

Genesis 12:1-4a
John 3:1-17

Second Sunday of Lent
Midway Presbyterian Church
March 8, 2020

Sacred Journey

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson for this Second Sunday in Lent presents the well-known story of God's call and promise to the patriarch Abraham, and Abraham's response. With this lesson the first book in the Bible becomes a history of salvation. What develops is by God's initiative. Listen to these words from Genesis 12:1-4a...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson today concerns the Kingdom of God. Here we find the account of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. Rebirth is called for, with an emphasis on God's love. Listen to these words from John 3:1-17...

Sermon

Due to significant water damage, Bob and Kitty Burge recently had to leave home and spend several weeks living at a local hotel. It wasn't exactly living out of a suitcase, but it was pretty close. We leave home to go to college. We leave home for career reasons. We leave home to visit relatives. We leave home to visit other parts of the country, even other parts of the world.

A Presbyterian minister said:

Some years ago I was involved in a preaching mission in Japan for two months. The Session of the church I served at that time encouraged my wife to meet me in Tokyo and on our way home we could see some of our church's mission work. In 30 days we visited 15 different countries. On another occasion we traveled from Ohio to California by way of Scotland, Ireland, and Canada. We packed and unpacked 35 times in 11 weeks.

Spiritually speaking, all of life is a journey, a sacred journey if you will, and we are always leaving the security of the familiar for the insecurity of the new. We are strangers and sojourners in this life. We move, not only from one place to another, but from childhood to maturity, from selfishness to unselfishness, from dependence through independence to interdependence, from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. From a temporal home to an eternal home.

Abraham must have been comfortable in Haran (HAIR uhn), that ancient city of Mesopotamia, now in southeast Turkey. He grew up in Ur of the Chaldeans, but early on his father Terah planned to move the family. They got as far as Haran and liked it so much they decided to settle down. This became Abraham's country, his home. The land was familiar. His kindred were there. His business was there. His possessions were there. It was home. But God said: "Pack your suitcases and get ready to move. I have a plan and you are to play a part in that plan." So Abraham gathered his barren wife Sarah and his nephew Lot, and all his workers and flocks. And despite being up in years, he set off for a land he knew not. They traveled southward with several stops at Shechem and the Oaks of Mamre, then next to the hill country between Bethel and Ai (Ay ee), in what would become the Promised Land, before finally arriving in Egypt. Then they moved on to the Negev (the southern tip of modern Israel) and from there they turned north and returned to Bethel.

The city Haran, from which Abraham is called, means "highway" or "crossroads." God's call to Abraham at this crossroads is the beginning of Israel's history. Leaving all

the security of home to journey to an unknown land, Abraham was moving from Abram to Abraham, from “exalted ancestor” to “ancestor of a multitude.” From a migrating rancher to a meditating child of God, from a master of servants to an obedient servant of the Lord Almighty. In these travels Abraham learned to trust God, to know God’s blessing, and to know God working through him to bless others.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis tell of the story of the creation and fall. But here in chapter 12 we are suddenly plunged into the life and faith of Israel. Abraham and Sarah are new characters. This is a new beginning, created by God. The One who called the world into being now makes a second call.

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. 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. (Genesis 12:1-2)

To stay in Haran would mean barrenness. To leave is to have hope of fruitfulness. And Abraham trusted God’s promise and went as God instructed, willing to abandon all natural roots. The land. The bonds of immediate and distant family. To go to a land he knew not.

John Calvin said the reason God did not immediately reveal the land of his destination was because God was testing the faith of Abraham.

As if he would say, “I command thee to go forth with closed eyes, and forbid thee to inquire whither I am about to lead thee, until, having renounced thy country, thou shalt have given thyself wholly to me.”

As followers of Christ, we too are a people on the move. Strangers and sojourners are we—in a world that seems foreign in the current political and moral landscape. But

this world is not our ultimate homeland; we pass through on our way to a heavenly city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

We are on the move; in fact, we're on several journeys at the same time. We move through life as individuals, as did Abraham and Sarah. We have our own itineraries, our own trials and triumphs. We have our own crossroads at which we must make a choice.

We also move through life as a part of the church. While its roots go all the way back to the covenant that God made with Abraham, Midway Presbyterian was established 186 years ago. Members, friends, and visitors have worshipped here all those years. Here at Midway people like you and me have been about worship, Christian education, fellowship, witness and service, stewardship, maintaining the building and grounds. We are a people not only focused on nurture of members, but also on mission to the larger community and beyond. Our journey is not only inward, but outward as well.

And the witness of Scripture, as well as our own experience, confirms that the God who calls is the God who equips. That the God who equips, leads the called to a more complete expression of the people we were created to be. A faithful response on our part is the embracing of what God calls us to—and the letting go of what has been the known, the familiar, the secure.

And this idea of embracing newness and relinquishing what has been, connects our Genesis lesson with our Gospel lesson and the story of Nicodemus. To be born from above or born anew, or born again, may be understood as the embrace of God's calling—a calling that necessitates leaving home and all that we have grown accustomed to, to journey toward a land full of the promise of unknown realities. Not only for us, but also

for others. To be co-creators with God of a fruitful church. Ambassadors of Christ with God making his appeal through us.

Where are we going in our journey through life? Each must choose his or her own road. We have basically two choices. Shall we pile up treasures on earth, or treasures in heaven? Build larger barns, eat, drink, and be merry? Or shall we realize that all we have is a gracious gift from God who is also giving us this time to make the most of our gifts and share them with others? Shall we remember that, like Abraham, we have been blessed, in order that we might be a blessing? That the treasure of the gospel has been poured into earthly vessels as ourselves? And that God has a role for each of us to play in his plans.

In his poem, "If You Will," A. D. Burkett said:

If God can make of an ugly seed,
With a bit of earth and air
And dew and rain, sunshine and shade,
A flower so wondrous and fair,
What can He make of a soul like you,
With the Bible and faith and prayer,
And the Holy Spirit, if you do His will
And trust in His love and care.

Finally, the Scriptures would remind us that we move by FAITH. Not just faith in general, or faith in ourselves, or faith in our fellow travelers, but primarily faith in the God who calls and leads us on the journey. In that great hymn that is sometimes attributed to John Calvin, "I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art," we hear these words:

Our hope is in no other save in Thee;
Our faith is built upon Thy promise free;
Lord, give us peace, and make us calm and sure,

That in Thy strength we evermore endure.

Abraham moved out to a place which had been promised to him as an inheritance. He didn't know where it was, but he went anyway. It was a journey of considerable risk, yet a risk that made possible a future full of promise and hope. By God's call, this barren couple will give birth to a great nation. And be an instrument of God's blessing. How could this be? By trusting the God who called him and led him, by being born from above.

As the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the New Testament assures us that Jesus not only calls us to follow him, but that he walks with us, teaches us, and carries us when we're too weak to walk on our own. He challenges us and comforts us. He helps us to grow not only in our relationship with God and neighbor. We just need to look unto Jesus. Assured that although now we see only through a glass darkly, there will come a day when we will see face to face, and understand fully, even as we are fully understood.

Prayer: We thank you, O God, not only for the sacred journey we call life, but for the assurance of your presence and power throughout the whole journey. Bring us at last as sojourners and strangers to our home with you. For Jesus' sake. Amen.