

# “Call and Promise”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – September 18, 2022*

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 33:1-9, 20-22

Genesis 12:1-9

*Last week we heard the story of Noah, his family, and the animals sailing in the ark, and then God offering a sign of promise to all the people and creatures of the earth. Noah’s family included three sons. The oldest son, Shem, is the great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather (that’s seven greats!) of Abram, who we are going to hear about today. Abram had two brothers, one of whom died, leaving a son, named Lot. The whole family, including Abram’s father, his wife, Abram’s other brother and his wife, and their nephew decided to move away from their home in Ur and go to the land of Canaan. Along the way, they stopped in a town called Haran — which was the name of Abram’s brother that had died. Abram’s father died there and they couldn’t bring themselves to go any further. We pick up the story today in Haran, in the book of Genesis, chapter 12, beginning at verse 1.*

*Read Genesis 12:1-9*

This is a story about election: not the political kind – that which, if you are not tired of it yet, you will be within the next 51 days – but being chosen by God. Sometimes, when God elects people in the Bible, we know why. Last week, we learned that God chose Noah to build the ark because he was the only righteous person to be found on earth; the rest of humanity was rife with violence and sin. In the book of Exodus, when God chooses Moses at the burning bush, we know it is because he has lived both in the Egyptian palace and with the enslaved Hebrews and thus is in a unique position to go and speak God’s word to powerful Pharaoh.

In today’s story, God chooses Abram, and his wife Sarai, and promises to bless them with children, with land, and in order to be a blessing to many. They are called to leave their home, their family, and all that is familiar to them to travel to a place where God will one day show them. We are not told why this couple – of all people – are elected by God. According to the text, they are not – nor have they yet done – anything noteworthy.

The rabbis explained that this was because Abram was the first monotheist. Ancient literature tells a story, not in the Bible itself, that Abram’s father, Terah, was a maker of idols. Abram, while still in his father’s household, discerned that idols were false gods and that there was only one true God. So, one night, he went into his father’s workshop and smashed and burned all his father’s idols. Therefore, the rabbis concluded, he was worthy of God’s choosing.

There is no such explanation in the biblical text itself. In this initial encounter between God and Abram, the promise of children, land, and blessing is offered as pure grace, given for no apparent reason whatsoever.<sup>1</sup>

What we do know about this couple is that they are old, and they have no children; Sarai, Abram's wife, is barren. They are living in a place that shares the name of Abram's dead brother, Haran. It is also the place where Abram's father, Terah, has died. This was not their original destination; they did not set out to stay there. But, somehow, somewhere along the way, they got stuck. Surrounded by grief, perpetually reminded of lives lost and their inability to have children, Abram and Sarai – whom God will soon rename Abraham and Sarah – may have believed this was, for them, literally the end of their road.

So, when God calls them, and tells them to go, it must have caused mix feelings of fear, promise, and relief. It would certainly be difficult to leave so much behind – their home, family, and all that was familiar – to move into an unknown place. Still, after being stuck for so long, with so little to hope for, maybe they were ready to move forward.

Thus, it may be fair to wonder: what kind of people Abram and Sarai would have to be – what point would their life need be at – to be willing to accept this call?

When God tells them to go, it is some combination of invitation and command. The Hebrew means something like “go forth” or “get yourself going;” emphasizing the energy that such a move will take: to leave behind all that is familiar and move without certainty toward God's plan for them.<sup>2</sup>

So, Abram and Sarai get themselves going. There is no verbal response, only the action of packing up their people and possessions and departing. They make the difficult decisions of what – and who – to take along; and what – and who – to leave behind. Lot, Abram's nephew, is a part of their traveling band; he can now move forward from the town that shares the name of his dead father. Maybe the only thing more difficult than deciding what to take is when you have no choice and have to leave everything – and everyone – behind. Abram and Sarai move forward as a family, a household; even if not the one they expected to be nor hoped to become.

When they come to Canaan – to Shechem and the oak of Mamre – God not only speaks to them, God appears to Abram. For someone who, previous to his election, had no relationship with God, it has now grown quite intimate. God offers an in-person promise that this land would one day belong to Abram and his descendants. But, as we are told, the Canaanites already lived there; it was not unoccupied. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Schifferdecker from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>2</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

Abram and Sarai – and their future offspring – would need to negotiate how to live in faithfulness and fidelity to God in the midst of strangers.

Throughout the story of this elected family, there will be times when it would be easier to adopt the values and customs of the people surrounding them; they will face many hardships and challenges – some of their own doing, some not – but God was calling them to a unique purpose: to be a blessing to others, to be a light to the nations.

Whenever we are in the midst of other peoples – whether we sojourn in their lands or they are strangers in our midst – we should ask ourselves to what extent we can be a blessing to them. Especially in places, times, and situations when we are blessed, we must listen whether God is saying to us: “get yourself going.” This might not mean actually picking up and leaving what is familiar behind; it could be a call to share of what we have, or to open our doors, or to listen and learn what we might build and heal together.

The story of Abram and Sarai should remind us that sometimes when we get stuck in our circumstances and understandings, God is inviting – maybe even commanding – us to move into new attitudes or spaces. There will always be fears about what might be lost, where we might be led, and how discomfort might disrupt our sense of security. As fellow descendants – along with all Jews, Christians, and Muslims – of our father Abraham and mother Sarah, we are people that are called by God to undertake journeys of hospitality and welcome: not segregating ourselves off from humanity but seeking to let God’s light shine through us.

After God appears to him at Shechem, Abram builds an altar there to mark the promise he has received. But note what happens next; immediately, they move on from that place to Bethel, where he built another altar, and then kept traveling by stages to the Negeb. Just as he had left his home in Haran, not knowing whether he would ever be led back there again, Abram builds these altars along his journey’s path, but willingly leaves them behind to continue along the way God shows him.

This can be so hard to do. The altars that we construct – whether they are buildings or programs or traditions; all important and well-intentioned – we want them to last forever. And so we laboriously and carefully maintain and keep watch over them; wary that they will change or crumble if we leave them behind. The more that we become caretakers of, the harder it can be to go forth in new directions.

Today, during our Rally Day Fellowship Time – in between painting rocks and ordering your Shaved Ice – you will see many of the missions, projects, and activities that our church is now involved in and ways that you might sign up and contribute. From choir and Sunday School to Pass-It-On, North Church, and the Doube River School. Some represent long-held traditions while others might be brand new – at

least to you. They provide a sampling of the ways that this community of faith seeks to be a blessing to others; to let God's light shine through us.

As you look at these options, I invite you to discern whether, today, God might be calling you to leave something behind in order to undertake a new journey; whether you are being offered an invitation to move away from the place where you've been stuck: whether in grief, or holding on too tightly to what's already constructed, or to a chaotic existence; into some new space.

What you are being called to – where God is inviting you to get yourself going – may or may not be on one of those sign-up lists. Instead, it might be that you are being nudged toward reconciling with a lost friend, or reaching out to neighbor, or welcoming a stranger. On the other hand, this might just be the time to take on a new or different role here; at this alter which was built to honor our relationship with God; and where we now reside.

God did not call Abram and Sarai because they had proven themselves ready; and not for their skills, their youth, or track record of achievement. God invited them to receive God's grace; and in order to have that blessing – and to be a blessing – they needed to “go forth”, to “get themselves going.” How about us; are we ready for this journey? Amen.