

"In God We Trust"

Genesis 12:1-9

First Presbyterian Church

May 8, 2022

So, Abram went, as the Lord had told him...Genesis 12:4

Now 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. 5Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan,

6Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. 7Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So, he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. 8From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. 9And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Sermon

It is always risky to use an old football story as a sermon illustration – first, because not everyone is into football... and second, because everyone is not as old as I am... but this one has to do with Ken Stabler (anybody remember him?). Back in the 1980's, Ken Stabler was the great left-handed quarterback of the Oakland Raiders... and he was interviewed one day by sportswriter, who read aloud to him the personal creed of great writer, Jack London. Here is what London had written: "I would rather be ashes than dust. I would rather my spark burn out in a brilliant blaze than to be stifled by dry rot, because, you see, the perfect function of a human being is to live, not simply to exist. So, I shall never waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time." When the reporter had finished reading, he asked the quarterback to respond. And after a pause, Stabler replied with two splendid words from his world of football. "What I hear London saying? 'Throw deep!'"¹

¹ New York Times, 9/6/08.

I thought of those two words as I returned to the 12th chapter of Genesis this week. Abraham, the grand patriarch of our faith tradition, and Sarah our matriarch, were not afraid to “throw deep.” No doubt they doubted themselves from time to time... and there’s evidence they doubted God on occasion... but for the most part, they really trusted that God would be able to do what God had promised... and they staked their lives on it. There is a quotation from philosopher John Stuart Mill that I like: “One true believer is worth 99 people who just might be interested.” The Lord needed Abram and his total commitment because the Lord’s plan of salvation was too important to entrust to someone who wasn’t all in.

And to see why Abraham’s total commitment was so important, we need to go back and remember what happened in the eleven chapters before. It began with God’s calling the universe into being and pronouncing it good. But then, almost immediately, bad things began to happen: the eating of the apple, the killing of Abel by Cain, the wickedness that so grieved the heart of God the floods came and covered the earth, and then even after the floods, the building of that terrible tower of Babel, which displeased the Lord just about as much as anything ever did. And at this point, scholar Leon Kass helps us understand what happened next. He says, “. . . the failure of the Tower of Babel marked the end of the saga of universal human beginnings. Before Babel, God tried to work with the entire human race all at one time. After Babel, God changed plans... or as we might say today, God “pivoted”... abandoning his plan to work with everyone at one time and choosing instead to work through one nation that would be a light to all the others.² One nation, no stronger than the others, no better, no wiser than the others, no greater track record than anybody else. And for reasons known only to God, the Lord chose these tent-dwelling people... this family headed by Abraham and Sarah... to be a blessing to the rest of the world.

Genesis 12 begins with God saying, “I want you to go from your house and your kinfolk in your father’s house to this land I’m going to show you... and when you get there, I’m going to make of you a great nation.” I imagine it all sounded nice to this old couples (kind of like retirement does to this old preacher) until you think of what you have to leave behind. They’re leaving their secure world everything they had known their entire lives... and stepping out toward God knows what. But, as Walter Brueggemann says, “Such a departure from security is the only way out of barrenness. To stay safe is to be barren, to be without life. But to leave in risk, is to have hope.³ (3) I don’t want to be overly dramatic, but I see this is a “hinge moment” in God’s love story for this world... in other words, everything hinges on whether they say yes or no to the hopeful future that God offers. So, at the behest of God, Abraham and Sarah said yes... the camel train pulled out... and the world has never been the same again.

² The Beginning of Wisdom, Free Press, 2003, p. 247.

³ Genesis, Walter Brueggemann, John Knox Press, 1982, p.118.

Now, what are we to do with this story of Abraham and Sarah so many years later? Well, I mentioned in my Friday pastor's note that over the years I have returned to this story again and again because it just has so much to teach us! For instance, that we are blessed, not because we deserve it or are more special, but so that we can bless others... or that following God's call in our lives sometimes means leaving some things and people we love and moving outside our comfort zones. Or as we said last week, when Jesus first called his disciples, they followed without all the facts. Just so, God called Abraham and Sarah to go... with no map... no specific destination... no ETA... just a promise.

So, we ARE in a way like Abram and Sarah, aren't we? We have no way of knowing what's ahead, but one thing we do know is that God NEEDS US – Just like God needed Abraham and Sarah, God needs US to say YES! to helping create the future that God has in mind. God is not picky about that kind of thing; God is looking not for perfect people, only people who will say yes... yes to being part of this ongoing family which God continues to bless so that it might be a blessing.

It's probably obvious why I wanted to return to this story at this particular time in my life and yours. Clearly, we're both being called to go into unknown territory... me into a new chapter in my life and you into a new chapter in this church's rich history. Some of us might be tempted to say, "No thank you, I believe I would much rather stay right here where we are." I know that temptation... I know you do, too. But we also have the sense that we can respond as Abraham and his family did - with faithfulness – letting go of our need to have everything stay in place and saying yes... so that WE can become the hinge on which history in our little part of the world turns. We will both need to draw deeply from our spiritual resources... and muster the courage to face what is ahead... and continually remember that our security lies not in shrinking back... staying still... maintaining the *status quo*. Our security lies where it always has been... in the steady, strong hands of a mighty and gracious God.

I remember telling you this story soon after I arrived – Henri Nouwen once wrote about a group of flying trapeze artists who performed with a famous German circus... they were called "The Flying Rodleighs." Nouwen writes that "when the circus came to Freiburg two years ago, my friends invited me and my father to see the show. I will never forget how enraptured I became when I first saw the Rodleighs move through the air, flying and catching, as elegant as dancers. The next day, I returned to the circus to see them again and introduced myself to them as one of their great fans. They invited me to attend one of their practice sessions, gave me free tickets, asked me to dinner and suggested that I travel with them for a week in the near future.

One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troop, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, 'As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there with split second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him.' "How does it work?" Nouwen asked. "The secret," Rodleigh said, "is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything.

When I fly to Joe, I simply stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me to safety.” “You mean you do NOTHING?” a surprised Nouwen asked. “Nothing,” Rodleigh repeated. “The worst thing a flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe, it is Joe’s task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe’s wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. No, a flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.”⁴

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Image Books, 1992)