

“A Journey of Transformation” Genesis 17.1–7 & 15–16
 The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 16 Mar 03

This is a story about change. Big change. God is doing a radically new thing in the live of Abram and Sarai, establishing a covenant with them that is still in force, thousands of years later.

So, how would you feel if God showed up on your doorstep and turned **your** life upside down? Would you feel filled with awe? Would you feel scared? Would you feel like your old life had been taken from you?

In this familiar, foundational story from Genesis, we often think that God is doing great things for Abram and Sarai. **But, what if Abram and Sarai didn't really want to change?**

God didn't take any public opinion polls to see if these senior citizens in the 90s were in favor of this everlasting covenant; God just rolls on in. And this isn't the warm and fuzzy shepherd God who is the shepherd...this is El Shaddai, God Almighty. (And you don't mess with El Shaddai.)

God doesn't even give Abram a chance to reply, and just says, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant.” *Done deal.*

What do you think this was like for Abram...or Abraham? Even his name has been changed. And in his culture, your name defined who you **were**. And then God says that ritual circumcision will become the mark of the covenant. *Now, things are getting serious.*

So, how would you feel if God approached you, and said, “Let's make a deal,” changed your name, and said, “Oh, by the way, the foreskin has **got** to go.”

I don't know about you, but I'd be totally freaked out. I'd want to rebel and tell God where to get off. (But, you don't mess with El Shaddai.)

And how do you feel if you're Sarai and your husband comes home from a hard day at the office and says, “Honey...have you ever thought of rearranging the letters in your name? ... Oh, and by the way, you're going to give birth to a son, and you're going to engender many nations...but...eventually...not right away.” So, you're ninety-something. Don't you begin to wonder whether your husband has finally lost his marbles?

Then, all these things start to happen. You become pregnant, and the name “Sarah” beings to have a nice ring to it.

If you are Abraham and Sarah, you probably don't have time to mind all the changes in your lives, because you're too busy **living** them. Your lives have been totally transformed.

Perhaps that's the business God is all about: transformation. Have you noticed that God is always changing something: either in biblical stories or in your own life experience? God doesn't leave well-enough alone when he creates Adam, he needs to create woman, as well.

One of the things Jean is fond of saying is that she didn't marry a minister, she married a writer. God calls; things change.

God speaks through the prophet Isaiah, saying, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to **do a new thing**; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”¹

¹ Isaiah 43.19

Ours is the God of Transformation (with a capital T). The biblical narratives are stories of how God changes peoples' lives, transforming covenants, changing names, speaking to them through prophets, appearing among them through Jesus of Nazareth...and inspiring us still through the movement of the Holy Spirit.

God is still calling us to change – to transform our lives, to “do a new thing.”

The only problem is that doing things differently or doing something entirely new pushes us out of our comfort zones. Abram and Sarai were happily “Double-income, no kids,” and, *trust me*, change disrupted the equilibrium of their nuclear and extended family!

But, did you ever notice that in this story, Abraham and Sarah don't *fear* change, they *embrace* it?! True, they may laugh at the absurd situation of their lives, becoming parents in their 90s, but they have faith that they'll walk with God on this journey. ***It is their faith that makes transformation possible.***

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great New England Transcendentalist writer, was ordained as a Congregational minister (though he eventually became a Unitarian). And he once said that there are always two parties: the party of the past and the party of the future: the establishment and movement. We probably – along with Christians, and Jews, and Muslims everywhere – think of Abraham and Sarah as being part of the establishment. (After all, the three great Abrahamic traditions trace their origins to this man.) But, as this elderly couple embraced the opportunities for transformation God put before them, it's hard to conclude that they were anything other than the party of the movement.

Abraham and Sarah, Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus, Augustine, Martin Luther, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Plymouth Congregational UCC – we're all part of the movement, because we are about the business of transformation.

Where do you, as an individual, need some transformation, with God's help? What is some thing or aspect of who you are that you'd really like to change? No, not everything about you is in your power to change, but it's not impossible with God on your side.

Lent is a perfect time to reflect on the things about ***you*** that you'd like to transform. (If you can't think of anything, try harder – or ask your spouse or partner for suggestions.)

In a sermon last January, I told you that I'd be asking you to consider a question that I will pose throughout the year, about our collective life together as a community of faith: “What is your dream for Plymouth?”

Our Centennial year is a perfect time to reflect on the things about Plymouth that you'd like to transform. So, what is your dream for Plymouth...five years from now...ten years from now?

As I told someone a few months ago, “the search committee and congregation didn't call me to keep things the same.” We're on a new journey together. There is a new spirit of excitement in this congregation. ***Fully ten percent*** of the members of this church have joined within the last six months! So, if you don't think God is calling us to transform ourselves as a congregation, you'd better buckle your seatbelts!

Nobody said that church was supposed to be static. There are moments when we draw from the deep well of our tradition, but we do it to stand on the shoulders of those who came before us: not so that we can canonize them, but so that we can journey with God. If we aren't interesting in movement, we could stand behind them, rather than on their shoulders. There is a wonderful phrase used by Louis Gunnemann, a UCC

clergyman from the Evangelical and Reformed tradition, namely that we are “Reformed” (tracing our roots to John Calvin) and “Reforming.” In the UCC, we affirm that the Reformation never stopped!

At the end of last year, the Church Council appointed a terrific six-person team that has begun to look at way God is calling us to transform our congregation. Our Strategic Planning Team is looking at our history. We’re looking beyond the four walls of the local church – at our community and ways we are affected by it and can, in turn, be change agents within it. And we’ll suggest possible directions for our future.

And we’re going to need *your* help. This isn’t something six people can do in alone in a vacuum. In the coming months, we’re going to be asking for *your* input in helping to discern where God is leading this congregation. That’s part of the reason I keep asking you to consider the question, “What is your dream for Plymouth.” We’re going to need to listen carefully to God, and the way God sometimes speaks is through the dreams and visions of God’s people. Your creativity and thoughts are needed to help determine our vocation as a community of faith. (So, stay tuned!)

Five years from now, Plymouth will be different. We may have staffing configurations, different ways of reaching out to the community, different style of worship, different buildings, different worship space. (We may even have a different color of carpeting in the sanctuary!)

We also have a wonderful guide in this endeavor, in the person of the Rev. Alice Mann, who is an Episcopal priest and senior consultant with the Alban Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. She’ll be coaching our Strategic Planning Team by telephone as we learn about our congregation and dream of the future. Alice is *the* expert on helping congregations move between a pastoral-sized church (roughly 100 to 200 people in worship on a Sunday) to a program-sized church (roughly 200 to 350 people in worship on a Sunday). Alice and I worked together in Connecticut on a strategic plan for First Church in Windsor, and I just learned from Sally Gilmore that the Holladay UCC in Salt Lake City has also used Alice’s work in mapping out their plans for the future.

Faith is not static; it changes. It is a still-unfinished deal with God and with the people who form this community. It’s never done. Abram was led out of the land of Ur to Haran by God as a young man and remained in the constant journey of faith; he and Sarah always listening to where God was leading, even into their 90s.

And churches are not static; they grow and flourish or they wither and perish.

Our congregation is not so unlike Sarah and Abraham. 60-some years ago we received a new name, when this church adopted the name “Plymouth.” It is our job to live up to our legacy and our “new” name.

My prayer for Plymouth is that we will continue to listen for where God is leading us individually and as a congregation in this time and place, so that we to can be transformed by the journey.

Amen.