

Gen 12:1 – 4, 17: 1-14 **“Imagine what is possible”** (07/24/11)

- by Rev. Peter Dennebaum -

After Christian Witness Reading (Matt) & the Hymn “Praise with Joy the World’s Creator”:

Stepping down to the congregation:

Liberation Theology changed my life. I was in High School when I heard the first time about it. I learned that in catholic Basic Ecclesial Communities, so called BEC’s, poor and oppressed started to read together the bible, discussing how the stories of the bible could help them in their fight for justice and peace – in anticipation of and already as participation at God’s promised kin-dom.

This was the moment when I felt that I was called to ministry.

As minister I always read the sermon text in unison with the congregation. The text belongs to us all; it is OUR text!

After we will have read the text together and after we have will have heard the choir singing for us the Anthem I will ask you now always as first part of the sermon, what has become important to you. You are then all invited to speak out loud the sentence, the phrase or the word, which has become important you while reading.

Might this be the first step of our own liberation.

You are now invited to speak out loud the sentence, phrase or sentence, which has become important to you while reading. Repetitions are always welcome as they only show that something is important for several of us.

God's peace with you!

Please pray with me:

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, □ o God, my strength and my redeemer. □ Amen.

I will not hide myself behind you – I picked for myself the first sentence. “God said to Abram: ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’”

This sentence is for me important in a double sense – individually as person, who left 5 years ago himself country and kindred. And as your Intentional Interim Minister, chosen by you to help you to discover the ministry you are called to do now and in future.

The Abram story sounds so damned easy: God calls, Abram obeys prompt and his wife follows without complaints. If one thing is for sure: This doesn't sound very realistic at all.

Interesting at this story is the untold story behind it: The story of all the fears, the doubts, the struggles.

Let me ask you: Who in this sanctuary is an immigrant? ... You all did what Abram did: You left country and kindred. You left your “fathers house”, the rooms you grew up in, the neighbors children and families, the friends. I don’t know how it is with you, but I am not sure, if I ever would have left my home country, if I had known, how many hurdles I would have to overcome. Who ever does this radical decision of leaving home and to move must be naïve – or must have a lot of faith. ...Or both.

I would give a lot to know more about the untold story behind our Abram saga [sage]. How did he manage to make everybody leave? Did he sit with his family around the lunch table, cutting the meat in portions as my dad did when I was young and mentioning casually: “Ah, by the way: Yesterday God called in. We shall leave. To Kanaan. Around 700 miles linear distance. I will become a great nation. We are leaving tomorrow.” I mean, what would you have said? Maybe: “Dad, I know it was late last night, and you had some drinks with your friends – why don’t we talk tomorrow again about it?” How do you think his wife reacted? I can picture her, looking at him from the side, shaking the head, thinking: “Pumpkin ... - you are 75 years old ... what on earth are you thinking???”

I can imagine that it took Abram quite a while to convince his family and to make them going. Or maybe not? ... What finally might have brought them to leave everything behind and to move on?

First: Abram was used to move. And also his wife Sarai. In the last verses of chapter 11 we learn that Abrams father Terach took both, who were already married, and his grand child Lot, the son of his son Haran, who had passed away and that all four travelled from Ur [Oer] in today's Iraq around 800 miles northwest to Harran at the southern Turkey border, close to today's Syria.

This sounds familiar to me. When I was young my parents used to take my 3 little brothers and me year for year on a 2 week long bike ride vacation - from youth hostel to youth hostel. Today I go all two years to another congregation, serving as Intentional Interim, preaching the story of Abram, who had the courage to leave his homeland, trusting in the word of God that a new world is possible.

Second. Abram followed a concrete vision, promised by God against all reality. "Imagine what is possible" was the theme of the 28th UCC General Synod in Tampa, Florida, beginning of this month. "Imagine what is possible" is my motto for my ministry with you. "Imagine what is possible" – in a few weeks a stole will be delivered with this motto on it – it is in this moment in production and it will visualize this motto for us on many Sundays to come.

Third. Moving is always a happening with mixed feelings. We always leave people behind. We need to say good-bye. You said last week good-bye to Bob. I heard the worships on Saturday and Sunday and the Saturday night dinner were very impressive and touching. It is important to acknowledge relationships, which has grown over the years.

But it would be also pretty odd, if everybody would be in the same way sad. Some might feel more relieved. The variety of feelings is typical for situations of transitions. We need to talk about these feelings openly and opportunities to do so will be created together with church council. We human beings are too intelligent to block emotions simply out – not worked through they will come back in form of conflicts – but then activated usually subconsciously and much more difficult to handle than an open and open inventory of our feelings, appraisals where this church is on its journey and the hope you have for the church - for yourself as church member as well as for the church as its whole.

