

Welcome

When I took calculus my senior year of high school, I had to get a TI-86 graphic calculator (I'm a gadget guy, so this was exciting for me). My mom and I went to Wal-Mart, made the purchase, and I immediately started trying to figure out how to program my own games.

A couple of weeks later - before the excitement of a new gadget had worn off, we went to visit my grandma. She lived in Mound City, KS, which is a town of fewer than a thousand. With not a McDonalds or Wal-Mart in sight (the nearest was about 30 miles away), I was struck by a profound thought:

I asked my mom what she would've done in High School if she had needed a TI-86.

She sort of rolled her eyes at me and said, "We'd either have ordered it from the general store or gone without."

For a kid from the suburbs, connected to a big city, this was an eye-opening moment for me, my first real glimpse into small town life.

Back then, Mound City was the kind of town Springsteen sang about in "Thunder Road". If you weren't a farmer, there really wasn't much else for you to do there. Today, the town hasn't fared well. Pretty much everyone my mom's age either left or has slid into poverty. The town's biggest struggles are methamphetamines and prostitution - the kinds of problems poverty creates.

To make a life for herself, my mom had to leave - there wasn't anything in her hometown for her.

So too with Mary. In the song, her town has nothing to offer her - high school is over, all her lovers are losers, the Chevrolets are burned out. It's time for her to take the next step, to leave.

But the song ends in ambiguity. Will she take that long walk from her front porch to his front seat?

I want to talk about calling today: about why we can't stay where we are, as individuals or as a church. I want to begin to dream with you about what's over the horizon, the future that's just beyond our grasp.

And I want to invite you to take that long walk with me into the future. Because God is calling us to something new, something different. Something that will require us to leave behind all we know, what's made us comfortable, what feels safe and normal.

And we don't get a road map. Jesus done took the wheel. God is in the driver's seat, extending a hand, inviting us to climb in. We don't get a plan. We get a promise of God's presence.

Series

We're kicking off a new series for the summer. We're going to be in the book of Genesis, exploring the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs - Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah and Joseph.

We're calling the series The Way, Way Back - which is what we called the back of the station wagon when we were growing up. As a kid, was there anywhere better to spend a Summer Road Trip? The patriarchs are constantly leaving where they are and going somewhere else. God is constantly on the move in Genesis, and so are God's people. So we're going to explore what we learn when we follow God into the great unknown. (After all, what's more quintessentially summer than a road trip?)

[Scripture Slide] We're beginning at the beginning, with Abram and his wife Sarai. The story begins in the town of Haran, where Abram's father settled some time ago.

If you were here last week, you might remember Josh's explanation of patriarchy as the way ancient cultures were organized. As a part of his father's household, Abram and his siblings and all their descendants lived under his father's roof. Abram and Sarai didn't have any children, as Sarai was unable to conceive. So Abram's nephew, Lot, was going to inherit everything once Abram and his father both passed on.

One of the reasons Haran was a settlement was that it housed a shrine to a moon god. In Abram's world, gods lived in shrines and temples, so people settled around those shrines, to be close to their gods.

Abram's story is a classic set-up: he's just going along, living his life, when a stranger comes to town (like Gandalf in Lord of the Rings or the cowboy in pretty much any Western, or like Bruce in "Thunder Road" pulling up in front of Mary's house).

Let's read what happens:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you."

So Abram departed as the LORD had instructed, and Lot went with him. -- Genesis 12:1-4

God is disruptive. God calls Abram to leave his father and his father's land. This was unthinkable in Abram's day - it was essentially agreeing never to see his father again. It was a challenge to the social order - children simply didn't leave their parents. Abram was violating everything that was sacred about the way people did stuff.

And for whom? A god we're not even sure Abram had ever heard of. It's been a long time since the days of Noah, and there's no evidence anyone is worshipping Yahweh anymore. This shouldn't surprise us - we've known since the Garden that humanity was sinful, turning away from our creator towards idols. We're not surprised Abram's father has made his home in the house of a moon god.

But it *is* surprising that Abram responds when Yahweh calls. "Leave your country, your tribe and your family and go to the land I'll show you."

Give up everything you know, all the comforts that make home *home* and start walking. I'll let you know when we get there.

Abram's immediate obedience is staggering. Leaving everything he knows, following after a god he probably doesn't... people just don't *do* that.

Yet it is God's promise of something new that compels Abram forward. God wants to do something new, something unprecedented. Yes, Abram will become wealthy and famous. But more than that, every nation will be similarly blessed by the nation that comes from Abram.

That language is important: Genesis 10 listed 70 nations, which was a way of listing every nation in the world (7*10 is a very Hebrew way of saying 'everyone'). And this nation that will come from Abram isn't in that list.

Because this isn't business as usual. Abram's not going to establish just another Haran with another shrine to another god.

This is new. This is different. This is the very definition of outside the box.

We struggle to hear the power of God's promise because we live in a world that is closed. Since the Enlightenment, we've seen the universe as self-contained. Nothing new, nothing outside can come in. Whatever we have is what we have.

