

The Line Between Resignation and Hope  
 Reading from the New Testament: Romans 5:1-5  
 Reading from the Old Testament: Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

Willa Cather said, “I like trees because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do.” I don’t know that I would so much call that worldview, *bleak*, as I would call it unimaginative. If optimism is on one end of the scale and pessimism on the other end, with realism being in the middle, one who claims Cather’s disposition would sway just to the left to just to the right of realism depending on anything from the weather to the news to the mood of your cat.

In the era before your smartphone told you the name, location, and blood pressure of your caller, maybe you remember calling someone who answers with breathless anticipation as if this could be **the** seminal phone call that could alter the direction of their life. But, upon hearing you speak, their reaction is a most deflated, “Oh, it’s only you.”

Man, I’ve spent most of my life as the *Oh, it’s only you* guy; my entrance into the room bringing neither excitement nor fear, energetic anticipation nor bridled fury. In other words, I’m not the straw that

stirs the drink, I'm more like the straw that falls to the side when your arthritic fingers accidentally pick up more than one at the condiment bar. At least I'm biodegradable, right?

It's not a bad place to be, really. I've never been comfortable being made a fuss of; never been one to make a scene ...or... make the scene. Oh, I've had my share of outsized dreams, unrealistic bordering on ridiculous visions of the possible; but gratitude for what is won't let me despair much over what isn't.

Is that resignation? Does being resigned to your situation leave you at a dead end? I don't quite know for sure, but I would suggest to you that resignation isn't a cul-de-sac so much as it's a traffic circle. We live on the end of the last cul-de-sac of a long and winding subdivision. We see a car in our cul-de-sac for only two reasons. You've arrived, or you're lost. However, in a traffic circle, you may be scared, you may even feel trapped, you may not know where you are going, but you are going to get off, your vehicle taking you in some direction, even if it's the wrong direction.

Cather's preference for trees **resigned** to the way they have to live, may be one road map for contentment, but only if it is not a closed course, and there is always an open lane to possibility.

Abraham and Sarah. Like the acquaintances you acknowledge with a nod at Firebirds or the couples' sitting near you in worship, we don't know much of the backstory on Abraham and Sarah in spite of the seminal role they played in our faith tradition. We know Abram was the son of Terah in the family lineage of Noah, that he was born in Ur of the Chaldeans and had two brothers along with that nephew who would later lose his wife to a terminally toxic case of salt. We are not given any rom-com narrative that would reveal much about the courtship of Abraham and Sarah, but as with so many couples today, their marriage would include a number of relocations, keeping the real estate folks busy with showings and closings.

Abe and Sarah settled into a long marriage laced with its share of drama and challenge ... but no children. We know that detail brought tension enough to threaten their marriage, hence Ishmael, but by the time we catch up with them in Chapter 18, they have long ago resigned themselves to a life together without children; though they were

repeatedly confused, or rather, bemused by the intrusion of the Lord's voice with lofty promises of innumerable heirs. "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Commence eye roll, because Abraham and Sarah were literally no longer equipped for that. Abraham was probably still traumatized by being the only person in history to qualify for a senior citizen discount on his circumcision. Yowsa!!

Yet, once again, here in our text today, while he's taking a *setaspell* under an oak tree in the heat of the day just north of contemporary Hebron, Abraham finds himself unexpectedly playing host to a mystery group of visitors, or was it the Lord himself, who brings him the warning, once again to get busy painting the nursery and sanding the rust off his old tricycle, because a baby's on the way.

Except this time Sarah hears the exchange and nearly busts a gut laughing. "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" She didn't know what was more ludicrous, the idea of her lighting candles while Abe puts on an old Luther Vandross album or of her talking to a lactation specialist in the maternity ward. OT savant Walter Brueggemann points out that here, Abraham and Sarah's "world

of barrenness is shattered by new possibility that lies outside the reasonable expectation of their perceptual field.” (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*)

At this point “God’s promise outdistances their ability to receive it. We can’t blame them because to accept God’s promises here would require them to suspend all the parameters of reason, wisdom, morality, or common sense.

The Lord’s response to their skepticism is direct and simple. “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” The Lord doesn’t really wait for an answer. Indeed, the Lord’s rather blunt. *Yo, I’m coming back next year and you’ll be holding a squalling baby in one arm while trying to vacuum the Cheerios out of the back seat of the Buick with the other.*

Abraham and Sarah found themselves on the traffic circle of resignation with the assumption it was a cul-de-sac. They had become accustomed, if not at ease, to their situation in life. They had accepted that life without parent/teacher conferences and Disneyworld would be their version of normal. But it wasn’t a cul-de-sac, it was a traffic circle, and there were exits they could take. Now, they could choose the road that leads through bitterness, resentful about the future that never came to pass. Or, they could choose this other road called possibility.

Yes, it appears a bit scary and curvy where it begins, but it leads to all sorts of possibilities and is illuminated with hope.

