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Mayflower 2/28/10  
Radio 3/7/10

Genesis 17

**“OH YES, YOU DID LAUGH”**

A massive earthquake hits Chile, and an unknown number of people are dead. We plan a fundraiser for Haiti next Sunday and we are already one earthquake behind. The seventh anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq is coming in just two weeks. Does anyone remember what we did seven years ago? The war to save the world from non-existent weapons of mass destruction?

Do you remember how you felt just a year ago when the first African American president was elected and we felt a surge of hope about the possibility of change? Do you remember thinking that we might finally get health care reform, including a public option, not just more government sponsored corporate welfare?

Do you remember when an American president left office with a budget surplus? It was only ten years ago. Do you remember life before FOX news, Rush Limbaugh, and hate radio? Do you remember the miracle on ice in 1980? I watched it with Shawn in a parsonage in New Jersey where we lived while studying at Drew University. That was a bunch of college kids who beat the Red Army hockey team. That was 30 years ago and my son Blue, the pilot and father to be, was two.

People sometimes talk about the good old days and long for them in a nostalgic way, but it's not change per se that bothers me, not even breathtaking change. Rather, it is a loss of perspective that worries me, the inability to find what is constant in the midst of that change. It is our apparent inability to connect the dots, to understand cause and effect, and to seek permanence in the midst of impermanence. In other words, to have faith—since that's how I understand faith. Not as a set of beliefs that

benefit me personally, but as a deep and abiding trust in what does not change—and the power of changelessness to change me.

Take Abraham, father to us all in faith, the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims. He not only didn't fear change, but he chose *impermanence* as a way of life, as a response to the call of God. Some people try to secure themselves against change, while others embrace it creatively, trusting that when the winds change, we ought to trim our sails and take the ride. Who are we to say that we know that we shouldn't be heading for a place where we didn't think we were going?

I love this story of Abraham and Sarah because they chose creative impermanence as a way of life – which sounds good in theory--unless you were an army brat and moved 12 times before graduating from high school. Creative impermanence. The fitful but faithful embrace of constant change even while holding on to that which never changes.

You know the story of Abraham and Sarah, you know that they wanted to settle down and live a normal life. Sarah in particular. And they were doing quite well, financially speaking, but not so well at producing the son they thought God had promised them.

What's more, Abraham was old, and Sarah was no spring chicken. And when it came to children, there was this big goose egg in the box score. Zero, zip, nada. . .a cruel shutout in the days when children were everything, a symbol of God's blessings, and a form of immortality.

They sat in their tent and looked at each other, and in the brooding silence that stretched between them wondered why God had chosen not to bless them. They had a nursery all fixed up, and ready to go – the crib, the little mobile stretched over it for visual stimulation, and the color scheme – a mixture of pink and blue (just to be safe) – and yet across all of it, cobwebs. When Sarah went to the back door and called out, "Everyone come to supper!" it was only Abraham.

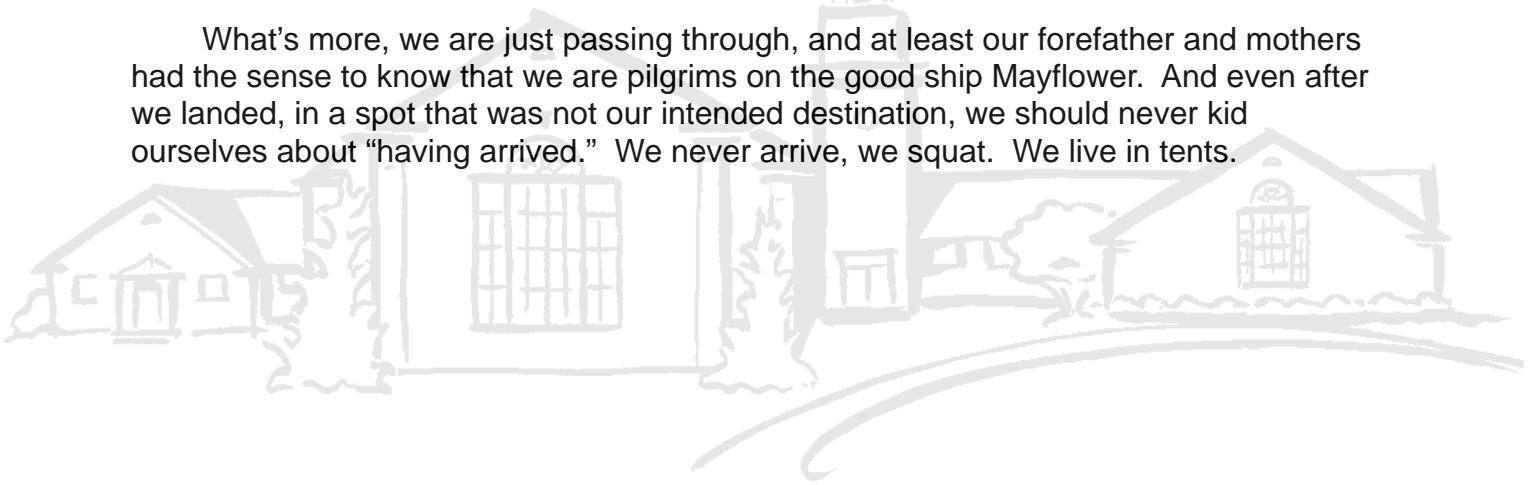
Then one day, Abraham was out walking, feeling old, and he looked down at the sand that was coming up through the holes in his sandals, and the Lord said, "Abraham, count the grains of sand," and he said, "Oh my goodness, I can't," and God said, "Neither will you be able to count your children." And he was about a hundred, and so was she.