In a closed system, we have two options: pride and despair. Pride is the future of Star Trek - we look ahead and say, "We're good enough to make everything right with a little elbow grease and optimism."

Despair is the future of dystopia. It's the Hunger Games or Fahrenheit 451. It says, "We're broken and nothing can change that. So whatever is coming will just be more of the same until we die."

In a closed universe, Mary of "Thunder Road" has two choices: she can become Mayor of her broken little town or she can end up a burnout like everyone else. But either way, she's still stuck there, with no real future and no real hope.

God comes to Abram with a disruptive offer: God is doing something new, something different, something that breaks the brokenness of Abram's world. God will create a new nation, a new people, and *this people will save the world*.

But only if Abram comes with God. Abram has to leave the comforts of home if he wants to see these promises of God fulfilled.

Abram can't stay in the broken systems he's grown up in if he wants to be part of God's new thing.

Abram can't continue living in the toxic places he's become comfortable if he wants to walk in God's new life.

God's aim is to disrupt the broken systems of sin that have swallowed the world. God's plan is to use a people, a new nation, something never seen before. For Abram, this is dangerous: to leave his comforts, his norms, his security.

But notice God doesn't demand or insist. God gives no law... only an invitation.

An invitation to what?

Abram doesn't know. To everyone around him, Abram's choice looks like foolishness. No one in his world who was in their right mind would abandon everything and set off for parts unknown with no plan.

But this is God's offer: no plan, only a promise.

In making his similar offer to Mary, Bruce says, "All the redemption I can offer, girl, is beneath this dirty hood, with a chance to make it good somehow..."

"Oh, oh, come take my hand. We're riding out tonight to case the promised land."

For Bruce, salvation isn't an escape to some other world. It's real world. It's dirty. It requires Mary to get in the car and drive away from the town she's always known, the things that make her comfortable.

So too with us. As we look toward the future, we must understand that whatever God is calling us to, it will require real changes in our lives.

Too often, Christianity gets reduced to internal changes - we say a prayer. We focus on how we feel, but not what we *do*.

But God is still about disrupting our broken, sinful systems.

What does that look like?

Well, we're not sure yet. But we know what's broken. We know that fewer and fewer people view faith as a necessity or the Church as a vital centerpiece of life.

Even faithful church members today attend barely more than once a month, on average.

And if you chart church involvement by generations on a graph, it's a steady decline from Boomers through Xers down to Millennials and then a sharp drop off when we get to Gen Z.

What does that mean for Catalyst?

Since the beginning, we've called ourselves a church for people who don't like Church. Our model of ministry is what's called in Church Leadership circles "attractional". In other words, the goal is to create a really great experience that, once people get a taste of, they want more of.

It works really well for people who love church. And the way we do it here at Catalyst actually works really well for people who love the idea of Church but not the kinds of experiences they've had in churches growing up or in other congregations.

But the reality of our world is that fewer and fewer people don't like Church. They don't love Church either... the best way to describe their disposition is that they don't *care about church*. They don't think about faith, they rarely ask questions about God. They don't know even basic Scripture.

The way we do stuff now doesn't engage those folks with the good news about Jesus. Even when they join us for our attractional Sunday experience - they have a nice time and say kind things about how friendly everyone is and inspiring they found the music and message.

But it doesn't move them.

Friends, this is going to be more and more the norm over the next decades. And if we choose to stay the same old church doing the same old things, eventually, we'll be as obsolete as slide rules and phone books and Blockbuster Videos.

That's not what I want for Catalyst. And I know it's not what you want for Catalyst. We want to be a Church that's embodying the good news about Jesus afresh for every new generation. A people so overflowing with God's love that we disrupt the people in our orbits with holy love.

The million dollar question is: What does that look like? What changes do we need to make? What's the plan?

I'll be honest with you: we don't have a plan. We don't know. Your Leadership Team has been in prayer and conversation about this all year. And what we know is that there's a lot we don't know.

We don't have a plan.

But neither did Mary.

Neither did Abraham.

What they had were promises. The promise that salvation is out there. The knowledge that to stay is death, whether immediate or eventual.

There's nothing for us in staying where we are. Ghosts and burned out Chevrolets.

So we want to set off on this adventure together. We believe God is still with us. We believe God is still preparing new work for us. We believe God knows exactly where we're going. All we have to do is get in.

So this summer, we want to invite you to pray and to dream with us. What kind of Church could we be 5, 10, 20 years from now? What needs to change? What needs to remain?

Change is never easy. But friends, the hardest step is the first. The longest walk is from our front porch to God's front seat. The door is open, but the ride, it ain't free.

To go with God costs us the comforts of home.

To go with God costs us our assumptions and convictions about the right way to do things.

To go with God costs us our right to be safe and comfortable.

But friends, God is good. God is trustworthy.

We don't need a plan when we have the promise of the one who created and called us.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] The long walk to say Yes to God...

Assignment + Blessing

Dream about what's next for Catalyst.