

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 12: 1-4a

“When God Calls”

Today we enter for the 1st time since February, what the church calls “ordinary time”. We move from the resurrection and the fire of Pentecost and speaking in tongues to the more mundane, regular rhythms of life. At the beginning of this mundane season, the lectionary relates two stories about it means to follow God. IN the New Testament, Jesus asked Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him. In Genesis, God asked Abraham (or Abram, as he’s still called here) to leave his home and follow him to a new land. In both readings, following God was an act of faith. But following also involved some pretty regular things – packing up, venturing out, pitching a tent, and having a meal with new friends. All of this reminds us that following God often involves familiar things and commonplace activities. BUT – and this is a big BUT – following God takes a whole lot of courage.

How appropriate, or providential, that on the Sunday we officially say goodbye to Carrie, we get two stories about following God’s call!

Today, I’m focusing on Abram’s call. It was around 4000 years ago that Abram settled in Haran, Turkey, on the Syrian border. He was, for all intents and purposes, a nomad. After his father died, Abraham heard the voice of God tell him, “Leave your country, your people, and your father’s household, and go to the land I will show you.”

And in act of utter audacity, Abram did just that! There were no warranties, no guarantees, no bonuses to lure him except his faith in God. It would be the modern-day equivalent of one of us packing up our possessions and

family into a U-Haul and heading to an unknown destination because God told us to do so.

One writer calls this story the “lynchpin of the Bible,” (John C Holbert, www.patheos.com) because it’s the turning point, the story in the Bible on which everything else hangs. Let me explain . . .

After God created the world (in Genesis chapter 1), things took a turn for the worse. God left Adam and Eve alone in the garden to explore Eden and in no time flat things started to fall apart. This was quickly followed by Cain killing Abel in chapter 4, and by the time we get to chapter 6, mischief has gone universal and God is planning on wiping out the entire creation with one big flood. Now before you start thinking that this “Old Testament” God is impatient and vengeful, keep in mind that in all these stories God is willing to make adjustments and go with Plan B. In the garden of Eden God decides making clothes for Adam and Eve is better than punishing them; and God still protects Cain even though he killed Abel, whom God really loved, and God decides to save one family, Noah’s family-from the big flood.

But things don’t work out so well with Noah; he brings shame on the family and God, and by the time we get to chapter 11 the people are building a big tower and getting along happily without God. Quite honestly, if I were God, I would have called the whole thing off right then and there. But instead, even though people have really messed things up, God is still willing to give them the benefit of the doubt and hang in there with them.

Which brings me to today’s story, the story of Abram. I think it’s fair to say that Abram is God’s last hope for the world. If things don’t work out with him, there aren’t any other places left to turn.

Noticeably absent in the story of Abraham is his list of qualifications for being the guy in the Bible upon whom everything else hangs. In other words, we don't know anything about the guy. What makes him qualified to be the forefather of Judaism, Islam and Christianity? What special qualities does God see in him? Was he particularly strong, adept, or astute? Or did he just happen to be in the right place at the right time? Or, depending on one's perspective, the wrong place at the wrong time? We don't know. About all we do know is that he was old, about 75 years old, childless, and married to a woman who couldn't have children. If you ask me, he was an unlikely candidate for being the father of a great nation, let alone the father of 3 major world religions. Why God called Abram, we do not know. At best we can only fathom a guess and let the story serve as a reminder that sometimes God calls the least likely suspects to do some pretty extraordinary things. But that's a different sermon.

Instead, in this one, I want to focus on Abraham's response. I find it amazing that Abraham went when God told him to go. In fact, I'm always amazed at the people in the Bible who go when God commands them to go because I like being settled and comfortable. Maybe this is why I don't move all that much. Blame my childhood; I lived in the same house until I got married. And the older I get, the less prone I am to seek out adventures. I have enough adventure with 4 children; you know what I mean? I get all the adventure I can handle.

But the Bible is full of stories of people who follow God's command to go . . . and while some of them do protest (Moses, Paul), they all eventually go. They all leave the old life behind to go where God commands them to go. Like Abram, they go without knowing all the facts that lie ahead. Gosh, Abram didn't even know where God was going to take him, but he still left his father's land . . . which was very risky.

