

Genesis 15: 1-6

Does God Keep You Up At Night?

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This September our worship theme is vocation. The question we will ask all month is “How do we hear God’s call?” Now, we don’t talk much about vocation in our churches. If you grew up in a Roman Catholic Church, whenever the priest talked about vocations he was trying to recruit boys for the priesthood or trying to get girls to enter the convent. But that is not the only way to understand vocation. The root of the word vocation means “voice” and the Latin verb from it means “to call”. So the word vocation points to the notion that we are called by God. Now, in our church we believe we are all given gifts by God – gifts of intelligence, athleticism, art, music or administration. Each of us has an opportunity to use our gifts to glorify God, and to build a life in which we dedicate ourselves to God’s purposes.

We don’t usually think about our lives in this way, but I believe we all have a chance to hear God’s voice. We all have an opportunity to seek God’s guidance. That is what we are doing here each week. We gather to ask God for guidance, for course corrections, for a deeper sense of meaning, or a deeper sense of purpose.

The Bible is full of examples of ordinary people who heard God’s call and decided to embark on a new path in life. Abraham, Moses, Peter and Paul are all examples of people who heard God’s call. Though it may seem tempting to think that these people were special or set apart from you and me, the number of Biblical examples of this phenomenon point to the possibility that this is how God works in our lives. Let’s look at this story of the call of Abraham to see what the Bible is saying to us today.

**In the first place the story of Abraham says that God calls each of us.**

The Bible says that Abraham was a wealthy man. He had cattle, servants, and a beautiful wife who came from a royal family; her name meant “princess”. God saw Abraham for who he was. God recognized that he had gifts for business, and administration. Abraham was not a saint, but more like a wheeler and a dealer who knew how to get a job done. But for all his success, Abraham was sad. He and Sarah had not been able to have children. They had everything money could buy, but they would probably have given it all away or risked losing it if only they could have a family. That was their one great sorrow. Now I want to be clear that I don’t think this is really a story about infertility; that is just a plot device.

The Bible says that everyone has something that they cannot figure out, some pain that eventually brings them to their knees to pray. Some of us want to prove ourselves. Some of us want our parent’s approval. Some of us want to forgive or be forgiven; others want to be healed. Some of us fight depression. We all try to handle our problems. We try to fix things. Usually, we come to God as a last resort- not the first one. The good news here is that whether we seek God or not, whether we even know how much we need God or not, God is searching for us.

Who knows? Maybe the fact that you found your way to this sanctuary this morning is an example of the fact that God has a plan for you. Whatever you told yourself about coming to church today, God’s fingerprints may be on it, somewhere. Maybe you decided the summer was over and it was time to get back to church- who’s to say that was not a call from God? Maybe you have been searching for a church and someone told you about this one- who’s to say that’s not a call? Maybe you are tired of feeling so alone and need to find a community of faith that shares your values of justice and kindness. Maybe, you believe that your children’s lives are enriched by the religious training they get at Bible Village, or Youth Lounge, you appreciate that we take your trust in our programs very seriously, and

now it is time to think about your faith too. Maybe you have fallen away from faith and are mad at life or the church, or just skeptical and full of doubt but something convinced you to come anyway. Maybe you have done everything right to get where you are today, and even with all your hard work you want more, something you have not found yet, in your career or even at the gym? Maybe the world just seems more and more confusing and frightening and you know you need a different kind of wisdom. Abraham was one of those high functioning people who have everything but still hungered to be more whole. He had it all but was still grabbing for the brass ring of happiness and could not quite grasp it.

This summer Peggy and I have done a lot of camping on Cape Cod. Camping is work; I won't lie to you, but there is this sweet moment in the evening when you sit in front of the fire and just relax. Then on a clear night, when the sky grows completely dark, you can gaze up at the heavens and take in the spender of millions of stars. Whether you are at a campground on Cape Cod or a mountaintop in the Berkshires or in your own backyard, when you gaze up at the stretch of galaxies suddenly you feel connected to world you cannot know, and to the hand that made it all. Even the skeptics among us feel their eyes are lifted to new world of promise and possibility.