And then he looked up at the stars that littered the night sky and he wondered how many there were and knew that he could never count them either, and God said, “And so will be the number of your children.” And he was about a hundred, and so was she.

So he went back into the tent, and he said to Sarah, “Guess what?” And she laughed (as well she should have). And so when their son was born they named him laughter, which in Hebrew is pronounced Isaac. That’s Cass’ middle name for exactly the same reason. Where did you come from?

That’s a question that can be asked about everything. Not just a surprise child, but the universe itself – where does this come from, where does everything come from? What was there before there was anything, and how can anything come from nothing?

What’s more, we are just passing through, and at least our forefather and mothers had the sense to know that we are pilgrims on the good ship Mayflower. And even after we landed, in a spot that was not our intended destination, we should never kid ourselves about “having arrived.” We never arrive, we squat. We live in tents.



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Now as you know, living in a tent can be fun, as long as it's temporary. Because after a few days, or a few weeks, when everything gets damp and soggy, and you just want to take a good, long, hot shower, you know it will be OK because there is a place that you can go to that is *not* a tent. So if it's for a little while, what do we call it? We call it camping. But if it's for a lifetime, what do we call it? Refugee? Displaced person? Transient? I'll tell you what it's called. It's called *life*.

Because regardless of the ways we disguise it, building our houses on granite foundation to last a thousand years. . .saying, "But I'm still young!". . "Oh, let's not make out a will, that's for old people". . .we live in tents. You don't have to read the story of Abraham and Sarah to know this, you just have to pay attention.

Watch the seasons. In Oklahoma, we have the advantage of multiple season presents in any one season. I'm ready for this winter to be over, how about you? It will be very soon. No more snow and ice, but the boiling clouds of spring, when we dodge tornadoes, and then the scorching heat of summer, and we will long for it to be cool again.

We will take that long-awaited vacation, and it will be over in the blink of an eye. August will turn to September, the cool breezes will blow, the school bell will ring, the leaves will turn to flame – it's fall of the year. But it won't last. The leaves will get bitten from the trees and piled in a heap against the back fence. The winter sunsets will turn the trees into black antlers begging the sky for cover only to receive a blanket of snow. . .and the flying clouds and the frosty light and the year is dying in the night. . .and somebody says "Happy New Year!" 2011. . .well, what happened to 2010? Where did that decade go?

We live in tents. We are tent people, and life is a trip, not a destination. We don't get to say "Stop, I want to get off now, the ride is over." We don't keep the bodies we have now, a much weaker version is on the way. Right now Cass is working out every night; the music blasting while he pumps iron and get's ripped – and if you've seen him lately, it's working. That's why it's so strange to imagine him as an old man someday, stumbling around in his own front yard as if it's a foreign country, looking into the face of his best friends and saying, "I didn't get the name."

We all live in tents. We don't like it. I'm sure there were many nights when Sarah said to Abraham, "Honey is this the place. . .I'm so tired of paper plates and Styrofoam cups. . .can we stay put and get out the good china . . .develop some equity in the house, stop throwing our money away on rental property. Is this the place?"

And if that was Sarah's question, then our question must be: *why has this transience, this uprootedness, this wandering in search of something permanent become the model for the faith of millions?* The answer is clear, and simple, and yet profoundly important: the very thing which drives many people to cynicism and despair, drives other people into the arms of God. It is the very transient nature of things that makes some people say, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die," while others say, "For from him and to him and through him are all things. . .to him be glory and honor forever and ever, amen."

