Sermon 03-08-20

Plot Twists

Genesis 12:1-4a

In 1997, there was this struggling Internet startup company, some of you may recognize the name, I think they called it **GRAPHIC: Amazon**. Well, Amazon was losing money hand over fist. Many people weren’t ready to purchase books over the Internet. Many didn’t even know there was such a company.

In an effort to get readers to visit the website, Amazon invited noted author John Updike to begin and end a mystery story. He submitted the opening to a novel he’d begun in 1960 and never finished, about a magazine editor named Miss Tasso Polk. For each of the next 45 days, the public was invited to submit the story’s next paragraph**. GRAPHIC: Thousands entered every day, and each day’s winner won a thousand dollars.** The next day’s contestants returned daily for the next month and a half to see what strange new direction the story had taken and how they might respond. Often the story seemed to pin prospective writers into a corner, even reaching a dead end. “Now *you* get out of this mess,” each author seemed to say.

With 45 different authors’ new paragraphs pieced together, the story took many twists and turns. “The strangest twist,” Updike remembered, “was when Miss Polk gets into a taxi and is driven, in short order, to an estate with a cobbled driveway and a grove of boxwoods and elms. Elms! In Manhattan!”

But eventually the story was finished, the mystery was solved, and thanks to the ending written by Updike, all was well!1

**Written into a corner**

Now think about the book of Genesis. By the 12th chapter of that biblical book, history has been written into a corner. The several human actors who wrote their own parts of the saga through their free will had created so many twists and turns that God’s story seemed to have been written into a dead end!

Despite God’s creation of a stable and reliable universe, disobedience had forced humanity out of the Garden of Eden. One brother killed another, and evil spread. **GRAPHIC: Genesis 6:5 says, “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.”** God despaired because of humanity’s evil and wiped the slate — and the earth — clean through a flood. Then the boundary between parents and children was breached through the actions of Noah and one of his sons. And mortals in their vanity built a tower in order to storm heaven and make themselves little “g” gods. But soon Babel was in ruins and the people were confused.

The human actions in these first 11 chapters seem to have left God’s plans in tatters. And then, to top it all, Terah leaves Ur of the Chaldeans for what would one day be the promised land, gets halfway there and stops. One of his sons dies, leaving behind an orphaned Lot. Another son, Abram, and his wife are incapable of bearing children.

So here is Abram, with no future. Like the John Updike story, God’s story seems to have been painted into a corner because of the twists and turns of human actors in history. Dead end.

**Answering God’s call**

Yet it is this very family that God calls into a glorious future!

Abram and Sarai respond to God’s call. Perhaps this is because they feel incomplete. This call takes place against a background of human need. Abram and Sarai desire something more than security, prosperity and safety; **GRAPHIC: they want children**. Much human action begins with a felt need. Otherwise, why would anyone pick up stakes and move away from home and family to a distant land? Dissatisfaction is a powerful motivator.

The root of the story of the United States is to be discovered in human need. Whether we are new to this continent or have been here several generations, many of our family histories began with a perilous journey to a new world. Religious dissenters traveled from Europe to America, exposing themselves not only to the crossing, but to the near certainty that they would never see their loved ones again. Economic refugees came to America for a new life with new possibilities. Those whose story had reached a dead end sought a new beginning. Many of these left behind their mother tongue and their fatherland.

While many of us are not called to take a similar perilous crossing for our faith, we may be undertaking a spiritual journey, challenging ourselves at the urging of the Spirit to cross economic, ethnic or other boundaries in order to serve God more authentically.

But not everyone has made, or makes, such a journey. The fear of the uncertain future can be so strong that we may find it difficult to change. Some of us prefer the stalemate or even the hell we know to the possibility of a new beginning because it is so uncertain.

One thing is certain: Abram and Sarai are not the heroes we might expect in an epic movie: two young lovers about to set out on a great quest. They are more than mature. They have the marks of age. But these are the marks of beauty as well. God looks beyond age. In the scriptures, we see not only the young but the middle-aged and the elderly called to God’s service.