Though our hearts are warmed by those recurrent movie scenes where a parent or adult grasps the shoulders of a child wrestling with self-doubt, a lack of confidence, too fearful to try; and the adult implores the child with the soft voice of assurance, “You can be anything you want to be!” ---- They’re lying. We lie to our kids all the time. “You can be anything you want to be; do anything you put your mind to!”

No, you can’t. Listen, I can put my mind to it, along with yours, and Einstein’s too, and I’m still not going to win the Olympic marathon. Not happenin’! Motor just doesn’t have that kind of horsepower. And hey, Shaquille O’Neill is a basketball legend. Amazing athlete. Successful pitchman, businessman, policeman. The big Aristotle can do so many things. Why, give him a crowbar and a man-sized shoehorn, and ol’ Shaq might even be able to wedge himself into Zach’s SmartCar. Yet, all the *want to* in the world isn’t going to allow Shaq to break Usain Bolt’s world record in the 100-meter dash. Won’t happen. Yadi Molina is an icon in St. Louis, a perennial all-star, one of the greatest catchers in the history of baseball, the heart and soul of my beloved Cardinals, but

one thing you will never hear any Cards fan ever promise is that Yadi will break the stolen base record. Not happenin'. Slower than grandma after two martinis kind of slow.

But for Shaq, Yadi, even me, and certainly for you, there are so many things that you can do, accomplish, experience, overcome, survive, hope for, feel called to, be equipped for. Resigning yourself to who you are, to what you have already, to the tools/gifts you already possess is not settling for the cul-de-sac; rather, it is entering a traffic circle as long as you are open to the possibilities that God may reveal to you, opportunities that may come as a surprise to you. That other exit is called bitterness and you don't need to go there.

I heard someone speak of a friend this week, saying of his efforts, "Doesn't he know he's going to fail?" I wanted to shout, "You don't know that he is going to fail. You don't even know what your future is going to look like, much less his. Can't we just at least grant him a cautious optimism? Can't we be receptive to the future the Lord may open to him? To us?"

Andreas Christopheros was a young competent, confident, and reasonably content businessman living with his wife and young son in the small town of Truro in the southern English county known as Cornwall. He worked out of his home office, logging the long hours typical for a small business owner. One morning he was at his desk working while his wife slept in upstairs after a sleepless night with a feverish child.

Andreas saw a red Peugeot van pull up outside, not thinking anything of it other than its similarity to the van he used in his business. About five minutes later there was a knock at the door. He wasn't expecting any visitors, but it certainly wasn't unheard of. He received courier packages all the time for his business.

He went to see who it was, but as he opened the door, the visitor threw about a pint of concentrated sulphuric acid into his face and chest, saying, "This is for you, mate!" And thus began an incomprehensibly painful and life-altering journey. The attacker had driven 300 miles south from Hastings seeking revenge for the sexual assault of a family member. Trouble is, the attacker had shown up at the wrong address.



Other worldly pain; life-altering injuries, face altering scar tissue, three months in the hospital, the additional trauma of the investigation and trial of a man he had never met, from a town to which he may well have never travelled, the victim of revenge for a crime to which he had no connection, all because some crazed vigilante punched the wrong number into his GPS. A mistaken identity. A life altered. Andreas Christopheros would awake after a week's coma to find himself entering the traffic circle of resignation. Life was going to be different, but what direction would it take?

Amazingly, Andreas did not wake up with anger. He was alive. He thought he would be angry, but he also knew that he could easily lose himself in the anger, and if he did lose himself in that anger he would probably never come back. So, instead of anger, almost immediately, he felt driven he said, "to get on with it." He needed some normalcy, something as simple as sitting down with his wife for 15 minutes to read the messages sent to them and watch some trashy TV. He didn't want to be held up for the rest of his life. He knew he could not "rebuild" his past life; couldn't recreate how it was before the attack. It had happened ... to him. He needed to explore and accept what he could do

and find joy and meaning in that. He was already finding great meaning and joy in the support structure of family and friends.

Andreas wasn't foolish. He knew his recovery was going to be a slog, and his biggest fear was how his one-year-old son would react when he first saw him. Would there be any recognition? Would he appear to his child as a monster?

They had waited weeks before they brought their son to see him; and Andreas was afraid his worst nightmare was being realized when his son, Theo, first looked at him. The boy immediately buried his face in his mom's shoulder. Andreas could take the incredible pain, but not this. But then, when he spoke, when Theo heard his father's voice, he turned to Andreas and reached out for a hug, and father and son embraced for an hour. Andreas says that if not for his son, he doesn't think he would have made it. (Background information from an interview with BBC News)

Life is different. Life is good. A second child. A simpler but more meaningful life. Working, but not obsessed with it. Family life is the higher priority. Even with years of reconstructive surgery still before

him, when asked, he was flummoxed by the question of whether he would choose his life before the attack or now, five years after the attack. There was much gratitude in his voice as he spoke of his family, friends. He spoke as one who saw the present and future as a possibility and not a sentence.

Each life has its limits and there are times for resignation to reality. But resignation does not have to disqualify possibility. Never assume what God can and cannot do. Trust the One who looks to you and says, “Is anything too wonderful for God?” Amen.