

Have you ever played chess? I haven't played chess in a number of years, but when I was young, I played it often. Even if you *don't* play chess, you probably know this much: When your king is vulnerable to a direct attack, it's called "check." And when your king cannot *escape* from this attack, it's called "checkmate." But it's also possible to position your playing pieces so that your king is totally surrounded by your own chessmen, and none of your opponent's pieces are able to make an immediate capture. That protective arrangement is called...the beginning of the game. It lasts until somebody makes the first move.

Imagine two people who have just set up their pieces for a chess game. A friend rushes up and cries, "Wait a minute! Have you lost your minds? If you go ahead with this, both of you are going to lose most of your pieces. In fact, *one* of you will lose the *whole game*. Take my advice. Leave things just the way they are." Nobody would say that. Everybody knows there's no point to those neatly arranged chess pieces unless two players *take a risk* and set them in motion.

In our first reading this morning, we heard about two of our most significant ancestors in the faith, Abraham and Sarah. They had things in place for their retirement. They lived comfortably and securely among their relatives. They had amassed a sizeable herd and plenty of servants. They were all set up to enjoy their golden years.

But then came an unsettling call from God: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (*Gen 12:1*). And Abraham, age 75, and Sarah, not much younger, started packing.

Don't you suppose their friends rushed up and cried, "Have you lost your minds? If you go ahead with this, both of you are going to lose the security of your home, your friends, and your family. *Anything* might happen to you out there. You have everything you need right here. Take my advice and don't take one step away from your home."

So maybe Abraham and Sarah packed some extra Geritol and Ben-Gay, but, by golly, didn't they grab their canes and hobble off into the unknown *anyway*?

This story of Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of our faith, reminds me of something I try so hard to forget. Life is *all about risk*. Everything that is alive is taking risks. As soon as risk-taking stops, life stops. But isn't there something in us that tries so

*hard* to position things just the way we want them and then hold things still? Our egos long for that illusive sense of security. But to our *spirits*, it is like *death*.

I am not suggesting that we tear up our insurance policies, and act foolishly in how we order our lives. Not at all. I am simply saying that when we look for life, purpose, and fulfillment in security, stability, and safety, it's like looking for a party in a cemetery. We're looking in the wrong place.

Can you imagine what might have happened if the angels in heaven had a say in things just before we were born? Maybe an angel friend would come up to us as we were preparing to enter this world and cry, "Good heavens! Have you lost your mind? If you go out there, you are going to feel pain, rejection, loneliness, and fear. You're going to mess up and feel cut off from God, and in the end you're going to lose everything that is dear to you. Look how comforting this womb is. Take my advice and stay right where you are!"

And yet, isn't it our *lives*, with all the laughter and tears, the drama and poignancy, that we value the most? Frederick Buechner said, "We find by losing. We hold fast by letting go. We become something new by ceasing to be something old." Abraham and Sarah must have known this deep down in their souls when they left the comforts and security of home and set out for the new land God would show them. That's why we call them the father and mother of our faith.

So what is the faith that these two advanced risk-takers show us? Some people think of faith as the belief that God won't let anything bad happen to them, and that if they pray hard enough, God will grant them what they ask for. That's a little like trying to play chess insisting that none of your pieces get captured and that no matter how you play, you win. What kind of game would that be?

For me, faith is something like a chess game. I have to take a risk if I'm ever going to move forward. I've been saying this for seven-plus years as regards our Shared Ministry. God is calling us to take big risks in order to move *our* life forward. But when we *take* that risk, we find God empowering us in ways we could never have imagined had we *not* taken that risk.

You don't believe it? Look at Paul. Paul's faith empowered him to embrace every challenge with unshakable courage and hope. He wrote these words as he was awaiting trial in prison: "I can do *all* things through him who strengthens me" (*Phil 4:11-13*). So important are those words to my faith journey, I have a plaque bearing those words right where I can see them – and be reminded of them – every day.

So our trailblazers of faith, Abraham, Sarah, and Paul, remind us that we are at our best not when we are anxiously holding the fort against life's uncertainties, but when we are taking risks, facing and embracing life's challenges, walking in the faith that in the end, we are bigger than anything we might lose, and God's love is bigger than anything that can happen to us.

In God's call to Abraham and Sarah there was also a promise. God said, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.... In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (*Gen 12:2-3*). God's blessings naturally flow through our lives when we stop protecting ourselves from risk and enter into life courageously. Someone said, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." When we bring our fears into the light of God, we can begin to see through them and perceive the everlasting arms of God that will never let us go. We see that in God's eternal embrace we are free, worthy, loved, and ultimately, that we have *nothing* to fear. We are indeed *blessed*, and as we live in that exhilarating realization, God blesses the world through us.

Abraham and Sarah help us journey further into Lent by helping us think about our own life's journey. Is there some place where you have been holding out against life's relentless movement and flow? Maybe you are resisting changes that are happening in your family or loved ones. Maybe you are denying a restlessness with your vocation. Maybe you are repressing long-buried parts of yourself that are struggling to come back to life. *Listen deeply.*

- Do you hear God's call to leave the dead certainties of what you *know* and step out toward a *new place* God wants to show you?
- Can you bring your fears into the light of God?
- Can you place your feet on the faith that God will meet you in the midst of the risks of life, more than in the stagnation of your security?
- Can you walk in the assurance that nothing will ever be able to separate you from the love of God?

If so, with God's strength, you are ready to move fully into life, to discover untold blessings, and to be a blessing to the world.