

*Going Forth by Stages*

Genesis 12:1-9

Whitefish UMC

June 8, 2008

*And the Lord said to Abram . . . go forth.* Sounds like something a speaker at a commencement ceremony would say. Because that's what you do when you graduate. You "go forth." In fact when I graduated from seminary ten years ago this weekend, we sang a hymn called "Go Forth for God."

That's how the saga of our faith begins. The Lord said "go forth" to Abram who lived in Ur, which is present day Iraq, and Abram, with his wife and family and their servants - "the people they had acquired" - went forth and traveled to the land of Canaan - in present day Israel. They left a land known as the "fertile crescent" and traveled to a desert land - just because God told them to. Our familiarity with the story should not blind us to the strange - almost humorous - nature of this event. Can't you just imagine the conversations around the dinner table that first night?

*Honey, the Lord spoke to me and said that He would show me a land of blessing. So we're going to leave and go there.*

***Go where?***

*Th-There.*

***Where is there?***

*Well, I think its west, west of “here.” We’ll know when we get “there” that it’s the right there. But, until then, we won’t know - exactly where “There” is.*

***Abram, honey, you’re seventy five. We have retirement plans. We were going to go visit my sister’s family and your brother’s wife. She’s ill - remember? And we need these people, Abram, because we don’t have our own children. And this is our home, Abram. God has blessed us here already. Why would God want us to leave? Yes, well, I don’t really know - but there will be more blessings, I think. Like a family.***

***Abram, honey, you’re seventy five. And I’m pretty close to that. And we’re not going to have a family other than who’s here.***

*Yes, I-I know it looks that way but the Lord said that we’d have our own “offspring” - somehow. We’ll have a family - when we get “there.” That’s all I know.*

***Who else heard this Voice, Abram?***

*Just me. Let’s start packing.*

And, with that, they set out. Abram, who would become Abraham and Sarai, who would become Sarah set out for a new land and a new life. *Over “there.”* They set out all because of a promise, a promise of blessing. They set out because of a vision of a world with land and children. Details were quite scanty in this promise. And the people who went weren’t all that stellar - they made mistakes, they pouted at times, they complained. Yet, four thousand years later, Abram’s journey - and his family’s journey, Abram’s faith, continues to be the inspiration for three of the great religious traditions of the world. Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

All three claim Abraham as a “father” of faith. And, for all three, this is where it all begins. With a call to a new life. A call to change, to move

out, to move on. Bruce Feiler, a Jewish author, has written a book *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land Through the Five Books of Moses*. He actually went to the Middle East to research the roots of his faith - and ours. And he walked the land - traveling to many of the places mentioned in the great stories of the Old Testament. He tells of a conversation with the Israeli archaeologist, Avner, who was his guide. They were sitting on a hilltop in modern Haran, reflecting on the story we just heard. Feiler asks . . .

“So what would have been the biggest change from the world he left to the world where he was going?”

Avner replied: “The biggest difference would be leaving an area that was the core of civilization to a place that was just emerging. It was not the heart of everything.”

Avner then continued . . .

“Do you want to know the real difference between here and the Promised Land? (That is, between “here” and “there”) . . . there are no rivers. There are no floods. Canaan was settled. It had some rain. But the water wasn’t predictable, or plentiful. In saying *lech l’cha* - go forth - God changed the history of the world. He gave Abraham (at age 75, mind you) the power of fertility, the power to create a great nation, which up to now had belonged only to the rivers: the Tigris,

the Euphrates, the Nile. From now on, people - not water - would control the world. People who believed in God.”

Without arguing whether the Israeli archaeologist is right - ecologically speaking - the point he makes is crucial. Abram’s journey was a geographical journey *and* a spiritual journey and the two were intertwined. He went *where* he was told because he was called and he was willing to take a journey of the heart even as he journeyed by foot. The story of Abram is a foundational story for our faith. The saga of Abram and Sarai was just the beginning. They started a trend. Joseph was forced to go to Egypt. Moses and the Israelites wandered 40 years in the desert. The Hebrews were taken to captivity in Babylon and then made their way back. The birth of Jesus happened after a journey to Bethlehem. The young family was driven from Israel to Egypt. Jesus wandered 40 days in the wilderness and journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem, and, at the end, carried his cross from Jerusalem to Golgotha, outside the city. Soon after that, the fledgling Christian community was forced to leave Jerusalem by the Romans and scatter for safety. The great missionary Paul was known for his “journeys,” his travels, where he brought the gospel to Gentiles, foreigners - people who were clearly not from home, from here. They were from “there” The movement of faith seems always about a movement from here to there. And when we

finally get “there” there is always another “there.” God just seems intent on moving us along.

In other words, at the root of faith is a journey. This story of Abraham and Sarah is how it all began. And this story is at the heart of our faith for a reason. For faith, you see, is not about arriving, it’s about moving. It is not about getting it right, boxing it up, playing it safe, staying home or staying where we are comfortable. Faith is about moving, growing, yearning. God is intent on moving us along! A faith that does not move simply dies. It stays in Ur, in Haran. It ignores the promise of blessing and by playing it safe, misses out on the blessing.

