**

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman  
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury  
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Genesis 17:1-7 and Mark 8:31-38

It has captured a generation’s empathy and commitment. Especially so among grandmothers themselves in the northern and western hemispheres, as they see the need for grandmothers, even great-grandmothers, to be called out from their regular household duties (which in and of themselves may be immense) to care for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren all over Africa, where generations have been wiped out due to the AIDS virus.

There is a reason most of us have our children by the age of 40. It is hard work raising children, and while it is never easy having sleepless nights with a feverish child, or consoling a young one facing scary dreams, it is a bit easier to handle when one is under 40 and not over 60 or 70 or even older.

I have several friends who now have a second family of pre-schoolers or primary aged children, and I marvel at their courage to enter into that pathway, and am thankful that is not my lot at the present moment.

And so in that mix we have the story of Abram and Sara who, in their later years, are called upon to change land, build a new people, and start all over.

It is easy to dismiss the story as a fabrication, or at least a stretch of the truth. Who, after all, can do all of this in their 90’s?

Then we need only remember that Hazel McCallion retired as Mayor of Mississauga just shy of her 94<sup>th</sup> birthday, and Robert Mugabe, a controversial figure to understate the truth, but nonetheless presiding at a huge celebration of his Presidency in Zimbabwe at age 91, still very much in charge in his country.

And so, is it all that unexpected and impossible that a whole new tradition and people began with a couple named Abram and Sara advanced in years?

It is my experience that the biggest divide in life is not so much age (although there usually are some basic things that change as we age – we may not be able to move quite as fast or our hearing may not be as acute as it once was, or our sight needs to be aided by glasses, or our limbs appreciate support as we move about), but life is not so much about age as it is attitude.

We have people who are interested in what is around them, and those who are not; we have people concerned about the world, and those oblivious to what is happening in the world; we have those who want to make a difference, and those who are indifferent to what is happening.

But how do we handle the chaos and uncertainty?

David Rickey, an Episcopal priest from San Francisco, suggests that the divine presence works like a sheep dog amidst the flock, bumping and circling, guiding, chastising and protecting us as we stumble through changes in our life, and new circumstances in the world around us.

When all seems chaotic, Father Rickey continues, “I try to step back and realize there is an unseen process going on that is infinitely trustable – it is the reason behind the universe.”

Mahatma Gandhi is credited with making famous the phrase “Be the change you want to see.”

Abram and Sara were just that – they became the change that God wanted to see through them, and the change that renewed the world around them.

Now we know that each one of us can face challenges, or do everything we can to avoid challenges, and to miss whatever demands come our way within our lives.

Surely that was what Jesus experienced when he turned to Peter in today’s gospel passage. I am not so sure Peter was the “Satan” of the story as Jesus blurted out toward Peter “Get behind me, Satan.” Jesus would not be that judgmental of any one person, certainly not one who played such a key role in the early work of the disciples.

No, Jesus rather heard in the words of Peter a temptation that was ringing in his own head, a temptation that sounded something like: “I do not need to expend a lot of effort in this life, and I do not need to worry about what I might face – I can be oblivious to the demands and heartache that others face.”

That was, for Jesus, the temptation of the devil. Go look for the easy way, without hassle or expectations upon his life. Have you ever felt that way?

We all have those moments, I suspect, when we are more interested in our own comfort than in our clear role in life. Most of the time, we shake ourselves into a new awareness and refocus our lives on what is right. At the extreme, tragedy may hit and everything comes crumbling down.

Like the story of Susan Smith, who reported her children had been hi-jacked in October 1994 before it was revealed she had in fact drowned them in a local lake, a week after being spurned by a man who told her he was not interested in having children. In her own absurd logic, as a single mother struggling to manage a challenging life, Smith thought if she no longer had her children, there was a chance to enter into this relationship and life would be better.

Rarely are the choices as dramatic and twisted as this was, but we all have faced times when we think that we can turn despair into hope with a shift in what is happening around us. “My life would be better,” we try to convince ourselves, “if I did not have to worry about some of these people who bother and upset me.”

Chaos can only reign in our lives, and in the world, if we refuse to see we have a responsibility to make a difference.

Communion celebrates the life of Jesus. It defies those who thought his crucifixion would end the power of the Jesus movement, and it even flies in the face of his followers who thought that any sign of suffering would be a weakness, and so if Jesus suffered there would be no reason to see hope in his message. In suffering, the value of what he taught, how he lived, or what he shared would be lost.

Both concepts were false.

The death of Jesus did not kill the Jesus movement; it only showed that it was worth listening to. And suffering did not scare those who followed Jesus, but rather it only made them more dedicated to the purpose to which he called them.

As we enter into this service of communion today, may we feel encouraged in all that we do, supported in what we face, and willing to be a presence in the world that seeks to make a difference.

May we be people who not simply worship the Christ, but honour his teachings by what we say and do in his name.