

1. Children: Today is Baccalaureate Sunday. (Point to the word on the bulletin.) Any idea what that might be?
2. Interview Paul Dungey—Paul tell us about your degree, what is it, what does it mean to you, What degree, how long did it take, why did you do it, is there a something special it has prepared you for?
3. It's really interesting that the lectionary reading for today is the call of Abraham and Sarah to begin a new chapter in their lives. It's actually the reading for last week, but we're using it this week because it fits our circumstance so well. Last week, we said good bye to Rev Patrick Heery, our pastor of 7 years. This week marks the beginning of a new chapter in the life of our church.
4. Today we are talking about new beginnings. Often an end is also a beginning. A graduation is the end of school, but it's also the beginning of whatever comes next. Very positive and exciting.
5. Patrick leaving is a new beginning, but it's mixed with a sense of loss. He's done so much for the church and for us personally, that it is hard to say good bye. It's a loss and like any loss we grieve. The place seems empty without him.
6. Yet, it is also a new beginning. We will write a new chapter together. We don't know what it will look like, but the Lord will lead us and the Lord will bless us, just as he has before.
7. Our life has changed. A new chapter has begun.
8. Abram and Sarai were living in Haran in northern Iraq, when God calls him to a new beginning. He is to leave his life behind, travel 400 miles with his family to an

- unknown land. He's an animal herder, so he takes his livelihood with him to this new land. He's 75 years old. We can imagine that this would seem like a bad idea. Haran is a pretty nice place at this time in history and his family is there. He's going to a strange new place full of strange people who speak a different language. But, God promises that he would bless Abram, and that he would become a blessing to the whole world, by becoming the ancestor of the Jewish people.
9. He's 75 years old, called to a new chapter, a new beginning, unknown and mysterious, but with a promise that it will be good, and that he will be blessed by God.
 10. For us, Abram and Sarah are examples of faith, of a new beginning, of trusting God for blessing and leadership, even though the destination is unknown. It's fortuitous that this reading comes in the lectionary at this time. We also are on our way to an unknown country.
 11. We know pastors come and go. As Presbyterians, we have an orderly process that we go through, which takes time, but it works. Still there is a certain amount of anxiety because the future is unknown. We don't know where this road will lead us. But we know that the spirit has faithfully led us in the past interim situations, before Patrick came, and before Phil came, and so on. We trust the same spirit will lead us again, and that the words of God to Abraham will also be for us. *I will bless you and you will be a blessing.* Isn't that what we are about? To take the blessing we have received and pass it on to the world?
 12. But there's also a word here for each of us.
 13. As individuals, we also come to new roads, new callings, unknown pathways, new life chapters, new beginnings.

We pray and listen for the Spirit to lead us through this unfamiliar territory.

14. Abraham was 75 years old when he is called to make this life change. Biblical ages are weird, but however old he was, it's clear that both Abraham and Sarah were not young. These are older persons making a new beginning, setting off on a long journey to an unknown destination. They still could be a blessing, someday, somehow. Likewise, with us. We might still be called to a new country. We might be as old as Abraham, 75, or older. We might have other deficits, whatever they might be, we still can be a blessing in some way or another.
15. What new thing is waiting to be born? We go through new life chapters from time to time. A new job. Moving away from home. A new relationship. A marriage. Those are the positive ones, the ones we celebrate, yet they may be mixed with a sense of loss.
16. First day of kindergarten, a day of promise mixed with loss. That cute little baby has grown up (story).
17. There also life chapters that seem mostly negative, like the loss of a spouse, or a divorce.
18. Losing a spouse means an end to the life of a person we loved. We don't only lose the life of the person, we lose the life we built together, just as Abraham and Sarah lost the life that they built in Haran. There's a whole life chapter that we had invested in all those years, that is gone forever, that will never come back.
19. Yet, something new is waiting to be born. It doesn't end there. It may take time, but we are being led to a new country, into a new place of blessing.
20. This time of year, after the recent rain, I'm watching the weeds grow and I am anxiously waiting for my vegetable and flower seeds to germinate. Germination has been

uneven this year because of the drought. But yet, I have faith. Something will grow. A new growing season is bursting forth all around, and I want to claim my part in it. The peonies, the roses, blackberries, grapes—they all are flowering and seem happy to be part of a new chapter in that ancient story of growth and renewal. My poor little vegetables need to get on board.

21. I watch the weeds. Nature is incredibly prolific. Each dandelion flower can produce 200 seeds. A large multi flora rose can produce ½ M seeds per year. They don't even need seeds. They can spread by their roots. No wonder it's considered invasive.
22. Nature is wonderfully prolific. It's filling every empty space in my humble plot of land. If it doesn't do it one way, it will do some other way. Plants are waiting to be born everywhere. That's creation. That's the world that God has made.
23. We also are wonderfully creative. There are life chapters in each of us waiting to be born. Since there are so many possibilities, we don't need to be stuck on one thing. If we try something and it doesn't work, or if something we've been doing for a long time stops working, plant another seed, see what happens. A good gardener is always germinating something.
24. It doesn't have to be some grandiose adventure like Abraham, leave your home, and give birth to the chosen people, be the father of three world religions.
25. Mary Oliver, the poet, spends a day strolling through the fields, gets on her hands and knees and watches a grasshopper, then asks, "*What else should I have done? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*"

26. Let us move into our new beginnings, whatever they might be. Write the new chapter of life. Be blessed, and be a blessing.

Rev. Larry B. Bell, June 18, 2023