

I am going to start our time together this morning with some connecting the dots on the screen, and let's see if we can figure out together what the picture is.

(Show first connect the dots image)

We can all tell what this is. Tell me what you think, say it out loud. Good, yes, it's a dolphin, and yes, it is my favorite animal thank you for asking. Okay, how about the next one?

(Show the second one connect the dots image)

What do you think that is? Yes, it is a snake. And yes, that is, in fact, Andy's favorite animal. Just kidding. If you've been around here longer than 10 min, you know Andy does not like snakes. Okay, I have one more.

(Show the third connect the dots image, the one with only 2-3 dots)

Can anyone tell me what this is? No, you can't because we can't see the full picture. We don't know which direction the next dot will be. There is no way to predict with accuracy what this picture will be.

Our lives and our relationship with the Creator are like this sometimes. We are in a series called "In the Middle" where we are looking at stories in scripture of people who were in the middle of their journey of following God. Today, I'd like to share a little bit about a middle season I have been in and then take a look at the life of Abram, who we know as Abraham. We will be looking at the beginning of Genesis 12, but why not start with a little vulnerability? Authenticity is a key part of our culture here, so if this is your first time with us, you need to know that this is a place where we set aside facades and live authentically.

For the last year, I have been in regular therapy. There are a lot of factors from my story that play into it that I won't go into in this context, but I do want to set the scene for what transpired for me finally make the call. I was having recurring panic attacks, navigating a difficult adoption situation, and I was trying to figure out how to parent children with special needs that were unique to each of them. ***And just a word on that, if you are parenting a child with special needs, I see you. I am you. I actually have a support group I lead, find me after for details. If you know someone with special needs kids, offer to help them. They don't want to ask for help, but they are tired and sometimes hopeless.*** So, all of this was going on, and I was

also trying to be a wife, lead a ministry, be a friend etc. So, when the panic attacks and anxiety became unbearable, I went to my nurse practitioner, and I found a counselor.

One of the things that were quickly evident to my counselor was my attachment to having control of at least knowing what was coming next. It boiled down to the fact that if I don't know every piece of the puzzle or if I can't anticipate what is next, then my brain fires a message of "You are not safe." While this was a deeply layered trauma response, my brain latched on to the idea that I needed to figure every scenario out to feel safe. This plays out in ways like looking everything up online first, preferring to drive everywhere, and not flying because of the lack of control. But it also has taken a toll on the level of trust I can offer in my relationship with Jesus.

Therapy is really hard work. It can be painful. There were things brought up that I had repressed, and I needed to deal with them. It hurt, and it was heartbreaking at times. It has been said, "We cannot heal what we won't feel. So, I went through the work of feeling and healing.

It became clear that my hypervigilance, perfection, and image-focused ego were all things I was putting trust in above Jesus. All the hard work I mentioned above was like tilling the soil of my heart to get it ready for God to grow something new in me.

I was challenged to get comfortable with mystery. I was challenged to slow down, rest, and to practice silence. If you know me, that sounds like a list of things Melissa Cook hates.

In the midst of all of this, I had a growing desire to have some space between being on the payroll for Jesus and just being a daughter to Jesus. I have always been in ministry. My dad was a pastor, I was on staff in churches all through college, and served in ministry since. It has been my whole identity. But I started to feel a shift. In fact, after I shared my plan with one of our new residents, Abi she said, "It seems like the Holy Spirit was telling you to live in the kingdom instead of trying to run the kingdom." And she was right.

So, in November/December of this year, I began having conversations with leadership about what I was processing. I felt that I needed to resign. Several indicators from the Spirit and trusted friends aligned, but I told my therapist that I thought that was **irresponsible**. We could not meet our budget without my income. He laughed and said, "Ah yes, the irresponsible word. The one that only takes our Western, logical brain into consideration" He then went on to punch me in the face.

Just kidding, he didn't, but he did say, "*Maybe one of the reasons why you have a hard time trusting Jesus is because you don't ever give him a chance to come through. You always try to "create" your own security.*" So basically, it was a punch. 😊

But he was right. So then Sully and I started to pray. I spoke with Andy at the end of his sabbatical, and he prayed too. Then I took my sabbatical, and the word that kept coming up in a variety of non-related ways, was mystery. *Mystery*.

I believe that Jesus was calling me to step into the unknown and just do the next right thing. Did anyone catch those Frozen two references from the saints Elsa and Anna? But for real, it's the idea of connecting one dot at a time and taking one step at a time, and being okay with the mystery.

So, after sharing this with our AMAZING Elder team, *I mean that- they are incredible and do so much for this church and our staff. If you see them, please please tell them thank you. It's not an upfront role, but they are shepherding significantly.* Anyway- I decided I would try part-time, and the elders and Andy crafted an amazing plan for me. After the sabbatical, I came back two days and realized I just couldn't do it. I was so confused as to why. It was the best of both worlds. I got more time at home but still had some income, but I did not feel settled. I shared this with Sully, and he said, "I think the reason it doesn't feel right is because you felt called to step out, and you aren't doing it. You are trying to ensure financial safety, and you don't want to feel like you are making things harder for people you love, in a way protecting what they think of you." He was right. Sully is a behind-the-scenes guy with not a lot of words but is so wise, and I have enough words for both of us.

