

Genesis 12:1-4a Pastor Bill Uetricht 3/12/17 2 Lent

Although I grew up among relatively simple people in the middle of relatively simple suburban Cincinnati, I have never been characterized as being overly simple. I am a thinker. I like to go to the more complex places. But this week, at least initially, I am taken to the short and simple first reading from Genesis. In some ways, it seems to me that this reading gets at the essence of the call of faith. Simply put, this little story about Abraham is simply what the life of faith is all about.

And I am going to put it as simply as I can: “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go!’ And Abram went as the Lord told him.” The command to *go* and the response of obedience—this is simply what it’s all about.

God said to Abraham, “Leave behind everything familiar to you. Leave your home, your country, and your family! Get the heck out of Securityville.” Okay, we say, but where is Abram going? Well, God is not overly definite. He just gives a promise: “Where you go, I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and will make your name great, so that you might bless others.”

Well, where will all this happen? Hawaii? Southern Florida? A nice little cottage on the Mediterranean? God doesn’t seem to say exactly. God just tells Abram to go. God’s quite specific about what Abe is going to need to leave behind—home, family, community. But he’s a bit vague about the destination. Just, go!

I suspect that this imperative (go!) is the imperative spoken to all of us, all of us who are children of Abraham, followers of Jesus. To be grafted into the family of Abraham is to join a family that is always going someplace—someplace that sometimes doesn’t look like home, isn’t always that secure or familiar. It intrigues me that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all look to Abraham as their father. They are all said to be Abrahamic religions. They all think that the life of faith begins with an invitation to go, to leave behind the secure. Faith is fundamentally an invitation to go, to begin a journey. Well, where are we going? Some place! It’s a place of promise, a place where you will discover your blessedness, and more than that, where you will be able to bless others.

Can you help me out? Where will that be? Here's the rub for me. I am not sure. Could it be far away? Yes! Could it be here? Yes! This is what is so troubling about the faith to me. There is simply so much lack of certainty. Regularly, daily, I hear the call to "go." For me, the faith, while a phenomenally comforting reality, is amazingly unsettling. I want guarantees. You want guarantees. And that is not what faith gives us. What we are given is promise: I will bless you, and you will be a blessing to others.

Listen to Dan Clendenin: "Abraham left Haran, not knowing where he was going or even why, except that he God commanded him. He acted whole-heartedly without absolute certainty. In so doing he defied both the inner propensities of human nature, and the outer pressure of cultural conformity to cling to the familiar, the self-serving, the broad and easy road."

It's natural for us to want to stay where it is familiar. Simply, this is how we keep ourselves protected. We'll hang around the folks we know. Avoid the new ones we don't know. Foreigners will always be a threat, so we'll make sure that they are always kept a distance. We'll stay in our little neighborhoods, eat our kind of food, keep away from anything that might take us out of our comfort zones. This isn't surprising. It's simply natural.

And it's what everybody else is telling us to do. You want to survive in this culture, you want to belong in this culture, just go along, take the path that everybody else is taking, avoid the new, the risky, the road less traveled. Clendenin points out that almost everything in our culture encourages us to journey from the *unknown* to the known in order to tame life, guarantee the safe and the secure. Yet our foundational story urges us to go from the known to the unknown. Sadly, what is so often talked about as faith in this culture is about arriving in the known land—the land where it's all clear, the land not where the mystery is greater, but the mystery is solved. Faith is having answers.

Now don't get me wrong. We need some answers. We need to know enough so that we aren't crippled and we have a sense of who we are. But to stay in that kind of land is to miss what the Abraham story tells us: "Go!" Leave behind the safe and secure. Leave behind what you know for sure

and discover what is yet in front of you, that which is promise, that which pries you out of your comfy Lazy Boy.

Now as we are being pried out of our Lazy Boys, our psalm for today addresses us. Psalm 121, known as a pilgrim psalm or a psalm of ascent, was the kind of song you sang when you were getting ready to leave on the journey to Jerusalem for the festivals or the journey to come home from those festivals. You would look ahead at the journey and be a bit overwhelmed by it. I lift up eyes toward those big hills and wonder if I am going to make it, wonder if I am up for the journey. And all of a sudden, somebody speaks to me, in Israel's history it could have been a group of people or perhaps a priest, telling me I can make it. These folks are acting like cheerleaders, giving me or us a promise: "God will not let your foot be moved. You won't slip on the journey. God's awake. God will be your keeper. The sun won't wear you out. The moon and its ability to make us all a bit crazy won't have the day. You'll be all right. God will keep you from all evil. God will watch your leaving and your arriving. You can *go*. You'll make it. You'll be fine. Get going!"

You're right, though. You are not sure where the journey is taking you. I am not sure Nicodemus knew where the journey would take him either. Yet it appears in John that he still wants to come on the trip. He comes to Jesus "at night." That is to say, the light hasn't fully come on within him yet. He's interested in this Jesus character, intrigued by the journey, but not quite ready to go on it. The miracles that Jesus has been doing have really gotten his attention. But these miracles, these signs, aren't the point. Yet Jesus wants to take Nicodemus on the trip, wants to lead him to the deeper places. "You can't go with me," Jesus tells Nic, "if you think it's all about you. It's not. To go on this journey is to go with God. It is a matter of being born from above, born from water and spirit, born out of what *God* is up to."

Nicodemus hears these words and thinks literally, as many early stage religious people do. He interprets the word translated "born from above," as meaning "born again," going back into his mother's womb one more time. He doesn't get it. The journey is about this wild spirit who blows where it will. And the gospel of John says that this wild spirit is blowing through Jesus. In him is to be encountered the deeper things—things that

aren't a matter of our engineering, our choosing, our making a decision, our giving our hearts to Jesus at the crusade. The deeper things are about God. The journey we're on is a journey toward God. It's that simple. The invitation to *go* is an invitation to go toward God and with God.

And, oh, John says, the God that you are going toward, the God that invites you to go, the God who accompanies you as you go, is the "God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have life—big life, life that matters, eternal life."

You see, it is love that is beckoning you to go. It is love that wants to take you beyond the familiar, the comfortable, the secure. Too often the secure and the comfortable keep you from the depths of love. They keep you bound up in yourself; they keep you focused on surviving, not thriving. They don't lead you to the deeper places of serving and giving. Love wants to take you to the deeper places. Love wants to pry you out of your cocoon, wants to lead you from death into resurrection.

That's where you are going on your trip, by the way. You're going into death, but you aren't going to stop there. The one who kicks you out of the nest will lead you from death into life. In this new land you will be blessed. And you will be a blessing to others.

It's really quite simple. This trip is going to be the best trip you've ever been on. It's the trip of love. So, go! And as new scriptures are written, scriptures reflecting on what your life has meant, perhaps they will read: "So he, so she, just like Abram, went as God commanded them."