

# “On the Journey”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – September 16, 2018*

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 28:16-20

Rev. John Wahl

Genesis 12:1-9

“Where are we going?” This is the natural follow-up question to ask anytime we hear, “Let’s go, we’re leaving.” It makes all the difference to how we get ready, what to pack, who is going with us, what route we’ll take, what is being left behind, and who is going to take care of it all.

This morning, we hear the story of the call of Abram and Sarai; this couple who will soon be given by God their new, more familiar names: Abraham and Sarah. They are called by God to leave the place where they are living – the known and the familiar – and to embrace and travel instead toward the unknown and unfamiliar.

Because they obey God’s call – and follow God’s promise for offspring, land, and blessing – they are remembered in history as the father (and mother) of not only the Jewish people, but Christians and Muslims as well. All three religions have their common beginning in this story, in this family, and in this decision to obey God’s call.

This story is also the beginning, for us, of an almost year-long journey that we will be taking together, first through the stories of the Old Testament (during the fall) and then through the stories of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (after the New Year). Over these next few months, we will encounter a variety of Old Testament characters – both the ordinary and special, the flawed and chosen – who are not only our ancestors in faith, but also model for us what it means to be in relationship with God – and one another – as called and chosen people.

And so, this is our starting point. As we, ourselves, depart on this journey together, we might pose some of the same questions as our ancestors: where are we going; who will go with us; what are we taking, and what is being left behind? In claiming the Hebrew people that are described in the Old Testament to be our people – and their God to be our God – we are deciding to take their history seriously; that it makes a difference to our identity as Christian people. And yet, claiming them personally, and taking them seriously, does not mean that we must look at them uncritically; they are human beings like us: creating in God’s image and yet susceptible to every fault and base impulse. In the same way, the texts that we will read, though we believe they are inspired by God, are also the product of human endeavor, and thus are rife with questions and controversy.

What we take with us on this journey is therefore the stories of our ancestors in faith, as well as the long history of their application and interpretation. Sometimes, this will prove to be a welcome companion; at other times, we will be glad to travel lightly, unencumbered by tradition. I pray that – week after week – in this journey together through scripture, we might support and encourage each other to keep moving forward and imagine a future that God is still revealing to us. I hope that these stories, as they come alive before us, will help us likewise to be more alive in our faith: in our relationship with God and one another.

Genesis 12 stands as an early, but significant a turning point in the biblical story. Before this chapter, we find the familiar stories that make up what scholars call the primeval history – the Creation and the Fall, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, the Tower of Babel. Beginning with this chapter, though, the focus narrows; instead of stories about cosmic beginnings and worldwide calamities, we find an account of one couple – Abraham and Sarah – and their family.

“The one who calls the worlds into being,” says Walter Brueggemann, “now makes a second call. This call is specific. Its object is identifiable in history...The purpose of the call is to fashion an alternative community in creation gone awry, to embody in human history the power of the blessing. It is the hope of God that in this new family all human history can be brought to the unity and harmony intended by the one who calls.”<sup>1</sup>

What we know about this couple and their family is pretty limited. They are living in Haran, located is what is now southeastern Turkey; but they are not from there: originally, they come from Ur, in what is now southeastern Iraq. They are following the Fertile Crescent toward the land of Canaan, where none of them have ever been. We also know that Abraham and Sarah are well-advanced in age and childless. Barrenness here serves as an effective and vivid metaphor for hopelessness. For this couple, and for the continuation of their family history and name, there is no foreseeable future.

And so, when God calls Abraham and Sarah to go, following will mean leaving much behind – family and friends, house and belongings – and yet, it is difficult to comprehend just how desperate they may have been for a new start, a new hope. God promises to bless Abraham and Sarah, but not because they have done anything to deserve it. And neither is it for their sake: instead, God says: “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I 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.” (Gen. 12:2-3)

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Genesis” from *interpretation Bible Series*

Abraham and Sarah are not given a task to do other than to listen and go. All they are told is: *follow me and I promise that through you something is going to happen*. And what is God's promise to them? It is three-fold:

- 1) They will be given descendants – God says, “I will make you a great nation.”
- 2) They are promised land – God says, “to your offspring I will give this land.”
- 3) God says, “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”<sup>2</sup>

*Blessing*, in Hebrew, means to bring a gift to someone while kneeling out of respect; to do or give something of value to another. So, not only are Abraham and Sarah promised that they will be given something of value, they will also, by kneeling in respectful obedience to God, give to all people of earth a great gift. Their faithful response of accepting God's call – whether done out of reluctant acceptance or excitement for new possibilities – impacts not only their own family, but indeed all the families – including our own families – for many generations to come.<sup>3</sup>

This three-fold promise to Abraham and Sarah will continue to reverberate through all of scripture. They will have to wait many long years, and endure many trials, before they are given children. And the land of promise that they pass through in this passage will not finally be granted to Israel for many hundreds of years. And yet the promise remains; it stands as God's resolve to found a new community that is formed solely through God's faithfulness. As it was intended from the very beginning of creation, Abraham and Sarah function like a funnel through which God chooses to pour blessing on the whole earth.<sup>4</sup>

Abraham and Sarah believe in God's promises. They leave their land, house, and family to go to a place and a future that God will one day show them. There were plenty of reasons to pause and think their choice over. They did not know how long it would take to get there or what they would do once they arrived. They trust that God will provide them with children despite barrenness and old age. In time, Abraham will even stand ready to sacrifice his son, the child of promise, because – we are told – of his faith in God's ultimate promise of blessing. It is, as Abraham and Sarah come to recognize, only through God's grace that they have been called; and that by God's grace they have journeyed forward into God's blessing.

Sometimes, a choice might just feel like the right thing to do. It may not be logical, nor convenient, but somewhere at the core of our beings we know that it is the proper step to take. These times can be scary, filled with doubt and uncertainty. We might wonder why us; what makes us prepared or chosen for a particular task? We can imagine

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Schifferdecker from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>3</sup> Linda Fabian Pepe, “Step by Step”

<sup>4</sup> Celia Brewer Sinclair, “Genesis” from *interpretation Bible Studies*

a number of reasons why we shouldn't do it. What, then, does the example of Abraham and Sarah teach us? Are we likewise called to take a step of faith and go where God is calling us?

For Christians, Abraham and Sarah are remembered and revered as our ancestors in faith not because they are especially good people, but because they remind us that our relationships with God are defined by grace. What really matter is not whether any of these biblical ancestors are bad or good, cowardly or heroic, but that God is pursuing the welfare of the human family with and through people like them; in other words, people like us.<sup>5</sup>

And so, we have begun a journey through God's Word that begins with the story of God's call to Abraham and Sarah to get up and go. We start not at the very beginning, back in the primeval history of creation, but with this second call: the one where God imagines a new community emerging from one family; one hopeless couple who are given a promise of being blessed in order that they may be a blessing. It is this same three-fold promise – for offspring, for land, and for blessing – that will guide the story through the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis, into and out of slavery in Egypt, through the desert during the Exodus, finally into the promised land, and during the time of the judges, the monarchy and the prophets.

In and through the course of these many centuries, we will explore the relationship between God and the people through whom God has chosen – by grace – to bring about the vision of a new world. As Christians, we profess that this vision is best illustrated and initiated in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Through him, and in communion with him, we share in this vision and work to bring it about: by claiming God's blessing and the resulting opportunity to be a blessing to others. May Christ go with us our journey. AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> From *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, Bill Moyers, ed.