I understand cynicism. I have believed in single-payer, universal health care since the days when Nixon was president. I don't believe that we are at war with terrorism, but with poverty, oppression, and injustice so deep and wide that it mutates into despotism and rage. I do not believe that we will win this so-called "war" with one more push, one more offensive, one more arrest. The day is coming, I believe, when military options will be obsolete — but that's not how it's going.

I participate in strange behaviors like most of you. I water my grass, so it will grow, so I can cut it, so I can water it again. Or take housework (most men don't get this). You gather up dirty clothes and dishes so you can make them dirty again so you can gather them up and wash them. Why do we spend so much time and energy cleaning up the house when the only way to make sure it stays that way is to lock it and check into a hotel room?

Abraham started out looking for the perfect piece of real estate. But the longer he wandered, and the more he kept his ear tuned toward things divine, the more he came to realize that it wasn't a place he was looking for at all, but a city whose builder and maker is God.

There is so much in all of us that resists change. Not just old people, either, we all do it – we all want certain things to stay as they are forever. We do it in the church. The committee said to the young minister: "That was a marvelous sermon that you preached, and during this interview you have demonstrated strong faith and a obvious commitment to the ministry, and that's why it is with great regret that we say to you that we just don't think you are the minister for our church right now." And she said. . . "why?"

It was not that long ago, when I was a child, that interracial marriage was illegal in Oklahoma. Now the president of the United States is the child of an interracial marriage. It was only a few decades ago that homosexuality was considered a disorder, something from which one could recover if properly treated.

Change. We resist it, even when we know that it's part of God's plan. Robert Louis Stevenson said it well: "To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive." And Thornton Wilder wrote: "Everyone's always talking about people breaking into houses. . .but there are more people in the world who want to break out of houses."

We are all pilgrims on the earth. Some of us just adjust to it better than others. In fact, what some people think of as painful dislocation after painful dislocation, other people call *growth*. Think for a moment about the things you thought were important once. They've changed, haven't they? And the saddest thing in the world is a grown man who is stuck in high school, still running about trying to "Take State!"

The past is important, and must not be forgotten. But it's not a place. It's not where we live. God is forever calling us, out of wherever it is that we are, and have gotten too comfortable, and into the future that God has in mind.

And don't plan out your life too carefully, because those plans will change. Life really is what happens while you are making other plans. Just let the fact that you live in a tent make you seekers after what is really important. And don't think that you have to understand everything, or have everything figured out ahead of time – after all, who do you think you are? With all due respect, we do not live by the rule of Descartes: *Cogito ergo Sum* (I think therefore I am). We live by something far more risky: *Amo ergo sum* (I love therefore I am).

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I am tempted to give up right now on all sorts of things, like democracy for example. Like basic fairness in government and the idea that it is morally wrong to ask people around here to pay tax on their groceries, but not on a Thunder ticket. Or cut teacher pay when we have let 5 billion dollars worth of special tax breaks pile up, mostly for those who don't need them. I see money controlling everything, but this is hardly a new problem. And we can either give up, or dig in and take the long view — doing what we can, where we are, with what we have.

Hope, after all, is the one thing for which there is no acceptable alternative. So when Sarah Palin said recently to a Tea Party rally recently, “So, how’s that hopey, changey thing working out for ya?” I thought to myself, “How have we gotten ourselves to this point, where someone like this can actually have the spotlight, and use it to mock the idea of hope and change. How did we go from the rhetoric of Lincoln, to the hysteria of Glen Beck? Lincoln had real problems to deal with. And so did FDR. And both of them kept the nation alive through hope; they lifted us out of despair by working tirelessly for change. Now we seem to be drowning in a sea of abysmal ignorance.

It is the Lent of our discontent, but guess what, it won't last. You may think things are getting worse, and in the short run you might be right. But God is not in it for the short run. And nothing is more important right now than for you and me and every person of faith and goodwill to refuse to pour a big cup of despair and join the race to the bottom. Not caring anymore is exactly what the money masters are hoping for. That's why we are seeing ads on TV right now for the benefits of high-fructose corn syrup and the wonders of clean coal technology. How stupid do they think we are? As stupid as we act.

Rise up oh men and women of God. You have nothing to fear but fear itself. Take back the church; take back the country; take back the idea of citizenship. We've got work to do because we are not in this for the next quarter, or until our ship comes in. And we are not worried about dying tomorrow — we're worried about leaving behind a world in which our grandchildren cannot even live.