God woke Abraham up one night and called him out of the tent where he was sleeping. Then God invited Abraham to gaze up at the stars. There God revealed the plan. You will have children and they will have children too, and your descendants will be as many as the stars in the heavens. God invited Abraham to take a walk with God. God told him that there was more to life. God invited Abraham to take a journey that would change him for good.

**In the second place, God's call can be frightening.**

Answering God's call can be scary. God asked Abraham to leave his ancestral home, and to venture into a whole new territory. God offered Abraham a child, but it was not a free gift. Change is never free. It asks something of us. Even your fondest dreams will demand something of you.

Now I told you how pleasant it was to stare at the stars from a campground. But if I am honest I also need to tell you that it can be unnerving, too. The stars are so far, the world so vast, and you can feel small and overwhelmed when you gaze at the sky. In the same way, God's call often stretches us to see the world differently, or provokes us to see our small place more realistically, or challenges us to a greatness we never imagined.

I bet that Abraham had some second thoughts when he went back to his tent that night. Later in the story God sent three messengers to Abraham and Sarah to announce again to both of them that they would have a child. In that story Sarah laughed out loud at the news. In her laugh there was also a dismissiveness born of all those years of disappointment. Her laugh said- "We are not that family. We wanted to be, but that dream died long ago."

As a church I think we understand that feeling of fear. In our capital campaign we have prayed about our building and our future for four years now. We have raised over \$2 million dollars toward our plan to fix the deferred maintenance and then bring our space up to code so we are accessible to everyone. Our Board has decided that we will break ground on this project next spring. Many details have to be worked out, but we have a bold plan, and a new vision, and we have been talking about this since 2009. Now that it might happen, I think some people are nervous. In the hallway I have conversations still with people who wonder aloud. We have grown so accustomed to being the church with the peeling steeple, and the flooded basement, and the awkward hallways. Can we really live into a new potential? How would we change if we really became accessible? I think in our heads we are all there, but change is hard. Big dreams stretch us.

**Finally, the story says that God has a plan for the world.** When God took Abraham out to show him the stars God was telling him that He had a plan to create a bold and expansive community of faith. God created human beings to be in relationships. God dreamed that in time tens of thousands would strive

to grow in faith. Millions of people in various nations, with different languages and in different ways would embark on spiritual journeys. God called Abraham to be the beginning of something that bold, to play a role that would make a difference in the whole world. That is how God works. God reaches out to heal the very thing in us which is broken and in the process, God heals the world. We become part of something bigger and much more significant than we ever imagined, because God uses our brokenness to transform the world.

Fred Buechner writes that “Vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep needs”. The world’s deep needs are met not just by great teachers or good doctors, but also by inspiring parents, good plumbers, good hairdressers, fine lawyers, good friends. Whenever we discover how to dedicate our lives to God’s purposes, by being kind and fair, God can use us to make the world whole.

I want to finish today by telling you about Howard Thurman. Howard Thurman was one of the greatest preachers and thinkers of the last century. In 1899 Howard Thurman was born in Daytona Beach in the segregated South. A graduate of Moorehouse College, he was a classmate of Martin Luther King Sr. He went on to attend Colgate Rochester Seminary, became a Baptist minister and then Dean at Howard University Chapel. Thurman was the first man of his race to be Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. A brilliant man, he was also a poet and theologian, and understood the frustration of being born Black in the United States. But he also had faith to move mountains and trusted that God could use his gifts. Sure enough, when Martin Luther King Jr. came to Boston University to study in the 1960’s Thurman became one of his mentors, and it was Thurman’s book Jesus and the Disinherited that provided the spiritual fuel for the civil rights movement.

Howard Thurman talked a lot about vocation. He said, “Don’t ask what the world needs; ask what makes you come alive and go do it, because the world need people who have come alive.”

“There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.”

Let us pray....Lord help us to listen to your call in our lives. Lord we offer you the stirrings in us – our hopes, our dreams, and our ambitions. We also offer you our restlessness, and our fears.

Guide us, Heavenly Father, into the breathtaking empty space of the door you are opening. Amen.