

“Calling”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, June 7, 2026

Texts: Genesis 12: 1-9 and Matthew 9:9-13

How is your spirit? Are you hopeful? Do you see bright and wonderful things in the future? Do you look “down the road” with anticipation, with dread, or with some of both? How about our church? What does “down the road” look like for this church? Are our best days behind us, right now, in the future? With apologies to those of you visiting today, I want to spend some of the sermon getting the congregation ready for a forum we are going to have after worship. At the same time, the lessons from the life of Abraham and Sarah have impact on all of us. Not only were they dealing with the depths of depression, they also were about to embark on the journey they could neither predict, nor control. God was at work in them, even though their circumstances would lead them to think otherwise. God called these two people—who by many accounts had been forsaken by the Lord—to do God’s work. And so, it is for us. People often discount us due to any number of circumstances. God, on the other hand, does not call the ones we consider qualified. Instead, God qualifies the called. God may be calling each of us – and all of us in this church—to do things we can’t even imagine. Our task is to hear and accept that call.

As I mentioned, things weren’t going well for Abraham and Sarah in one important way. After spending two chapters of the book of Genesis speaking of Abraham’s genealogy,

in Genesis 11:30, the authors rather simply state that Sarah is barren. I think you'll agree that barrenness is an effective metaphor for hopelessness. In Sarah's world, there is no near future. There is no human power to invent a future (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation Bible Commentary*, p116)."

Many of us have been in a similar situation. Maybe it didn't involve the ability to have children, but maybe it was a health diagnosis, a job loss, a death in the family, a loss of status or power, or a host of other challenges. Make no mistake that for Sara and Abraham, this family begins its life in a situation of irreparable hopelessness.

However, just a few verses later, "God speaks [God's] powerful word directly into a situation of barrenness," writes Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on this passage, "That is the ground of the good news. This God does not depend on any potentiality in the one addressed. Abraham and Sarah were quite without potential." You know, some might look at this congregation the same way. Even though we have never been a large congregation, it is accurate to say that we are older (on average) than we once were. Our participation is about the same, or maybe lower than it was at one time during our "heyday." We know that culturally, church is less and less a part of people's lives – especially our young people. All of kinds of prognosticators are indicating the decline of the church—of all churches—the time frames change depending on who you read. I even remember reading one book years ago called "Death of the Church." There are a lot of people who have written off the church –especially mainline churches, small churches, older churches, churches in rural communities, and the list goes on. To some, the future of

the church looks hopeless. Some might even wonder why we would hold a forum to talk about the future when everyone says we won't have one. Sounds pretty hopeless.

Verse one of chapter twelve begins this way: The Lord said. Dr. Brueggemann reminds us that “the speech of this God is imperative and promise, summons, and assurance. The barren one is moved and comes to life. And so, we dare say that this text is a paradigm for resurrection.” As people of faith, we believe that God has agency and that God can act in ways we don't always understand, but that lead us to be more than anyone thought we could be. Bruggemann continues, “God calls the hopeless ones into a community with a future. [God] calls the fixed ones into pilgrimage...It is a call for a dangerous departure from the presumed world of norms and security.” In other words, God is always calling us to a new thing. It doesn't really matter to God what the world thinks of who God calls and what God calls them to...God acts and changes the world with the least likely people. You'll find it in our Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Over and over again God calls people that the rest of the world has left behind. That's true for each of us here, and it is true for our congregation.

I believe that the greatest problem in the church today is our inability to dream dreams and envision a reality that is different from the one people expect. Too many churches simply accept that their best days were somewhere around 1950 and things have only gotten worse since. And yet, here we are—a community that will not likely ever be the largest faith community in Otsego County, but who has a deeper community than many churches who are many times our size. We have the ability to pull together and do what many would say is impossible. I have been a part of larger churches, younger churches,

wealthier churches, and yet the community I witness here is deeper and wider than I've ever seen. But as wonderful as we are, we are called to something more.

Later today, you'll hear what the Convergence team believes are the top three or four things that we should focus on for the near future. We are not asking anyone to produce solutions, or to solve the issues today. All we're doing today is asking ourselves whether or not these lofty ideas might be our "true north" for the next few years. We will share more with you when we gather after some fellowship time. All I want to do now is get your imagination going. What if God is calling us to something more than we can imagine?

That's the main point of the Abraham and Sarah story for this morning. It is equally true of the calling stories of the disciples we find in the Gospels. God doesn't go around finding all the people who are "great" in the world to go be greater. God isn't interested in stroking our ego or making us the biggest. In fact, for much of the early history of the church, Christians were an after thought at best and a laughingstock at worst. Christians were ridiculed, mocked, even killed for their action. Until Constantine came along, the church operated on the margins. And yet, those days were in many ways the most faithful days of the church. No one was very worried about being the biggest. They just worried about being the most faithful. They were (and we are) called to be faithful to the God who has called us here. We are called to seek ways to tell people there is a place for them in the church. Many people have left the organized church because the church forgot its mission. Every church has a slightly different call, but all of us are called by God to live out the true meaning of our faith statements. God's call requires a decision. Abraham and Sarah were called to choose. We are as well. We know we can't do everything. However, what might

occur if we had a few things to focus on for the next few years? What new energy might impact us and our communities? This isn't about having one more thing to do. Instead, it's about choosing what is most important for us for such a time as this.

“Believing in the promise of God without any visible evidence is what is meant by faith,” writes Dr. Bruggemann. And the primary purpose of a church is faith. Further, faith is characterized in much of the Bible as journey. All we're doing today is choose to take a journey together. It may be that our goals change over the years. Some we may accomplish and some we may not. Either way, we will have made a choice about who we are and more importantly, whose we are. I know that there are lot of problems with the Abraham and Sarah story, not the least of which is what happens to those who occupy the land that was promised to Abraham and Sarah. Further, Abraham, like Moses, is “not the one who finally arrives at his destination. He trusts the promise.” Our call today is the same. We may not arrive at the final destination. Life is too uncertain for that. And yet, what we do today will impact those who come along behind us. We could leave for them what someone else built for us. All of us yearn for settlement, security, and placement, and yet God never stops pushing us into a journey or sojourn. We simply cannot sit still completely.

More than anything else, though, Abraham and Sarah are called to be a blessing to all the people with whom they interact. We know they didn't always do that well. The call to us is the same, though. How can we be a blessing on all with whom we have contact? What could we do to share what is genuinely good news: God is at work in the world. God calls us into community. God claims us and uses us to be a blessing on the world. How we do so

changes by individual and community, but the call is the same: be a blessing. May we accept that call.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.