

Call of Abraham

September 16, 2018

Every fall, as many of you know, I preach through the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. Last week we started with the flood story in Genesis chapters 6-10. At least the way the Hebrews understood the story, God was so frustrated with a corrupt world that God said, We need a do-over. You remember I said that ancient people and some people today believe that natural events can be a sign of God's displeasure. So the writers of Genesis believed that God destroyed most of the inhabitants of the earth and started over again. You remember I said that might be a theological interpretation of God you might want to leave behind, that God uses natural events to punish people. I'm hoping no one is saying that about Hurricane Florence.

But in this first part of the Genesis, there is disobedience, and judgment, and mistrust, and violence. The beautiful world that God made insisted on going its own way. When we reach the end of chapter 11, after the flood story, we hear about Terah, who is a descendant of Noah's son Shem. Terah has three sons- Abram, Nahor and Haran. They are living in Ur of the Chaldees, now modern day Iraq.

Abram takes a wife named Sarai, but the text says, Sarai was barren. Notice at the end of these eleven chapters, after all this death and destruction and judgment, Sarai is barren. It doesn't look like things can get much worse. The human story seemed to be one of brokenness and pain.

Terah says, Let's go find someplace new to live. So he and his son Abram and daughter-in-law Sarai and grandson Lot migrate to Haran, and they settle there. The story we have today will be the beginning of a new chapter. God's going to narrow the focus from the whole cosmos down to a particular family. "Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country, and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

Notice that God says to leave everything that is familiar: leave your nation, leave your community, leave your family. I don't know about you, but I like familiar

things. I can get comfortable in my routines. Most of us have them. There are places we like to visit; there are people we like to spend time with. If we have some disposable income, there are some restaurants we like to go to. God says to Abram: Leave it all.

I've told some of you before the story of my parents leaving everything they knew to go to a new place. In 1965, my dad had been a pastor 25 years, and he had been serving a church in Wenatchee, Washington for five years. Ministry was going well. There were now eight children in the family; the four older ones were in high school and college.

I was ten-years-old when a travelling missionary with Youth for Christ came to town, and spoke at our church. And because we hosted him for the night, he spoke with my parents over dinner.

He said to my dad and mom, "There are 33 American high schools in Europe for the children of our military personnel." The Vietnam War was going full strength. We had half a million troops in Europe. This missionary said, "We'd like someone to go to Germany and be our Youth for Christ representative in Europe, to creatively share the news of Jesus with those teenagers."

My dad was 50, my mom 46, comparatively old to make a change like this, like Abram and Sarai. And the more they prayed, the more they wrestled with it, the more they felt God's call. They so like Abram and Sarai, they left behind family, their four older children, they left behind the familiar rhythm of congregational ministry, they left the culture they knew. They took us four younger children with them, and we lived in Germany for three years. And it changed our world. It was a tremendous blessing for us, and for the people my parents were able to work with.

God says to Abram, Go from everything that is familiar to you, and here is why. "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."

The next verse says, So Abram went. Abram took a chance. I don't know what Abram based that on. He didn't know this God. He had been worshiping other gods in Ur of the Chaldees and in Haran. But maybe he took a chance on what God

promised. Listen to these four promises again that God makes: I will make of you a great nation. Well, that sounds pretty good, except that he and his wife were old and didn't have any kids. I will bless you, and make your name great. Ok, I can go along with that. You will be a blessing; in fact, in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. If I were Abram, I probably would have thought, I'd love to be a blessing to a bunch of other people.

And lastly, I will curse the one who curses you. Abram might have thought, Sounds like God's got my back. Maybe I can take a chance and leave it all.

I remember that my parents believed in God's promises. That helped them follow the call of God to a new country. When things looked impossible, my mom hung onto Ephesians 3:20- "Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. My mom claimed that promise that God could do far more than we could ask or think or even dream about. It was God's power at work within us.

So at 75 years of age, with 65-year old Sarai, Abram made the choice to leave for a new land. They are going to journey to a new reality that only God can create. And by the way, these promises to Abram are pure grace. Abram hasn't done anything to earn this favor. And this promise that God will make a great nation out of this couple are made to a man whose wife is barren. The sheer grace and the folly of God.

I want you to notice the journey metaphor in this story. We people of faith talk about the life of faith as a journey. That begins with this story.

