

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
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Upon college graduation, my best friend and I spent our cash gifts on a 4 month, 15,000 mile trip across South America. Flying south, we stopped first at my uncle David's in Puerto Rico. Union Carbide had posted him in Ponce. Our tiny plane survived a wind shear and we outlasted the cabbie unable to find their address. By 11 pm we stood with our backpacks at their gate. I heard their southern drawl radiating from inside their open-air home. "David and Dee," I yelled, "we're here!"

They ventured outside, smiling. They carried our backpacks inside. They asked if we were hungry or thirsty. We described the day's challenges with flight and cab. "Well, that's great," David said. "So glad you are safe. Just one question: *who are you?*" The letter I wrote them months before never arrived. "I'm Dale, Margaret's middle son." "*Oh, Dale, it's you.*" They embraced us again. Consider how they opened their hearts, home, and hospitality to strangers, all as a matter of trust. David and Dee remind me more than a little of Abraham and Sara's trusting faith.

We heard God say to Abram: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.' So Abram went, as God had told him. Abraham was 75 years old when he left Haran..."

In ch. 15, long after Abraham left home without knowing his destination, he finally *believed* in this God. God reassured Abraham he would have an heir, that Sara would not go childless, even in their 70's. At this, Abraham "believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness." Notice that Abraham and Sara acted faithfully before they could understand or believe. Like David and Dee, understanding and belief arrived only after they willingly stepped out in faith.

Faith is all about courage to step out like this. In the NT book of Hebrews, it says of Abraham, he set out "not knowing where he was going." Albert Camus said, "Sometimes you have to get 100% behind something you only believe in 51%."

Clearly we are dealing with an amazing couple. Abraham could have stayed content with everything familiar: homeland, culture and family. It would have been a pleasantly inconsequential life. Or he could step out and risk becoming a greater blessing to sweep the face of the earth. That demanded forsaking ties that deeply defined him. This is indeed the Abrahamic revolution: letting the one true God invisibly direct our life and loyalties even more than visible comforts and kin.

My message today is if we let God take us beyond our usual relationships, the familiar life we've always known, we can become part of something truly great. How great? you ask. God led Abraham outside his tent and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you're able to count them." The stars are the limit. Sometimes when we act faithfully, trustingly, belief catches up with us later.

Abraham made that hard choice and we all reaped the fullness of God's blessing.

There's an immediate and broader application of this essential lesson here today. The most immediate application is the baptism just celebrated. One of the most winning parts of the baptism is right after the sprinkling as I walked Mac around. Isn't he a stunning child? Isn't it lovely to welcome a family as handsome as the Boulier's? But guess what, something greater also happens during this little walk.

The deeper, hidden meaning of that moment is taking the newborn beyond his familiar field of blood relations into his spiritual family, the church of Jesus Christ. This walk acknowledges that alone by ourselves no two parents, no one family, is enough. Parenting is too difficult. The stakes with our precious children are high. Shaping people of character and faith requires the efforts of many. Acknowledging the insufficiency of any two parents alone, many reinforcements get enlisted.

In effect, the Boulier's trust us with the most vulnerable and precious parts of their life without knowing and interviewing us all for the job. Katherine has a long history here. She was a Junior Deacon attending Deacon meetings for four years during high school. Still, that was a while ago. Chuck is newer to FCC, Darien.

Call them crazy, if you like. But that's how baptism works. We step out in faith together for greater glory. In some ways, baptismal waters are thicker than blood. Sometimes we step out trustingly in faith only to grasp and fully embrace it later. That's a microcosm meaning of Abraham and Sarah. But here's the macrocosm.

It involves all of us and the surrounding culture beyond us. Consider how deeply the relationship of the world and the church has changed within our lifetime. It is no less than sea change, a tectonic shift, the ground shifting beneath our feet. In a word, the world into which I was born and baptized is utterly different than the world little Mac has been born and baptized. The more we want to pretend that hasn't happened, that all the old rules still apply, that we can merely open our doors and people will stream in like the Fifties, the more we risk shrinking away.

The era of American Christendom is over. I did not say American Christianity is over, it is not. I am saying the privileged place of mainline churches like ours as the religious establishment for the surrounding culture has ended. In place of the modern, progressive era whose hallmark values are reason, self-sufficiency, and optimism, a new pluralistic and secular post-modern culture is today put in place. The passing of American Christendom means we no longer own the franchise on religion. In fact, there is really is no franchise other than the spiritual but not religious sorting through the self-help section at Barnes and Noble or Amazon.com.

We can see the impact of this in multiple ways without necessarily naming them. Why are our Church School attendance and class numbers down, despite the fine leadership of our teachers? we ask. Why is it so much more draining to find the energy, resources and audience to put on our Antique Show? we wonder.

Why is it a growing annual struggle to staff boards and committees every year? Those recruiting scratch their heads. Why does it feel like we must depend on the same people to do the same things year after year? What will happen to those ministries when the few burn out? It's not just here, believe me. It is everywhere.

The temptation is to jump at quick technical fixes. We need new curriculum for Church School. That will fix it. We need to get out the nice silver and china for the Preview Party. That will fix it. We need to clarify the duties of committees in the by-laws, we affirm. That'll bring in leaders. Some churches create a revolving door for staff, looking for whiz bang, charismatic leaders to revivify the old order. Believe me, we have a fine staff. Something bigger is needed than any quick fix.

Way beyond our technical fixes we need adaptive change. This distinction is from Ron Heifetz in his *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Technical work is characterized by clearly defining a problem then clearly defining the solution. But what if we don't yet know the right questions to ask? Simple problem solving won't work.

Adaptive work isn't so cut and dried. In some cases, the answers may be known. But in many cases, the solution requires a deeper inventory of invisible forces at work around us, forces we prefer to ignore, changing our world. Adaptive work requires willingness to alter our self-perception and internal life, the imagination and creativity to see new modes replacing dated ones and shift in church culture.

Christianity is far from over. Globally, it remains vital. But it awaits renewal on our own shores. It is a difficult, awkward moment in the history of churches like ours. Of course, such challenges as these are really only veiled opportunities for new forms of faithfulness. Or, as theologian Walter Brueggemann puts it, "The world for which God has carefully prepared you has been removed...Praise be to God!"

Why does he sound cheerful? Isn't this depressing? He's a biblical theologian. He understands how Abraham and Sarah left everything familiar behind, trusted God, and started anew at age 75. He understands what an extreme risk it was for them to venture thousands of miles back in the days of old tribal societies, when the kin group was the only source of identity, income, security, and protection. It's hard for moderns to fathom how much Abraham and Sarah exposed themselves.

No less is asked of us in our era. We move into unfamiliar landscapes with the same Bible and Gospel we have always known. We should be no more daunted by this alien world than they were. I have seen this coming a long time. We can do this. For God goes with us out into the unknown. So I end on a note of hope. Now the earnest work of building begins. I dare to believe the best is yet to come. Amen.