

Hespeler, 8 March, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Genesis 12:1-4, Psalm 121, Romans 4:1-5, 13-18, John 3:1-17

Now the LORD said to Ashurbanipal, **“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. 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.”**

So Ashurbanipal went, “What, are you crazy, LORD? You want me to leave behind everything that is familiar and comfortable, the land that I’m supposed to inherit from my father and all of the family supports that are supposed to protect me from all the unpredictability of life. That’s okay, LORD, you can keep your blessing.

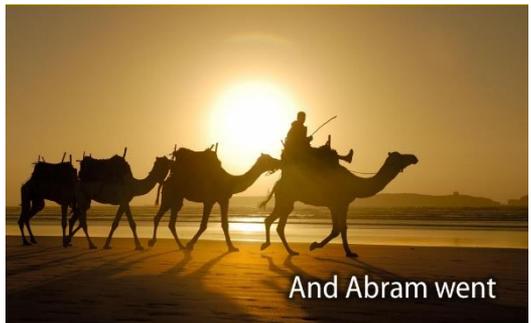
But the LORD was not discouraged and he went and said to Utnapishtim, “Utnapishtim, same command. Leave your country and everything and you can have all these blessings.” But Utnapishtim said, “LORD, I am very flattered and everything, but I am totally swamped this month, can I get back to you later on your plan.”

So, the LORD went on to others – to Nahshon, Ammishaddai and Zuriel – but nowhere could he find someone to take on the challenge of what he commanded them – until he found Abram. And Abram, to everyone’s surprise, he just got up and went.

That is the kind of amazing thing about the story of the call of Abram in the Bible, isn’t it? There really was nothing special about Abram before that. He hadn’t *done* anything, hadn’t proven his value in any way. When we first meet him in the Book of Genesis, there is only one thing that sets him apart, one thing that indicates that he is different: when God says go, he goes. He doesn’t talk back. He doesn’t ask questions or hesitate. He goes.

That is what made me wonder how we’re supposed to read this story. Was Abram the only one that God spoke to, or were others given the same offer? Do we not hear about those others – are they entirely lost to history – simply because they turned God down?

And if the only thing that Abram did to set himself apart, at least at first, was respond to this command, what is the significance of that? What did Abram do right? You might think that it was his instant obedience that impressed God, which would mean that God is really only interested in what you might call “yes men” (for lack of a more inclusive term). What God



And Abram went

wants more than anything else is someone who, when God says jump, only says, “How high sir?”

But no, that cannot be it. If God were looking for nothing more and nothing less than unquestioning obedience, he could have chosen to adopt unthinking beasts instead of a human family. No, what set Abram apart was not the instant obedience itself but the thing that made him react that way, and that thing was faith.

In our reading this morning from his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul is referring to a later event in Abram’s life when he writes, “**Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,**” but what he says there certainly applies to this earlier event. What set Abram apart right from the very beginning was his willingness to believe the promises that God made to him. Paul goes on from there to explain what belief in God means in that kind of situation, “**But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.**” Paul says that the faith that God is looking for is a willingness to trust God.

As I thought about the season of Lent this year, I noticed that there was a certain theme that kept coming up in our readings for Sunday mornings – a theme that is most clear in this Genesis reading this morning. The readings are full of stories of people who step out and embrace new things, new concepts and ideas, who leave things behind because they feel called to something new. We see that theme, for example, in our gospel reading from this morning. We see it as Nicodemus engages with Jesus of Nazareth who pushes him to rethink just about every aspect of the Judaism that he has held onto as a teacher of Israel. If Nicodemus is going to embrace what Jesus is saying to him (which apparently according to this gospel he eventually does) he is going to have to let go of many of the ideas and ways of thinking that have told him who he has been up until this point in his life.

So, looking at that, my question was why are these the stories that seem to be coming up during Lent? Lent has always been a very important season in the life of the church. It is a time of reflection, of repentance and of rededication. In the early church, it was also a time for focusing on the basics of the faith. Throughout the season new members of the churches would be taught what it meant to be followers of Jesus in preparation to be baptized on Easter Sunday. So I think that we should also think of it as a season when we focus on the absolute essentials of what makes us followers of Christ.

