

New Beginnings
Genesis 12:1-9

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost/18th August 2019

Throughout the summer we've been exploring the storied nature of our lives. As people of faith, we are called to honor our unique, individual stories, because our stories—yours and mine—are precious to God; they're situated in and integral to the sacred story that God continues to narrate. Our stories matter, even when we forget or can no longer remember our stories. We each have a story to tell, embedded in the larger story God is narrating, a story of creation and recreation.

If you were asked about your story, if someone said, "So, tell me your story," you would probably go back in your past to a point in time, pick a starting point, perhaps back to the beginning, and go from there. "*Once upon a time....*" Or, in the words of Genesis, "*In the beginning...*" (Gen. 1:1). You would probably proceed in a linear fashion, moving from the past up to the present. We have been conditioned to think that we're products of, shaped by, formed by the facts of the past. Sometimes this is true, but often the past is an illusion of the present or a lie that we tell ourselves or something we conveniently choose to forget. The novelist and essayist Toni Morrison (1931-2019), in a Commencement [speech](#) at Wellesley College several years ago, reflected on the nature of storytelling. "The past," she said, "is already in debt to the mismanaged present. And besides, contrary to what you may have heard or learned, the past is not done and it is not over, it's still in process, which is another way of saying that when it's critiqued, analyzed, it yields new information about itself. The past is already changing as it is being reexamined, as it is being listened to for deeper resonances. Actually," she says, "it can be more liberating than any imagined future if you are willing to identify its evasions, its distortions, its lies, and are willing to unleash its secrets."¹

Morrison calls us to analyze the "deeper resonances" of the past, to listen to what the past has to say so that we might be liberated from it. If there's anything in the American story needing to be unleashed of its demonic secrets it's the enslavement of Africans. This week, *The New York Times* introduced [The 1619 Project](#), a major initiative observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery, on August 20, 1619. This project "aims to reframe the country's history, understanding 1619 as our true founding,"—not 1776—"and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are."

Going back to the past to "unleash its secrets" can be liberating. It can pave the way toward confession and reconciliation and renewal. It's one way to free us from the past and present and release us for a better future. But it's not the only way.

Look carefully in the Bible and you'll see that the Living God brings liberation in an unusual way. There are moments when God brings about an entirely different future for God's people, not by renegotiating our relationship to the past but by doing something entirely, radically new. This new thing is genuinely new, unprecedented, unexpected, unanticipated by either the past or present. This new thing is unknown, unknown as the future. We could even call

this new thing the future, which for us is always unknown. The new thing that none of us knows anything about is like God, who is known and yet not fully known by us.

Theologians call this new thing the *novum*. “The new thing is the surprising thing,” as Jürgen Moltmann describes it, “the thing that could never have been expected. It evokes unbounded astonishment, and transforms the people whom it touches.”² From a biblical and theological point of view, the *novum*—the new thing—changes everything, it transforms our hearts and minds. It is grace, and like grace, changes the direction and meaning and purpose of our lives. And because it is grace it has the power to redirect the movement of history by granting a future, a new future that is not the product or result of the past. It is sheer gift from the unknown. As people of faith we are being shaped by the known-yet-unknown Living God who continually speaks to us a fresh, new, liberating word. This is why for the person of faith, history is never destiny. The present is not indicative of the future. The God of Abram and Sarah works in a different way. Anything is possible.

So, consider the call of Abram and Sarai in Genesis 12. Really, we should begin with the last verse of Genesis 11, 11:32: “The days of Terah,” the father of Abram, “were two hundred, and five years, and Terah died in Haran.” That’s how it ends: with death. And then, as if from out of nowhere, comes 12:1, “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.’” It’s in *that* holy space between 11:32 and 12:1—in *that* space, that we witness the *novum*, the new thing. In fact, there’s actually a major break in the text. Walter Brueggemann suggests that it’s the most important structural break in the book of Genesis, and probably the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures.³ There is a *before* and an *after* and in between there is what Jewish theologian Michael Fishbane calls a breaking point, a “*caesural event*,” an event that is eruptive, disruptive, a rupture of reason and sensibility and logic. We find events of this kind throughout the Bible, events that change us and change history.⁴

Going back to the text, Genesis 1-11 tells the story of creation followed by generations that end in barrenness, in death, in nothing. By the end of Genesis 11, the generations have been played out. There is no future. Sarai is barren. The past and the present have run their course, they are no long generative. Genesis has become anti-Genesis. Then, from out of nowhere, Yahweh appears and speaks and a radically new future begins to take shape. Remarkably, barrenness is the arena of God’s life-giving action. New life begins in a state of hopelessness. God speaks directly into a desperate situation, one in which the future could not be imagined. And it’s the speaking of God directly into the place of hopelessness that becomes the ground of the good news. It’s all about God in this text. This promised future is not the result of any potential within Abram and Sarai, it won’t come about because of inherent capacities or personal resources. There’s nothing from their past or the present that will carry them over into that future, there’s nothing from the past that guarantees their future—the past is useless, it can’t give birth, it can’t promise anything. God’s speech, the creative Word is all that is necessary for them to step out into the future. Even here, though, there’s no analogous experience for them to draw upon. They hear “a word about a future to a family without any hope for future.”⁵ That’s the *novum*. The Living God speaks over the barrenness and breaks in as pure gift—and grants Abram and Sarai a new beginning.