"So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh." And the last verse in this passage says, And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.

Notice the movement- Abram went....they set forth to go....Abram passed through the land...Abram is on a journey of following God, and it happens in stages. He's not quite sure what Canaan is all about, but he is learning to trust this God who is calling him. There is a journey here that is not happening all at once.

You and I are on a faith journey. I hope you are not where you were ten years ago on your faith journey, or five years ago. I trust that God is showing you some new things; that God is taking you deeper. Now, there are lots of false steps on the journey, just like there are with us. We make some mistakes on the journey, don't we?

Abraham and Sarah get impatient waiting for a child. They are 75 and 65 when God calls them. And when they get to this new land, they still are waiting for a child. So Sarah says to her husband, Go ahead and have a child by my handmaid. And Ishmael is born. And that's not the plan that God had. Sometimes we try to make things happen on our own, and God says, This isn't my timing yet. So the journey is a metaphor that we receive from this story. Faith is a journey.

Faith in Scripture does not mean believing a set of doctrines. Faith means placing your complete trust in the one we follow. Abram was called righteous by God not because he believed certain things about God, but because he was willing to follow God.

We have a program in the ELCA called Young Adults in Global Mission. I read a story recently about Erika Storvick. On her first night in Fianarantsoa, Madagascar, this Minnesota native felt overwhelmed by her decision to serve there through the YAGM program. "It's probably the place that is most different from Minnesota," she said of Madagascar. Through YAGM, Storvick answered a call to spend a year volunteering alongside Malagasy companions teaching English to primary, secondary and deaf students, and growing in faith. But that night she asked herself, "Why have I chosen to live on the other side of the world for an entire year?"

Though she didn't have an answer at the time, Storvick knows now that the experience helped her become more open-minded. While teaching was fulfilling, the Malagasy spirit really filled her heart.

The Malagasy spirit involved being intentional with others, to the point where time and schedules take a back seat as you focus on relationships. “I was a very overscheduled, overinvolved person before, so at first, my life felt empty if I didn’t have something scheduled for every minute of every day. [But] you have so many more opportunities to grow if you don’t schedule every minute.”

The challenges of living alone, walking an hour one-way to the deaf school where she taught arts and crafts, and overcoming a language barrier were at times daunting. But she stuck with it. Her pastor supervisor said, “She ... just kept doing the work that you do when life’s not easy, which I really appreciate about her.” (Her supervisor is paid through the funds we pass on to the ELCA, by the way). Storvick said the community spirit she was shown by people she met helped make her year abroad one of lasting importance. “I think I’m a better person because I did YAGM. It’s taught me that [from] the places and people I least expect, you can grow friendships, and even in very humbling situations ... [when] you know nothing or none of the answers—those are the places I saw God.”

When you know nothing or none of the answers- those are the places I saw God. That’s what happened to Abraham and Sarah. They didn’t have the answers- they just followed. They didn’t know how God was going to work it out- they just followed. That’s what faith is. The writer of Hebrews says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Let me share a simple example of following as I close this morning. My Susan almost always has her act together. But Wednesday she forgot her lunch. I found it after she left, brought it with me to church, and texted her and said, I’d be glad to bring you your lunch. She works out at St. Vincent, out at the end of Highway 217. In fact, I said, I’m looking for an excuse to go to Hillsboro to have lunch with David, one of my pastor colleagues I meet with every Tuesday on Google Hangout.

I called David, who happened to be free for lunch. I delivered lunch to Susan at St. Vincent's, and drove onto David’s church in Hillsboro. He gave me a great tour of their facility, where I got some great ideas for how to use art around the church building. As we sat and talked about ministry in a Mexican restaurant in Hillsboro, I spoke with him about a quandary that I have in ministry. And he gave an insight

that I needed to have that day. The timing could not have been better. In fact, he reminded me of something I had told him two years ago. I needed to hear exactly what he had to say. If Susan hadn't forgotten her lunch, I would not have been sitting there with David, letting the Holy Spirit tell me what I needed to hear.

Susan never forgets her lunch. Why did it happen that day? There is a journey of faith going on if we pay attention. God has a chance to work on us and in us, especially when we find ourselves in uncomfortable situations, or in new territory. As Erika Storvick says, "When you know nothing or none of the answers—those are the places you see God." May it be so. Amen.