With all of that in mind, how should we think of this theme that seems to be introduced by this decision of Abram to just get up and go, leaving everything that is familiar, just because God says so? I believe that this is meant to teach us something absolutely essential about faith and what it means for us as followers of Jesus Christ in the world today.

Let me ask you, how is faith generally perceived in our society today? I would suggest that a very big stereotype of people of faith is that they are people who cling to the past. That perception is not always true about Christians, of course, but it is persistent, and it is not based on nothing. There are many Christians today, for example, who cling to beliefs and ways of seeing the world that are outmoded and largely discredited – those who insist, for example, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that the world was all created about 6,000 years ago, and that it was all created in a span of six 24-hour days. There are those who would claim that believing that, in the face of all that contrary evidence, is a perfect example of what faith is.

But it's not just in matters of what people believe that Christians can be particularly stuck to the past. It is also in matters of practice and ways of doing things. We cling to old songs and old forms of prayers and old traditions. Have you ever heard that favourite old hymn that goes, "give me that old time religion, it was good enough for my father; it's good enough for me."

And I am not saying that that is a horrible thing in and of itself. Just because something is old doesn't mean that it can't be good. Old traditions can obviously still be meaningful and comforting. Old truths can still be true, and we should never abandon the truth. There is no problem if we simply value these things and hold on to them appropriately. The problem comes when we confuse blindly clinging to these things with faith; the problem comes when we start to see stubbornness in itself as a virtue. And I'm afraid that we often think in exactly that way.

If faith really were what we often assume it is, then Abram would not be the ideal example of faith. He would be a negative example. If faith was just about stubbornly clinging to the familiar and comfortable, then the example that we would be celebrating today on this second Sunday of Lent would be Ashurbanipal or Utnapishtim or whoever else turned God down flat before Abram said yes. But there is a good reason why nobody knows who they were.

The season of Lent is often compared to a journey. We talk about how it is the path we have to travel in order to arrive at the sad but beautiful truth of what happened on Good Friday when God's love for us was demonstrated so powerfully. It is a journey towards the incredible victory of Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday. But every journey towards something is also a journey away from something else; that is the truth that Abram demonstrates to us so clearly. When he left on God's orders, what he was journeying towards was very nebulous. God hadn't even actually told him where he was going yet – had only promised to let him know when he got there.

But if Abram's destination was unclear, what he was leaving was anything but. He knew exactly what he was giving up and what it was costing him. And that is often how it works and that is why change is hard, why it is so much easier to cling to what you know than to embrace what you have not yet seen.

And so, if we are going to think of our passage through Lent this year as a journey, I'm going to propose that, instead of focussing just on where we are going, we think about what God might be calling us to let go of in order to get there. As you may know, it is a tradition in certain churches to give up something during the season of Lent. People might make a vow to stop eating chocolate or desserts or to stop doing some favourite activity during the forty days of the season. That is may be close to what I'm talking about here, but I think we may need to look for something a little bit more serious than that.

I'm not talking about giving up something you like for just a short period of time. I'm talking about giving up permanently the things that are keeping you from grasping the full truth of what God did for you on Easter and on Good Friday.

Let me ask you, what might you be clinging to, not because it a good thing or a healthy thing, but simply because it is what is familiar or comfortable. Perhaps it is an old grudge – something that you have been holding against somebody for so long that you may have even forgotten why it was that you were mad at them in the first place. Holding on to something like that might make you feel good – there is a comfort to it – but it is not doing anyone any good, least of all you. I would suggest to you that part of the Lenten journey that God is calling you to is a journey away from that grudge.

Or maybe you've been resisting something – some change in your personal life or something that you are involved in – even though you know deep down inside that the change is inevitable. Change is hard and God understands why we resist it, but your Lenten journey this year might well involve you walking away from the resistance. That will mean that you will walk into something new and unfamiliar and probably disturbing because of it, but the walk forward is a walk of faith for you as much as it was for Abram.

I just think that you need to be reminded that, if your faith is merely something that makes you hold onto what you've always known, resist change and complain about any disturbance to what you are used to, it is not the faith of Abram. It is not the faith that prompted God to bless Abram and make him a nation that would bring blessing to the whole world. Walking away from some of that will be hard, of course, but the same promise of blessing that God gave Abram is the promise he is offering to you this Lenten season. So let's embark on the journey together.