That's how the Living God narrates the story of creation and recreation, by doing something radically new. Yahweh once said to Isaiah: "Do not remember the former thing or consider the things of old, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Is. 43:18). This is one of my favorite verses and powerfully spoke to me when I was in college, as I sensed that God was about to do a new thing in my life. And this new thing is truly *new*. In fact, the announcement of the new is a judgment on everything former. The new doesn't emerge from the old. It's not simply the old in new form. And we're not talking about a natural process or progress or evolution here. We're talking about something unnatural. It is a new creation. Creation is reserved for God alone—*bara* in Hebrew, meaning "to create," is reserved only for God. Only God creates—*creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing. Human beings work with what has been given to us, but we don't, technically, create. Only God creates. In fact, if you want to know where God is in the world then pay attention to these transforming moments of new creation, because they're all over scripture.

Consider the other times when God provided hope in the state of barrenness. Consider the exodus of God's people out from captivity through the Red Sea, providing a way when there was no way (Exodus 14). Or the time God showed up and called unlikely characters into the story of salvation—think of David (1 Samuel 16). There was that time the angel Gabriel announced the radically new thing about to happen in her life (and our lives), the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth (Luke 1:36-48). Look at the life of Jesus and his death, and then consider the resurrection itself: God provided a way when there was no apparent way. Resurrection is the new thing, the *novum*, resulting in the transformation of human life and the course of history. Actually, Genesis 12, the call of Abram, in many respects, foreshadows the resurrection; it's a paradigm for the resurrection.⁶ In fact, Paul sees a parallel between what God offered Abram and Sarai and what God offered through the resurrection. Abraham is the father of us all, Paul says, who, "hoping against hope," believed and trusted in God, the God, Paul says, "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the thing that does not exist" (Romans 4:17).

Who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the thing that does not exist. This is the way of God, the God of new beginnings, of fresh starts, of grace. It's why Paul could say to the church in Corinth, with joy, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17). It's why Paul could say to the church in Galatia, "...a new creation is everything!" (Gal 6:15). New creation—*καινή κτίσις* (*kaine ktisis*)! The new creation God offers us in Christ is a true *novum*.

And I really like the way theologian David Congdon suggests that the new creation "is not a creation so much as a creating—a *creatio continua*—that happens in each existential moment."⁷ This ongoing creating is not the result of something inherent to nature, it's the work of God and therefore it is unnatural. It's something new. Christ comes making all things new, establishing a new order, not taking us back to a glorified past. In this respect, Congdon says—with an arresting and provocative image that takes your breath away—"Christ comes as the great destroyer of Eden."⁸ We're not called to go back to a mythic garden, but forward into the new creation that God is bringing about—in you and me. We were never called to go back to Eden. Remember, God placed an angel with a flaming sword to the east end of Eden to make sure we never return. We can never go back (Genesis 3:24). As Thomas Wolfe knew (1900-1938), we can't go home again. We can't go back. Looking to the past for life is a regressive move.

Nostalgia, too, is powerless to save us for the present or the future. We can't go home again—and trying to make *anything* “again,” whether church or nation, is a regressive move. It's not a faithful move, it's not a hopeful move, it's not the stance for people of the new creation.

The God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) is the God of *new* beginnings. These ideas might be tough to grasp and you might be wondering how all of this is relevant to your life. For me, the reality of the *novum*—the new thing that God causes to be, which does not emerge from the past—is the ground or foundation of the gospel, and the foundation of hope for the living of these challenging days. We can face the future with hope—not optimism or wishful thinking, but with hope—because the story of God's love is still unfolding. God is always doing a new thing. The past is not determinative of the future. History is not destiny. The present order of things is not definitive. All is possible.

The spiritual, existential, psychological, pastoral dimensions of all of this are profound. I stand in awe before all of it, I really do. There are so many people who are trapped by the circumstances of the past, bound by events that took place a long time ago, which they had no control over. The events of the past cast a shadow over their lives leaving them caught or stuck, in a barren land, a wilderness, without hope. We can't undo the facts of the past. But we are also more than the accumulation of all that has happened to us. The good news of the gospel is that God never leaves us in those barren places. God can and does provide a way when there is no way. I have seen it in my own life and I have seen it in the lives of countless others. I can't tell what the future will be. As a pastor, I'm always careful about not saying things I have no right saying, giving false hope, saying things that I don't know enough about, like the future. Sometimes we have to sit and wait in the tension, in the in-between, live in the unknown, and wait for the new thing to appear. But what I do know and stake my life on is that there is a new creation, the *novum*. I agree with Paul, “New creation is everything.” The God of Abram and Sarai, the God of Jesus Christ, is always doing a new thing. The Living God speaks over the barrenness and invokes a new future that is pure gift—a new beginning, again and again and again.

¹ From Toni Morrison's 2004 Commencement Speech to Wellesley College cited [here](#).

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 28.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 116.

⁴ Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 18-20

⁵ Brueggemann, 116-117.

⁶ Brueggemann, 117.

⁷ David Congdon, *The God Who Saves: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 227

⁸ Congdon, 227.