So that first week back, I also had a counseling appointment. I told him that I really felt like I needed to step out, but I was getting stuck. I said I don't want to be like those people in the parable of the good Samaritan that just walked by when the man was wounded. WellSpring some open staffing positions, and I don't just want to walk by." He then said, "It is interesting that you're feeling called to be more available to your kids who are walking through a really hard time, but in that story, you have put the church as the thing you need to rescue and save instead of your kids. Why do you think that is?" Whether it be a sense of duty, identity, or misaligned priorities, I had taken on the role of rescuer for WellSpring, which no one asked me to take on. So, the next day, I submitted my formal resignation. I needed space from the tension of misaligning my priorities.

Hear me, as parents, we want to draw lines like she's a working mom or a stay-at-home mom, etc. We get put in boxes, and we attach moral value to these things, but those are the wrong labels. I don't think that is the label Jesus looks at. I'd say the goal or the label is, am I a spirit-filled mom or parent because if that is the case, then then the value is attached to my response to a calling, whatever it may look like.

So, I embraced the mystery, resigned, and, as you all know, this is my last week on staff. So that is my story, and those are the dots. But now I want to move now into the story of Abram, and this is special because this is one of the scriptures that I was led to during my sabbatical.

Read Genesis 12:4-5 and have it on the screen. Well, isn't that nice? God told Abram to go somewhere, so he packed up his family and left. Lala, the end.

Okay, we can all go home. Just kidding.

We don't see if... They asked questions. Sarai had to have questions in the middle of the story. Abram came home and was like we have to move, God said it is going to be good. It's fine. No. I am sure there were some conversations. I am sure it seemed **irresponsible**. I have been in a loving marriage of 13 years, and I trust my husband, but if he was like, "We have to leave our family, everything we know, etc because God told me so. I would have a few questions especially if he didn't know where we were even going. We don't see the whole story here in these few verses.

There are plenty of stories we do see in the middle, like Joseph and David and Jesus. But what about in our current circles, we don't often see the behind-the-scenes middle. We don't see the process of mystery.

The Old Testament is full of story after story that hits the high points because every story whispers Jesus' name. Was God interacting with humanity in other ways, I think so. But the way the Old Testament was written was with intention. Let's look at the end of chapter 11 leading up to where we opened chapter 12.

Read Genesis 11:27-32 and have on screen

That seems like the Instagram stories version of a generational line. We don't see the middle details of Terah and his wife, how they met, or what happened to Momma. We get a little info about Abram and his siblings but not much. Just mentions Sarai couldn't have kids, and Terah was 205.

What is interesting is if you read this for the first time, you wouldn't know what God is going to do in the life of Abram and Sarai. There is a middle coming. And through that middle story being experienced, Abraham impacted generations upon generations. In fact, his faith in the middle is mentioned in Hebrews for this EXACT story.

Read Hebrews 11:8 and have on screen

I used to think that faith was a logical assent to understand God and His ways, but it's not. Faith is trusting even when all the dots don't line up or aren't visible. Faith is the ability to rest in the mystery and in the middle. Sometimes we do that well, and sometimes we don't. Abraham had times he did that well and times he didn't. He didn't trust God's plan to give him an heir, so he took control of the situation, and it caused negative outcomes. But then Abraham was incredibly faithful when it came time to obey God and what he wanted him to do with Isaac. That is the human experience. Figuring out the dot to dot for Abraham took a really long time. There was heartbreak, there was doubt. Sarah laughed in his face when Abraham told her that she would be pregnant. I mean, Abraham was 100 years old. A hundred! Can you imagine waiting that long to see the picture of what God was doing? That kind of waiting is painful. **But it is also powerful. The middle is painful, but it can be very powerful.**

Put on the screen: The middle is painful, but it can be powerful.

But through Abraham and Sarah, God built a nation. And through Joseph, God saved that nation, and through David, worship to Jehovah was reestablished in that nation, and through Jesus, that nation became a kingdom not of this Earth but of Heaven.

Here is what I want to leave you with. Who knows if I will be back on this platform in this context, so here is what I want you to hold on to from this message.

As believers, try to not discount what can come from the middle. I know that isn't a light statement. Sometimes it's abuse, cancer, or a divorce. And those things are heartbreaking.

But I want to challenge you to practice embracing the mystery because when you do, you are entrusting your future to a Messiah who has proven "to make all things new." That word new is special because, in Biblical Greek, there are two distinct words, both translated as "new," but with radically different meanings. One of them is **Neos(slide)**, which means "new" as we normally think of it: a new car, a new phone etc. In other words, **neos means something that was recently created.**

But *neos* is not the word used in when scripture gives us that promise of new. What we see Jesus using in Revelation 21 is **kainos(slide)**, which also translates as new but in a very different way. Something that is **kainos is "new as to form or substance."** Unlike *neos*, which just means something recently made, **kainos indicates something unlike anything before, of a "form or substance" previously unknown,** (unknown or mysterious?) Use telephone/ internet example. Do you think Alexander Graham Bell could have imagined that we would have the capability to video chat someone on the other side of the world in seconds? Let alone, video, and what is digital and look it is in color!

One seminarian stated, "It is something that is better than the one that came before it so much that it fulfills and even surpasses the original model." God doesn't want to repurpose the middle for minor tweaks. God wants to repurpose the middle for re-creation.

When we walk through the middle, when we embrace the mystery, we open our hearts and minds to a relationship with Jesus that is new, previously unknown, and surpasses how we knew Him in the past.

Embrace the middle. Embrace the mystery. Embrace the Messiah.

Let's pray.