What Abram and Sarai share is of more value than fleeting health and youth. By answering God’s call, they have a purpose. The poem “Sailing to Byzantium,” by William Butler Yeats, begins, “That is no country for old men.” Describing a world of young people, a vibrant creation inhabited by creatures of earth, sea and sky in active exaltation, the poet continues:

***GRAPHIC: An aged man is but a paltry thing,***

 ***A tattered coat upon a stick ...***

It’s a pretty grim picture. At least until the poet adds a crucial word: “unless”!

***... unless***

***Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing ....***

When our soul claps hands and sings, and sings even louder — when we have a new vision — we embrace a new life, whether we are young, old or in between!

**At any age**

For example, **GRPAHIC: the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921-2007),** long before old age, had established a formidable reputation for herself as a cultural anthropologist, having published 15 weighty and highly respected texts on various subjects beginning in 1950. Then in her late 70s and early 80s, she turned her attention to the Bible and wrote about Numbers and Leviticus, applying what she had observed around the world regarding codes of clean and unclean. She discovered real insights into what meaning these biblical books still have for our lives today!

In the book of Proverbs, we read: **GRAPHIC: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”2** Having a vision for life is crucial. But it’s even more important to act on that vision. God’s plan for Abram and Sarai is cosmic as well as inspiring. Everything will be changed. God will grant the two descendants beyond number. God will bless them, and bless those who bless them and curse those who curse them. Indeed, “... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,” God tells Abram.

But for this to happen Abram and Sarai have to act! Archaeologists have discovered scientific marvels that originated thousands of years ago — batteries, astronomical computers, speculation about advanced science — but these did not change the ancient world because they were never developed or generally used. The ancients — or rather, the rich and powerful in the ancient world — were content to build a world on the backs of slaves and the very poor.

God offered Abram and Sarai a vision of a world transformed by his promises — promises so powerful that they carry through even to today, when we, too, are offered an epic vision of a world transformed. This time — and supremely — the transformation happens through the truth of Jesus’ resurrection. Despite the many twists and turns of history caused by human sin, there is great possibility for transformation and salvation — provided we’re willing to act on God’s promise!

**We can say yes or no**

But if God gives us the opportunity to say yes to the vision and the promise, God is also willing to let us say no.

There’s a marvelous scene in the novel *The Lord of the Rings:* **GRAPHIC:The two hobbits, Sam and Frodo,** on a seemingly impossible and hopeless quest, have forced their way to the edge of the evil land of Mordor. They are taking their rest before the final hopeless push, when Sam muses aloud that in some ways they have found themselves in a story of the sort he had enjoyed listening to when he was younger. He says at one time, he thought the people in great stories went out and sought such great adventures. **GRAPHIC: Now, he admits: “I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten.”3**

Implicit in this scripture is that Abram also could have said no. As could Mary when she was approached by Gabriel, or Elisha when called by Elijah, or Isaiah or Jeremiah if they’d stuck to their guns when arguing with God that they were too sinful or too young. But the ones we know about, the ones that made the cut and are in scripture, weren’t perfect, or perfectly handsome and beautiful, or even admirable 100 percent of the time.

But they saw the vision, and they said yes.

God is still creating a future through speech. It was by a word that the world was called into being. God’s word created a future for Abram where none had existed before. God’s Word made flesh came to save the world. God promises life!

**GRAPHIC: Say yes to the vision**. You are one of the descendants of Abram and Sarai, through whom God means to bless all the families of the earth. God’s story includes an ending of wonder and joy and peace, incorporating the paragraph each of us writes into this great saga, with an ending to cap all endings.

Let your soul clap its hands and sing! Let your light shine before all people! **GRAPHIC: Say yes! Get up and go!**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1 For more about the Amazon/John Updike mystery story, see *The New Yorker,* September 29, 1997, 31-32*.*

2 Proverbs 29:18, KJV.

3 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (50th Anniversary One-Volume Edition), 711.

Scripture Reading for Sunday, 3-8-20

Genesis 12:1-4a

Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’\*

4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.