

To a Land That I Will Show You
Genesis 12:1-4
First Presbyterian Church
March 8, 2020

Bible Reading

12Now 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. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." ⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Sermon

Abraham and Sarah lived with their extended family in the town of Haran on the upper Euphrates River, in what is present-day southeastern Turkey. They raised animals – sheep, goats, cattle, a few camels. They would migrate across the region – grazing their animals – but Haran remained their PLACE. It was there that Abraham and Sarah were surrounded by everything and everyone they knew and loved – everything we think of when we think of "home." This was their place... and these were their people.

One day God spoke to Abraham, saying: "Go from your country and your kindred and your family home..." Go from this place you know like the back of your hand... depart from this family that gives you identity... leave behind the security of your parents and the friendships of your brothers and sisters... go from this place where people know you and have your back no matter what. Four thousand years ago, God said: "Go from your country and your kindred and your family home..."

The kick brought both pain and joy. Pain from the sharp jab to the abdomen and joy that a human life was literally growing inside her. What would it be like? All the books in the world could never tell her. She had attended all the classes... joined every chat room... and talked to every young mother she could find. But she still knew that she did not know. So long someone's daughter, what would it be like to be someone's mother? Go from your country and your kindred and your family home.

The six-year-old paused before climbing the steps to the red brick building. On his back was a brand-new camo backpack... in his hand a shiny dinosaur lunchbox. He had thought about this moment for days – arranging and rearranging his school supplies to discover the best possible order. And now that his time had come, he wondered what would happen? Would he remember how to get to his class? Would he do something wrong? Would he find a friend? No mother here to tell him... no father to help him fix his mistakes. The first grade can be a foreboding place. Go from your country and your kindred and your family home.

An elderly man stood silently with his children staring at the spray of yellow and white flowers on his wife's casket – they were her favorite.

Most of the others had drifted back to their cars... the gray canopy shielded him from the drizzle... the green AstroTurf shielded him from the red clay, but nothing could shield him from the ache that lodged in his heart. Fifty-two years he and she had been together... for 52 years they had built a home together, raised children together, worked together, vacationed together, celebrated together, grieved together. Together... was how their lives had been. But now... what do I do now? Go from your country and your kindred and your family home.

This word of God – spoken so clearly to Abraham and Sarah some 4,000 years ago – is spoken to each of us repeatedly through life.

We are that young mother-to-be
we are that six-year-old boy heading off to first grade
we are that high school grad taking off for college
or that college graduate taking her first real job two thousand miles from home
we are that couple adjusting to an empty nest
we are that middle-age woman now single
we are that executive walking away from his retirement party
we are that grandmother leaving home and friends and church
to live nearer to her daughter
we are that grieving old man wondering what do I do now?

Time and again... at every passage of life... sometimes chosen and other times not... we are called to leave home... to leave what is familiar and migrate somewhere we have never been... new school, new career, new season of life, new city, new relationships, new role in the family... we are forever trying to let go of what was... forever trying to embrace what is... forever trying to just hang on long enough to catch our breath and get our bearings. There is no choice – if we are still breathing, we are always on the way – and I know you know what I mean. You and I live in a world about as unlike Abraham's as is possible – 4,000 years is a long time! Yet, we are exactly like Abraham in one crucial respect – we don't know what's ahead for us. We haven't even a clue!¹

Kris and I spent Thursday and Friday in Cincinnati attending a “pre-retirement seminar” put on by the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church. You see, someone in this room turns 65 this month... and though you are not going to get rid of that someone anytime soon, the Board of Pensions knows that it is important for pastors to begin planning and preparing... so they offer these seminars to anyone within 10 years of retirement. There were modules on identity – who are you when you are no longer “the pastor”? There were modules on financial planning and Medicare... and modules on how to stay physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy. And each part was tremendously helpful to this roomful of pastors and spouses who are, like Abraham, contemplating God's command to “Go” into the next chapter of life. And yet, there was also the awareness that ALSO like Abraham none of us knows what's ahead for us.

¹ William L. Holladay, “A New Beginning: Abram,” Christian Century, May 22-29, 1996, p. 569.

What we DO KNOW is that the Bible doesn't stop with the commandment to GO! And that God does not stop there... neither with Abraham and Sarah, nor with you and me. Because when we are on this journey with GOD, faith carries with it not only the one-word "Go," but an eight-word promise when you do: Go from your country and your kindred and your family home **to a land that I will show you...** meaning... you may not know where you're heading, but wherever it is, I will be with you all the way... you may not know precisely where you are on the journey, but I am there... and perhaps most important, when you arrive, I will be there to meet you. Though this "passage" or this "new season in life" may be new and strange to you, it is not new and strange to me. For there is no place where you are that I am not. There is no place you can go, where I will not be.

Surely some of the most BEAUTIFUL and some of the most COMFORTING words in all Scripture – are the words of Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Go from your country and your kindred and your family home TO A PLACE THAT I WILL SHOW YOU... because there is no place you can go that I am not.

And I would dare say, my friends, that this promise holds true NOT ONLY for our personal and family lives, but also, for the new realities we face as God's people in the church and in our nation and world. Beyond the normal changes that come with being a human being over a lifetime, we also encounter larger forces and realities that often make us feel as though we are strangers in a strange land: social and political changes... economic and ecological changes... cultural and technological changes that frankly make our heads spin... at least my head is spinning a lot of the time trying to keep up with it all and make sense of it all... trying to find God in it all. I don't know about you, but I think a lot about our nation right now... and I think a lot about the other nations of the world... I think a lot about our planet and what life will be like for my grandchildren when they're my age in 2080... I think about the church and how we can continue to be faithful to Jesus as things change so much and so fast. Maybe I'm just a thinker... or a worrier... but I can't help but wonder where this is all heading? Perhaps more than anything, I suppose that any new and unfamiliar territory will tend to challenge our faith. And I don't mean faith only in the sense of things we believe about God, I mean faith in the sense of how we live our lives in gratitude and service to God.

In this new land... amidst all this change... will we turn to other gods – the gods of self-centeredness and self-protection? the gods of divisiveness and suspicion of those who are not like us? the gods of fear and anxiety? Especially in times of great change, God calls us NOT to be formed by what is happening around us, but by the faith that is IN US. Faith in the God of justice and love... who calls us to be grateful and generous and humble... who sends us out in service to our neighbor. Into our human ways of dealing with the new and unfamiliar, God speaks a different word: “Go from your country and your kindred and your family home to a land that I will show you.” Trusting that the land will be different, yes, but it will not be God-forsaken. That we will not always know where we are, but that God will walk beside us each step of the way. That we will not always know where we are heading... but wherever it is, God will be there when we arrive. So, go my friends... whenever God calls you... GO. For there is no place you may go that God is not... there is no place you will end up, that God is not already there.