

12 The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you,  
those who curse you I will curse;  
all the families of the earth  
will be blessed because of you."

4 Abram left just as the Lord told him, and Lot went with him. Now Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran. 5 Abram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all of their possessions, and those who became members of their household in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in Canaan, 6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the sacred place at Shechem, at the oak of Moreh. The Canaanites lived in the land at that time. 7 The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "I give this land to your descendants," so Abram built an altar there to the Lord who appeared to him. 8 From there he traveled toward the mountains east of Bethel, and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and worshipped in the Lord's name. 9 Then Abram set out toward the arid southern plain, making and breaking camp as he went. - **Common English Bible**

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When we last read the story of the Call of Abram and Sarai together, it was mid-September four years ago and I reflected with you then about what it means to follow God's call into the unknown. I ended that sermon with these two paragraphs (let's pick up where we left off):

I read a book a while ago that used Lewis and Clark's journey to describe the situation facing most churches today. Lewis and Clark planned to canoe across the country, but when they encountered the Rockies, mountains inconceivable in the east, they had to find a different way to keep moving forward. They needed a radically new approach for a radically new circumstance. And they found it... and we live here today partly thanks to their courageous willingness to push forward, leaving behind the known for the unknown.

I don't know exactly what St. Andrew's needs to leave behind in order to move forward towards God's promised land... but I think that the canoe we've been paddling for 60 some years needs to be retired. And together we need to climb the mountains before us seeking God's will above all else. Abram had land, family, the resources of his father's household. He left it all behind... and indeed... out of barrenness and impossibility God brought life and possibility. This is the God we worship. We can settle for lesser gods of security and comfort, or we can give our hearts to the God who makes a way out of no way, whose promise is enough foundation for faithful response.

Little did I or we know then how radically different the world would be four years hence, nor that we'd be thrust out of our canoe so dramatically with over a year of only virtual worship. We've been shaken up, displaced, seriously challenged. Let's look again to Abram for some insight into this experience.

Sometimes with stories of God's call people are given a clear sense of that to which they are being called, but sometimes... maybe often... it's a lot more vague. It certainly was for Abram. He's 75 years old. He has no heirs as he and Sarai have been unable to conceive and bear children. He has no children, but he does have land, and family, and the resources of his father's household. And the voice of God is quite explicit that he is to leave all this behind. For what? To go to an unspecified land where God will make a nation out of him, make his name great, and bless him, and bless others through him. God is asking a lot of Abram, but God is also promising a lot. But... as grand as these promises are, Abram surely struggled to wrap his head around them and probably had a pretty hard time visualizing them. How is a nation going to be built out of a barren couple wandering in a strange land? How will forsaking settled security yield blessing? The promise is beautiful, but fuzzy. The call is stark, and clear.

Jean Calvin says Abram and Sarai are asked to go "with closed eyes... until having renounced thy country, thou shalt have given thyself wholly to me" (cited in Brueggemann, 118). And they go, on faith, eyes closed, they go. And as they make their way around the land of Canaan, Abram keeps building altars and worshipping and waiting for more guidance from God. We won't be reading the rest of the Abraham and Sarah story this year (watching as they change and their names change too). Last year we read a particularly awful moment in their story... and there are several... though Abram demonstrates no apparent fear or hesitation in today's story, things get more complicated as the years progress... but today I just want to us to focus on this story of an ending and a beginning.

Walter Brueggemann calls this passage the most important structural break in the Old Testament or at least in Genesis. He says there is a stark break between the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12 and says this break distinguishes between the history of the curse and the history of the blessing (Brueggemann, 116). If at the beginning of the book we hear of the creation of the world only to hear quickly how

messed up humans make that world (that's sort of where last week's story began), at the beginning of 12 we hear about the creation of a people, a family, a nation through whom God will confer blessing on all the world. Brueggemann writes, "It is the same God who calls creation and who calls the community of faith. This same God works [God's] powerful creative purpose and intervenes in surprising, redemptive ways. The call to Sarah and Abraham has to do not simply with the forming of Israel but with the re-forming of creation, the transforming of the nations" (Brueggemann, 105).

More significantly this story sets up a pattern that is crucial to the story of God's people, the pattern of promise and faith. Many of the stories in chapters 1-11 of Genesis do not portray humanity as particularly responsive and receptive to God. Abram and Sarai are different. Brueggemann writes,

It is unambiguous that this family has responded in a peculiar and faithful way. In this narrative, there is a striking correspondence between God's call and the response of Abraham and Sarah. It is that correlation that offers us the theme of promise and faith around which the narrative revolves... Promise is God's mode of presence in these narratives. The promise is God's power and will to create a new future sharply discontinuous with the past and the present. The promise is God's resolve to form a new community wrought only by miracle and reliant only on God's faithfulness. Faith as response is the capacity to embrace that announced future with such passion that the present can be relinquished for the sake of that future (Brueggemann, 106).

I want us to focus on this story of ending and beginning, of leaving the known for the unknown, of giving ourselves in trust to the promise of God we can't fully grasp because I think this is God's word to St. Andrew's right now. It's God's Word to the individual members of St. Andrew's and to us as a faith community. All of us are figuring out what it means to be faithful in a radically changed and changing world. We know that we are called to follow Jesus, we are devoted to our mission of connecting with Christ and each other to serve our neighbors, but what that means right now is rather fuzzy. How we will best do this is unclear. We are reassessing mission commitments picked up during the pandemic. We are grieving people we have lost, families who are missing. We are trying to sort out how best to secure our building and yet remain as open and welcoming as possible. It may feel like we are stumbling forward with our eyes closed.

But we are moving forward placing our trust in the God who calls us, the God who's got us, the God who has prepared a beautiful future for us. Perhaps all that we have let go the past few years, painful as that has been, has been part of that forward movement. Let's keep responding in faith to the God who promises so much.

Works cited in this sermon:

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Sarah Sanderson-Doughty. "Leaving the Known for the Unknown." *Sermon for St. Andrew's*, September 16, 2018.