That doesn’t mean necessarily that *bad* things happen. It just means that the good that *could* happen doesn’t. A growing faith always means a commitment to a journey. And we can learn something about this journey from Abraham and Sarah. They can help us as we face our personal challenges and our communal challenges. But, the first thing to get hold of is that to be a person of faith, a community of faith, means we must be *on the move*. It has always been that way. Why do we think it should be different now? Let me share three things that I think we learn from Abraham and Sarah.

First, quite simply, God calls us - wherever, and however and whenever God wants. Our choice is to respond as best we can. Abram was seventy five years old - and even if the years weren't reckoned exactly as they are today - the point was that he was old. He had paid his dues. He had been a good man. He had worked hard. He had a right to expect things to be the way he wanted them. He liked his worship service at 10:15 on the hills of Haran. He liked his seat in the back row. He didn't want to move anywhere else. But God had something else in mind. He could have stayed where he was - that is always the option and going no where is always a choice. But the blessing would come in the choice to move, to go, to change, to take a chance.

I think most of us would prefer things be a bit more settled than that. We long for a time when things will be predictable. But, usually, God's timing is not ours. Abram responded to God's call as best he could, in faith, and moved forward. Imagine what it was like to move an entire household from here to there. And yet, in that process, God formed a people. Abram developed in a way he wouldn't have if he had stayed where he had been comfortable for so long.

And Sarah - Sarah became a mother. Miracles happened not because Abram and Sarah were perfect people - they made lots of mistakes.

Miracles happened because they set out from here to there in faith. That is all God ever asks.

Second. God leads in stages. I love that part of this text: *Abram journeyed on by stages*: the place at Shechem to the oak of Moreh to the hill country on the east of Bethel and on to the Negeb. And it has been that way ever since. The journey of faith is a bit like a wild west pony express process where we do our part and then hand the mail or the goods to the next folks who take it from there. We don't get to have all the answers. We don't get to know it all. We do get to do our part - *if we choose*.

I have said more than once as I have reflected on my own journey of faith -that if I had known thirteen years ago how hard it would really be, if I had known everything that was going to happen, I don't think I would have sold the home we loved and started seminary and changed careers. God is very smart. God knows this about us. And so we are given glimpses of possibilities and we set out. God sets the direction and makes the promise of blessing - but God can be quite reluctant about the exact destination. *Go forth* is the command. *Move*. If we set out in faith, trusting God's promise and presence, God will be there. Even if it doesn't always look like it. We have some challenges - we have financial challenges. We have personal challenges - and yet, the promised land is before us. I am talking about who

God is forming us to be - God calls us to offer something to the heart of this valley and to the world that is uniquely ours to offer. We can choose to ignore it all - to try to keep things the way they always have been. Or we can choose to move forward, with each other and Lot, and Lot's wife, and all the other motley characters of our ancestral story. We can choose to follow the call of God trusting that as we move from here to there, regardless of our age, we will be blessed. And we will have offspring as numerous as the stars in the heavens and blessings as many as the grains of sand on the shore.

Finally, God's plans are big. God takes the long view. God's vision is far greater than ours. God does good *for* us but also *through* us. Or, to put it more crudely, it's not all about us! God is not in the business of keeping us content with how things are. God wants us to move from here to there.

One of the things Feiler said about Abraham in another book he wrote called *Abraham* is that the only piece of the Promised Land that Abraham ever legally possessed - which was the promise, you remember - was the grave site he purchased from the Hittites for Sarah.<sup>1</sup> He is also buried there.

Abraham died at age 175 - so, for a hundred years (and, even if the years aren't exactly accurate, the point is that he started late and worked long), he

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followed God's call and yet, when he died, he didn't "possess" the Promised Land. And he had barely eked out a few descendants.

How did he feel? Was he a success or a failure? Should he have left Haran and Ur? We'd say yes now but, I am quite sure he had quite a few doubts about it all. But it didn't matter what he thought. It mattered what God thought. Which is, of course, the point. It's not about us. It's about planting seeds and giving life and sharing a vision for a future of a world transformed. It is making a commitment to make a difference - to foster joy in those we love, to comfort the sick, to feed the hungry, to work for peace. It is moving from here to there. It is moving from wherever we are too comfortable and more concerned about ourselves - to there, where people need life and hope and joy. And in the moving, we will become the people God calls us to be. Just like Abraham and Sarah and all our ancestors in the faith who got us where we are and who expect us to keep going.

Kathleen Norris writes, quoting Doris Betts *that faith is "not synonymous with certainty . . . (but) is the decision to keep your eyes open."*

And Frederick Buechner writes *Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, a process than a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you're going but going anyway. A journey without maps.*

Today, as we honor our graduates, we remind them that they are on the cusp of a wonderful journey. But as for the rest of us, we're in the midst of a great journey of faith too. Individually and as a community. Together, let's keep our eyes - and our ears - and our hearts - open. Let's do our part to move toward the promised land - a place where people who believe - where you and I - really make a difference in the world. I'm not sure how it will all turn out but I do know it will be good and that God will be with us in the process, forming us and helping us give birth to something more than we can ask or imagine.

May we have the courage to go forth in faith from in this next stage of our journey in faith—wherever God leads us. *Amen.*

Sources:

This sermon is liberally adapted with permission from one preached by my friend and colleague Rev. Kathy Young in 2005.