

Called to Risk

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
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So here' what we're going to do this morning. Now let me start by saying that if you have trouble moving around this doesn't apply to you. Some of you, despite your physical limitations are here every week, and for your faithfulness I thank you. But for everybody else, for all who are physically mobile and able, I am asking you to move to another seat. That's right - I want you to leave your seat. And scooting down a couple of inches on the same pew does NOT constitute moving. Be bold! Be brave! Next week you can go right back to your old seats, but for the rest of this hour, I simply ask that you go ahead and change your seats. That goes for the choir too. And, while you're changing, I'm going to change as well. [congregation moves]

Well now... that wasn't so bad.... was it? Now for the real question: Is there a purpose to my madness or am I trying to just be cute? Over the past three years I have become so much more appreciative of anchors which hold ships in place. When everything around me is changing, I am ever so grateful for that which doesn't change. Being rooted in one place can be a really good thing... sometimes. But at the very least, it can be a very really comfortable thing.

Be that as it may, you may have noticed a lot is changing, even and maybe especially for the church. Women are more likely to be found in the pulpit than cooking roast beef for Sunday dinner. The definition of a family unit is changing; The role and function of the pastor has changed since the 1950's; Clergy attire has certainly changed over the last few decades. I don't know if you have ever heard of the term emergent churches, but those churches don't even bother with building buildings. They just rent whatever space their congregations needs at any given time. When they outgrow it, they just move on. Whatever the change, none of it is easy.

But there's a strange irony in all of this folks. When you think about it logically, of all the people and all the institutions, I would expect the church to be the most able to change, or at least to be the least resistant to change. After all, when you look at the grand scope of the biblical narrative, God's called don't stay in one place very long. Adam and Eve had to move; Abram and Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, all had to move; Moses, the Hebrews - they had to move and stayed on the move 40 years. And you could argue things basically started going south for Israel when they tried to settle down and put God in one place, the temple. From Genesis to Revelation; at the very heart of the biblical narrative is change; transformation. We start our journey in one place, and we finish in another; we start our journey as one thing, we finish our journey as another.

I LOVE it when congregations tell me that they're too old to change. Really?!? Have you never heard of Abram and Sarai? They weren't exactly spring chickens you know. There they were playing bridge down at Piedmont Crossing when God says to them, "I need you two to pack your bags." And they say "Why?" And God says "Well I have a dream of the two of you having as many kids as there are stars in heaven. And yes, I know you don't have any children, and yes, I know I didn't tell you where you're going. Don't worry about it; 'll let you know when you get there. Just because you're in the dark doesn't mean I am. Oh and one more thing; you're getting new names as well. "Well what's wrong with our old ones." "I know your names have been good enough for the last century, but it's time for new ones."

Perhaps this is why St. Paul is so fond of Abram and Sarai; they were individuals who understood faith involves taking a chance. One day God decided to knock Saul right off his... horse. And then in a move somewhat lacking in subtlety, God told Saul that despite his Jewish Ivy League education, he was already blind, he just didn't know it. So God went and physically

blinded a Saul who was already spiritually blinded. Perhaps God thought it would be easier for Saul to give up leading if he couldn't see where he was going.

So Saul found the light amidst the dark, as did our friend Nicodemus. Here we have an individual in the dark seeking out Jesus in the dark. But not just any person; a Pharisee. And if anybody was supposed to know who God was and what God wanted and valued, it would have been a Pharisee. And folks it's time for us to put away our prejudices when it comes to the Pharisees. They were educated laity who had been going to Sabbath school for decades. They were the ones who always said yes when the nominating committee called. In other words, they were a lot like you. So when Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, he's talking to people the church faithful.

But all of the people involved in today's lessons - Abram, Sarai, Saul and Nicodemus - find themselves in the dark today. Now the good news is that before their stories end, a transformation will take place: Abram and Sarai will become Abraham and Sarah, grandparents of a nation; Saul will have become Paul and birthed local congregations; and while Nicodemus will not be renamed, by the end of John's gospel, he, not the disciples, will see to it that Jesus' body is not left on the cross. On the darkest day, Nicodemus finds himself in the light. But before Nick could see, before Paul could write to the Christians in Rome, before Abram & Sarai gave birth to a child named "Laughter," they each had to give up some of what they thought they knew and they all had to take some huge chances. They left the geographical home they had always known; they left the spiritual home they had always known; they left behind the assumptions they had always had. In other words, they first had to be born from above.