I find it interesting that the land Abram left behind was named Haran, which translated means "crossroads". Knowing this subtle detail, I can't

help but reflect on some of the crossroads I have faced in my life, which aren't all that dramatic, but had I chosen another path to follow, my life would be different. There was a time in seminary that I nearly quit. Had I done that, my life would be very different. When Terry and I were looking to leave Wisconsin, opportunities to go to Columbus Ohio or Indianapolis Indiana presented themselves. Our lives would be different had we taken that turn on the road.

Think of the crossroads you have faced . . .the job you didn't take or the job you left behind; the home you left for a new city and new adventure; or the phone call you made that changed your life. How would your life be different had you chosen another path to take?

Think of the crossroads you as a congregation have faced; the decision to leave a building and move here; the decisions to call pastors and say goodbye to others; the decisions to elect elders to lead you, to begin new ministries like KLM, and to end others.

Carrie came to a crossroads, too. After six years of ministry here, she found herself standing at one of those moments when the future isn't entirely clear, but the call of God is. She could have stayed with what was familiar, what was comfortable, what she knew and loved. Instead, she chose to trust that God was opening a new path. Like Abram, she doesn't have every answer about what lies ahead. None of us ever do. But she has listened carefully, prayed faithfully, and stepped forward in trust.

These are crossroads. And when we come upon them, it takes trust to follow down a path whose future is unknown and uncertain. When Abram was at his crossroads, he went where God commanded him to go because he trusted God.

This story is so important and so foundational to our faith because it teaches us that the life of faith requires trust. More than anything else, it requires trust. This lynchpin story of the Bible shows us that our faith doesn't begin with a set of rules or a set of doctrines to believe in; it begins with an invitation to trust in God in the midst of life. This is what Carrie is doing. She isn't leaving because she has every detail figured out. She isn't leaving because she possesses some secret knowledge about the future. She is responding to God's call in her own life. It's never easy to leave people you love. But faith isn't the absence of uncertainty. Faith is trusting God in the midst of uncertainty.

Now, When Abraham left in faith, he didn't even know where he was going or why, just that God had commanded him. And when he went, he defied both the inner propensities of human nature, and the outer pressures of cultural conformity that pull us in the opposite direction. Because, you see, we understandably prefer to journey from the unknown to the known. We want to move from what we do not have to what we want and need, away from the strange and the predictable and toward safety and security. And unsatisfied with mere promises, we generally demand guarantees and clarity. Compare this to Abram, who acted whole-heartedly and without certainty.

But we are given one assurance when we decide to journey out, one very important assurance, and that is that God will bless us. God promised to bless Abram when he set out; God promised him a great nation, and to make his name great; and God promised to bless those who blessed Abram. So, even though Abram didn't have any idea where he was going or what was in store for him, he did have the assurance that God was there with him and would protect him and bless him.

Today we send Carrie with that same assurance. Because The same God who called her here six years ago is the God who is calling her now. The

same God who sustained her through a pandemic, through countless meetings, camps and classes, celebrations and heartbreaks, is the God who will sustain her in this new chapter.

The witness of scripture tells us that the God who calls us also equips us for our journeys, blesses us as we go, and remains with us throughout them. God gave Abram the tools he needed; and God gives us the tools we need: to face difficult times, and discouraging times; and God gives us courage and stamina, too. God did this for Abraham, and God will do the same for you, Carrie. You're ready. And while I know you've Joked about taking you back if it doesn't work out, and we would! We want it to work out for you. I have faith it will.

I've learned a lot from Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner, who says that the life of every single one of us is a sacred journey, by the fact that we have had a traveling companion every day, every step of the way. *"Listen to your life," Buechner says over and over again.. "In the privacy of your heart take out the album that is your life and search it for the people and places you have loved and learned from, and for those moments in the past—through which you glimpsed, however dimly or fleetingly, the sacredness of your own journey."*

Carrie, we're now part of your album, and it's been one of the great blessings of our congregation's story to be included in yours. When you look back on these years, I hope you'll remember the children whose lives you touched, the youth you encouraged, the families you walked alongside, the colleagues who became friends, and the congregation that laughed with you, learned from you, and loved you.

And while your next chapter is waiting to be written, a part of your story will always remain here. Your ministry has shaped us, and we are better because you have been among us.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord be kind and gracious to you, and may the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace, today and every day.

Amen.