

“Wait a minute. I have a question.”

**A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury
Sunday February 21, 2016 by Catherine Somerville**

For his present on the day of his 75th birthday, a man known as Abram was given a dream. It may not seem like much of a present, but it was enough to spur Abram into packing up his tools, corralling the animals, gathering the cooking pots and extra blankets, and taking his family on the road.

His beloved, Sarai, no spring chicken herself, went along. We are not told her thoughts on the whole idea of moving. But the two, accompanied by servants, a nephew, and herds of animals, traveled for quite some time. They passed through Haran in the land of Canaan, to Shechem, where Abram had dream #2, and this time God whispered that all this land would one day be his.

It proved to be a really good motivator. They packed up again and went to Bethel, then into the Negeb desert. Even though they wandered, they really didn’t need a map, because they simply learned to recognize the pull of God on their hearts, so the more they moved, the more they learned to follow its lead, not knowing exactly what the outcome would be. Truth was, they got so good at packing that they paired down their possessions to a tent full of just the necessities. They could be on the road again in a moment’s notice.

Difficult years came, and they moved, this time to Egypt. There was a famine. Sarai was taken into the Pharaoh’s household. They prospered. Things went well until Pharaoh’s wandering eye fell on Sarai, so they were evicted, and they made their way back to Bethel. The nephew went his own way. Abram grew more prosperous, and all this time, God kept whispering into his dreams that one day, Abram’s offspring would be more plentiful than all the dust covering the earth. All this land will one day be yours, was the way the whisper sounded.

Imagine, descendants as plentiful as the dust in your house. What a scary, scary thought.

Once, long ago, the two of them had talked about what it would be like to have kids crawling all over them, night time feedings, crying, laughing, playing with

their children, watching them grow. But nothing happened. Except that pesky dream. So Abram and Sarai got used to quiet evenings together by the fire.

It was just as well that there were no children. Abram was completely done in at the end of the day, and when he tried to read after supper, Sarai found him dozing more often than not. She wasn't much better. Her knees ached every morning, and when she dropped a spoon, it turned into a lengthy ordeal of cranking herself down and up again. She couldn't possibly contend with a toddler.

They would have given up; they were well into their eighties at this point, but God kept whispering. That was the pattern. God spoke. Abram listened. God promised. Abram believed. God commanded. Abram obeyed.

But not this time. Abram bursts like a creek overtaking its banks in the spring flooding. "Now wait a minute. I have a question. God, I don't know what you see in my life, that I don't see, but I can't figure how you are going to work all of this out. There are some pretty big obstacles here. I need more information."

Through the travels, the troubles and all the tests, Abram has grown bolder, stronger, more courageous, and more faithful.

It's his faith that makes him move beyond silent obedience. He has to ask, "How can this be?"

Then, his questions start to sound more like complaints. "Are you going to give me what I really want, God? Is a slave going to be my heir?"

What a moment this turns out to be. For we learn in those questions that one of the pieces about faithfulness is asking. There is room for doubt and uncertainty. Abram, and every one of us since, have struggled with disappointment and frustration. When the questions come, and we find ourselves asking 'Why', know that this is not a crisis of your faith. Too often, people are tempted to think of faith only as unquestioning acceptance or even silent submission, but today we are offered an alternative view that is so much more healthy and life-giving. Abram has come to the place where he can't sit quiet one minute longer. He challenges God. And his questions make all the difference in the world.

God must have realized that whispers and dreams weren't going to cut it. So, God invited Abram to go outside, and look at the stars. "Count them, if you think you can," God said, "and imagine every one of them calling you Grandpa, for so shall your descendants be."

The star promise helped. We are told that Abram believed. He's ready to take the next step forward, in confidence that God's promise will actually determine the course of his life.

We are not told exactly what he believes...that he will have a child? That God can be trusted? That there are lots and lots of stars in the sky?

I don't suppose Abram completely understood. He doesn't have all the answers yet. But he does believe enough to remember that God is faithful and true. Based on that assurance, he commits to following again.

But he is bolder now. His is a questioning faithfulness, a seeking after more. He is not whining, saying things like "God, when am I going to get what I want to be happy? What do I have to do to feel content?" It's not like that for him. He knows God's presence and power in his life, and he is choosing to remain open to the leading. He questions because he deeply believes that God can do something about his troubles. And he learns to take the next steps on his journey.

I saw that sort of faith lived out this past week. I was called to do a funeral for a family who have no connection to a church. They had just gone through the worst possible week, and now a minister was sitting at their kitchen table, talking about planning a funeral. They didn't know what to say to me. They weren't church people, so the conversation was rather awkward. They really didn't have any idea of what scripture to use or if they needed hymns in the service. They could not articulate any understanding of a faith that could help them through this valley. But at end of our time together, I asked them if I could pray with them. They said yes- what an incredible thing for them to say! So we held hands and talked to God about broken hearts and mountains of questions and tons of uncertainty. And we prayed that they would be able to hear the words of comfort and concern that they were going to be hearing in the days ahead. We prayed that they would remember that they were not alone in this disaster. We prayed for light to help them pick their way through the darkness. Then we said our Amens, and they invited me to have a cup of tea. It was OK now to have a

minister sitting at their kitchen table, for together we had found a way to talk about holy things.

That's what faith looks like to me. Room for questions. Room for doubts. But also allowing room for openings, and goodness and allowing your community to help lead you through it all. Room enough to trust that it will be OK, not fine thanks, life will never be the same for this family again, but it will be OK, for they have do have something deep inside to draw on. They proved it to themselves. They didn't need to prove it to me. They might call it Love or Memory, not God, but Love, Memory, the gifts of God, have been given to them and equipping them with the energy to help them through.

In this holy season of Lent, we are offered chances to think about our own faithfulness and consider how others have lived and responded to God's call. Today, we are told that questions are good and necessary, for they will lead us deeper into the ways of God. We also learn that we can be the sort of people who choose to live expectantly, knowing that God's promises of life, and hope and future are extended to us in Jesus, the one who was not afraid of the questions others brought, and even asked questions himself. Such faithfulness allows us to take a step, then one more, as we follow the pulling of God on our own hearts.

Lent is the time in our lives when God is inviting to believe, even in the dark. Look at the stars in the sky, for they are a reminder of goodness and blessing, and they will guide your way.

May ours be a star-gazing, looking, listening, questioning, open and curious faith, with room aplenty for growth and change. May we each seek out ways to listen to our lives. And as we look and listen, may we continue to have courage enough to push towards the openings God has placed in our paths. May we travel together, knowing that God is with us and we are not alone.

Sources used:

Gospel Medicine, Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley Publications, 1995. Pages 35-36.

The Abington Preaching Annual, 2004, Abington Press, 2003. Pages 102-104.

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