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The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd; Austin, Texas

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts reveal your truth, O Lord, our strength, our courage, and our redeemer. Amen.

I want to explore one of the themes of our readings this morning from Genesis and the Gospel of Mark. And to do that, I'm going to start with a little background. I thought about expanding the reading from Genesis – the first book of the Bible. I thought about adding all of Chapters 10 and 11– but we'd still be hearing the reading, so I decided not to. And it would have been one of those passages that causes the person reading a great deal of anxiety – it has a lot of difficult to pronounce names.

Here's a sample from Genesis chapter 10: "Sons were born also to Shem, elder brother of Japheth, the ancestor of all the sons of Eber. The sons of Shem: Elam, Ashur, Arphaxad, Lud, and Aram. The Sons of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash. Arphaxahad was the father of Shelah, and Shelah was the father of Eber. ... Joktan was the father of Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmoth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah, and Jobab." Two chapters of this.

It's a genealogy of the people who would become Israelites. It goes from generation to generation to generation, it comes to Abram who marries Sarai. And then at the end of the two chapters of genealogies, there's chapter 11, verse 30: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child."

So Abram and Sarai, what's life about now that you're barren? Finding your place means knowing who came before you and continuing the generations, and what happens when you can't? If the purpose in life is continuing the genealogy, if it's creating a future by creating the next generation, then Abram and Sarai what is your life about now?

Then, the next verse, just after announcing that Sarai is barren: "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. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you....'"¹ So Abram and Sarai head out, leaving what they know, and a few chapters later we get to the verses that we heard just now: When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I will make you exceedingly numerous." "As for Sarai your wife, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations."

Abraham and Sarah had to leave what they knew in order to get this blessing. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house" They tried the path provided to them – the path of continuing the generations -- until it came up short. This theme of leaving home, of leaving what you know, it fits a pattern of statements from the Bible: those perplexing passages where Jesus says that we must leave, or even hate, our father and mother, our sister and brother;

¹ Gen. 12:1 (NRSV)

those times when Jesus calls his disciples away from their businesses, their families; it fits with the seemingly backwards part of our Gospel lesson today: Jesus says that we must lose our lives in order to find our lives. How could this possibly be? And why is this such significant theme in both the Old Testament and the New Testament?

Priest and author Richard Rohr writes that – his words – “What passes for morality or spirituality in the vast majority of people’s lives is the way everybody they grew up with thinks.”² Or put another way, our temptation is to take the voices that come from our families, our country, even our church – our culture – and to treat those voices, that programming, as if it were God.

The chief reason that this is so perplexing is that much of this programming is good. My own parents taught me that I was a valuable person, I learned as a child that I am loved, among so much else. But it seems to be the case that no matter how much good we inherit, we always inherit limitations too: a bias towards people like ourselves; so often this programming comes with tribalism – to some degree these voices are always trying to draw boundaries around who is in and who is out – the voices come with instructions, with expectations about how to live that reflect the abilities of people other than us. Even with the best launch possible, we’ll need to journey beyond that launch to the place where we’re able to live most

² Richard Rohr. *Falling Upwards: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. page 82. Rohr’s discussion also includes the theme of the next paragraph.

fully into our humanity, and that will always be the work of God. Just like for Abram and Sarai, there's a direction to our story: it's moving outward, including more, seeing more critically, loving more broadly.

Our call is to become the fully human; that's the path to the God who became human; and it requires for us the ability to see beyond the limits of what we know to something much bigger. And our Bible passages today illustrate that sometimes there's a push toward something bigger and sometimes there's a pull. It was a push for Abram and Sarai when they couldn't keep the family line going, and we experience times like this when something happens – something disruptive, illness, divorce – and the story we've inherited no longer works. And Jesus today describes a pull – “to save your life you have to lose it.” You know Jesus doesn't describe a maintenance mode – we never hear: follow me and things will stay pretty much the same as they are. Instead, he describes moving outward from where we are – so that we come to see beyond the limitations that we know.

The path served up for us will always be someone else's vision. When culture alone tells us what to be and how to act and how to think of the world and ourselves, then we'll be living in a box that is smaller than God. And it's so tempting to think that the identity culture serves up for us is God, or the answers our family serves up for us is God, or the identity that our career serves up for us is God. All of these things can tell us how to be and what to do and how to think, and

they're good things, but they operate in the shallow end and we're called to live in the deep end.

The place where identity markers matter less and less. Where shared humanity matters more and more. And it's not just for the sake of others, it's so that we can experience the freedom, acceptance, peace that God wants for us – and we can't experience these things if we stay within limits imposed from the outside. The limits that keep us from living into our fullest humanity. “For those who want to save their life will lose it.”

This is why the path to God's transformation isn't always “onward and upwards” but is so much more often down – lost job or lost love, so that you wonder “who am I” and “what do I do now” and have the chance to start building answers to those questions from the ground up.

We religious people have a special responsibility to do this because we have particular temptation. Our temptation is to take the limits of our cultures, and families, and careers and stamp them with the name of God. This temptation is why Jesus' harshest words were often directed at religious authorities. And it points out for us that the journey isn't simply individual, but it's also corporate. Looking backwards we can see where we've done this – failed to act early enough or clearly enough on issues in the past – but the question for us is where are we

doing this now? How are we called to see beyond the limits we know in order to follow the God made human in Jesus?

This has the potential to sound kind of depressing, and the downward part of the journey can certainly involve loss and disruption – but then there’s the other side, the new life that Jesus promises us beyond the limits that we know – the ones that cause us so much anxiety – the new life where we’re able to connect so much more easily with others because we’re able to see God in them. A new life aligned with the Holy.

And it’s our choice over and over again. We can choose the limits that we know or we can choose new life in the expanse of the Kingdom of God.