This point brings me to personal point. I can imagine that Abram and his family had many discussions before they went on the journey as well as during the long travelling. And it might have taken them 2 years to get to their destination.

Also we will be for the next 2 years together on a journey. But in opposite to Abram I will leave you after this time. I am only John the

Baptist. I am not the one you will call then in as your new settled minister. We don't know, if you want to call in then a male or female, straight person or a gay or transgender one. We don't know yet, which criteria you want to see fulfilled by this person –beside the masters of divinity.

But this one thing is for clear: I just can be as effective as you allow me to become part of your system! This Interim Period is YOUR time. It should be a GOOD time. A time, in which we try new things. Sometimes it will feel like a massage; ...You know how this works: When the masseur works on the tense part we are tempt to cry because of pain – but how wonderful is the feeling afterwards!

I am your masseur. There will be times, where you will hate me when I challenge you. And you might want to throw tomatoes after me. For this case I was happy to see that you have extra provided a special emergency exit for your ministers ... [*pointing to the exit door behind me* 😊].

I heard for example already that some of you felt challenged that I called in my sermon 5 weeks ago God a “she”. I promise you that I will go on to challenge you – because I want to see you growing – theologically and in numbers. But I also promise you to be always transparent and to work always together with all the groups of the church. It is not about me, it is about you. I will be away in the end.

But like in a good therapy you need then to know who you are and where you want to go as next step as people of faith.

I will offer you all the theological knowledge and insights I gained over the years. And part of it is that the Hebrew word for God's creating acting in Genesis, "ruach", is female. And even you would do a handstand – it will remain female. And it makes totally sense as the women are the ones giving birth. Please correct me, if I am wrong ... God is female AND male. After 2000 years of male dominating language it will be, I am sure, not the end of the world, if we acknowledge God's diversity --- Especially as we embrace as UCC-folks diversity and welcome radically others in our midst. And we don't do it out of a summer mood or because some of you might be Democrats; we do it out of theological reasons!

You see: It is sometimes not easy, to leave traditional thinking behind. Even this country voted once with Obama for his slogan of change – changes are hard. I acknowledge this and will not judge, when we meet difficulties. This I promise you. But I also promise you that I will be always very clear in my theology. In opposite to many of my ministerial colleagues I am not only TALKING about Liberation Theology, I AM a Liberation Theologian. I learned to read the bible as story of God's journey with us out of oppression into a freedom, which is NOT built on selfishness and the need for lonely survival fights, but on relationship in general: First to God and from there to the solidarity among all human beings – within this society and as global family.

So this is my request for our time together: Let us be honest: To ourselves and to each other. It is totally ok, when you speak at coffee hour about me (“Don’t you think that this guy is a little bit strange”) – but please come then afterwards also to me and share with me your joys and concerns. Please no triangulations! This is not healthy. ...

These two years to come are yours. They will be good ones, if we follow only a few rules like those. The time together will enrich you AND me. Like Abram and his family we are on the way to a new destination, guided in and by our faith that it is possible, what we imagine.

Please allow a last thought. When you look to the second part of our reading – I mean the part from chapter 17- you can do two other interesting observations.

A: You need patience. God waited 24 years before God came back to Abram, referring to the promise, which God had done. Don’t expect too much from you too fast! People say that it takes half of the time a relationship lasted before we are really ready for a new one; to switch from Bob to a new pastor you need to give yourself time. And it will also take time to get transformed as church and as church member to the new identity God has mind for you. Everything is already there, somewhere in your hearts, where all yearning is.

And finally B: God promises a fruitful and good life ONLY for the case that Abram and all generations after him –inclusive ourselves- do keep the covenant. The covenant is not the circumcision – this was meant anyway only as symbol for this covenant. No, the covenant is the acknowledgement Abrams and all humanity that God is the only God. Here in Gen 17 is already the motive laid of God as a jealous God, who wants to be the only God. From here it is not far to the second book of the Hebrew bible and Moses, who will receive as the first of the 10 commandments the commandment "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;³ you shall have no other gods before me. (Ex 20:2).

Without any doubt, the God of the Hebrew-Christian tradition is a liberating God. From what and to what – this we will explore together in the months to come.

May God guide us as we travel like Abram into the unknown.

May God help us to give birth to a new identity, which is maybe already somewhere spiritually within and among us.

May God bless us in our seeking and travelling!

AMEN