Let's plant seeds for tress under whose shade you and I will never sit. Let's clean up our act, even if it means we don't get everything we want. Let's live simply so that others may simply live.

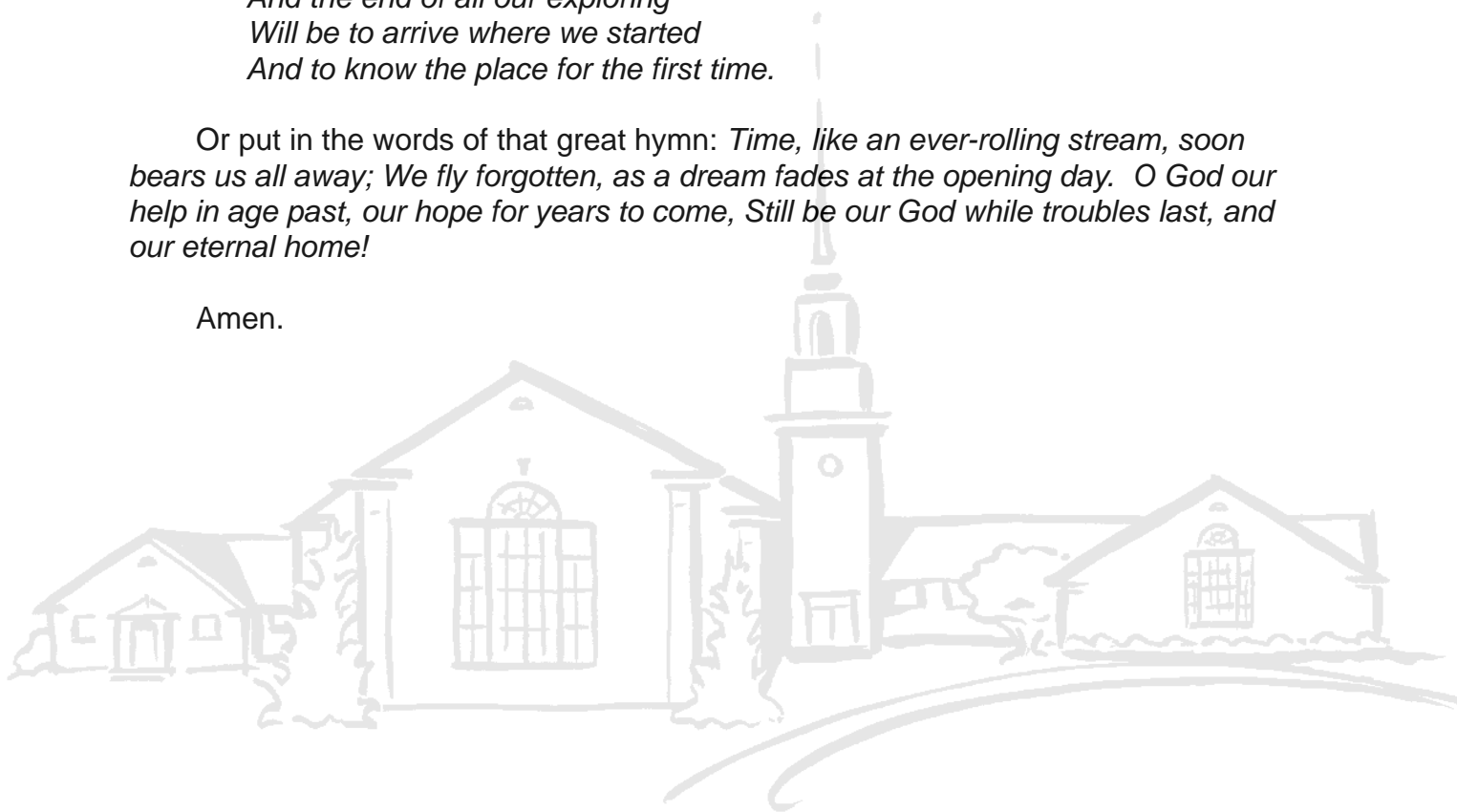
I know, I know, that's the “hopey, changey thing.” And if you think it's not working out very well, I might only suggest that you consider where fear, and fear-mongers will take us.

The French have a proverb that says, “To leave is to die a little.” But we know that the alternative is worst: to never leave is to be dead already. T.S. Eliot put it in just four lines of verse:

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And to know the place for the first time.*

Or put in the words of that great hymn: *Time, like an ever-rolling stream, soon bears us all away; We fly forgotten, as a dream fades at the opening day. O God our help in age past, our hope for years to come, Still be our God while troubles last, and our eternal home!*

Amen.



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