And yes, after all these years we are still misquoting Jesus. He doesn't say we have to be born again; he said that we have to be born from above by the spirit so that we can have a different perspective and so that we can stop walking around in the dark. After all, the Spirit is the source of such transformation. But don't think of her... well let's start with some basic Greek; the spirit is feminine, not masculine; never masculine. And don't think of her as a nice quite girl. The Spirit is more of an Amazon warrior with ADD; you don't know where she's going to or where she's come from, but Lord knows you can hear her when she's in the room. In short the Spirit is a catalyst and once you introduce a catalyst, the original chemicals are never the same.

So like I said, of all people and institutions, you'd think that people of the Spirit would embrace change; you'd think people raised on Abram and Sarai, raised on Saul, raised on stories of Pentecost would understand the need for change and transformation. Unfortunately, that's frequently not the way it works. You may have heard the fable about the man who climbed a tree during a flash flood. The tree held and the man held on to the tree and he was grateful. Well when the sun came out, he was still holding onto the tree for dear life. The people let him know that he could come down now; after all the flood waters had receded. But the man said, "No. You never know when another flood might come along. And beside, that tree had been there for him. How could he just let go? And so the days came and the days went and still the man stayed up there, growing ever more rigid and ever more lonely all because he wouldn't let go.

Are we in the church really that different? I can tell you of at least two churches nearby who are having difficulties when it comes to their chapels. The churches believe they can fulfill their missions better if they refurbish the chapel space and make it more modern and user-friendly. But so and so's grandmother got married in that chapel. And so and so's funeral was in that chapel, and so and so gave the money for that organ in the chapel and so on. And folks, I'm not being mean. I was a history major in college AND I'm a southerner. I understand the role of the past and I understand the role of history and I seek to honor it. But staying in a tree is not a way of honoring the past. It's a way of never moving forward. It's a way of not honoring the sacrifices of our fore-bearers.

We have trouble letting go, don't we? Why? We're scared. And our fists are clenched so tightly out of the fear that we might lose something, there is no opportunity for God to put anything else in our hands. And push comes to shove, by holding on, we in effect say we aren't going to trust God to take care of us; we're going to trust ourselves. The sad irony is that sometimes holding on to trees as well as buildings and endowments brings insecurity, not security.

All of us who are followers of the Way are called to risk; all of us. Progressives may have to risk being more evangelical; evangelicals may have to reconsider just how radical God's hospitality is. Traditional churches may have to risk giving up some of their... tradition, at least they will if they really want to be in the business of ministering to new generations. Contemporary churches will have to risk as well. They may have to risk being something more than trendy. I can assure you that God will ask all of us to leave behind the ground to which we've grown accustomed. God will ask us to let go; God will ask us to step out on nothing more than faith. And I know this because I can't think of a single individual in the Bible who didn't have to go through this process. I can't think of anyone who didn't have to risk. And when they risked, they risked more than giving up their seats. And if they had to risk, why would we think we wouldn't have to do likewise?

So is Lent a time for giving things up. Yeah, but maybe we're being asked to give up more than chocolate. Maybe what we're called to give up is our security trees and our security blankets. Maybe we need to give up the clenched fists with which we cling to what was. Maybe we need to give up our neatly lined ducks. Maybe we need to give up the assumption that God can't or won't do mighty things here at Peace in the years to come. I don't know. But a faith that uses a cross for its primary symbol is a faith that's going to ask you to let go of something.

So Peace Church, what are you willing to let go of? God is asking you to sacrifice.... but. But while you're thinking of what you'll let go of, don't forget... Don't forget the good news. God had some wonderful things planned for Abram and Sarai, including a new child named Isaac or "Laughter." Wonderful things were waiting for Saul & Nicodemus come daylight. And if God had wonderful things planned for those flawed ordinary individuals who let go, why wouldn't God have wonderful things planned for flawed, ordinary people like you? Folks, you can do this. You are good enough, mature enough and faithful enough that you can meet whatever challenges come tomorrow so long as you remember who and whose you are; so long as you remember you are called to risk. And when the Spirit comes, let's pray that our hands here at Peace will be empty enough to receive the gifts She brings. Amen.