

The Journey of Faith- The Call

1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

2 "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. 5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

8 From there he went on toward the hills 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 called on the name of the LORD.

9 Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

In the summer of 1983, I had a spiritual crisis. Beth and I were living in San Jose, where she was completing her Master's degree in Urban Planning, and I was working with college students at San Jose State.

I loved the work, really, and I loved the students. I loved teaching the Bible, leading Bible studies and prayer meetings. I loved talking with students about their school work and career aspirations. I loved being able to be on a campus where there were so many

people who were not Christ-followers, and engage them in conversation. We loved our neighborhood, especially the wonderful Guatemalan family across the street with their three kids. We loved the duplex on Shasta Avenue that we rented from a 70+ year old woman who was building her own home, with her own hands, somewhere in the Santa Cruz mountains. We loved our church with the 100 member college class, my co-teaching with the Associate Pastor and another fellow, and our small group of six diverse couples. And we loved being near our families, some in San Francisco and some on the East Bay. Our lives were very busy, and very good.

And yet God was doing something within me, I called it “stirring the pot.” I felt unsettled, and vaguely dissatisfied. My immediate supervisors sensed it, too, and recommended that I search for the next step in God’s calling for me. Beth and I talked with each other, and prayed. We talked with others. They prayed for us. The summer was drawing to a close, and I needed to make a decision.

I had begun to read through Genesis, and I became fascinated with Abraham’s story. His calling, his struggles to believe, his sins, his disobedience, and his persistence in following God’s call. I read his story again and again. One night, before bed, I read the passage we read this morning. As I read, I asked God, “Should I stay or should I leave?” But I sensed no answer.

I fell asleep, and had a dream. It was the most vivid dream I have ever had, and it changed my life. In the dream, I was walking our blond Cocker Spaniel named “Woosha”, which is Ethiopian for “dog”. Another story for another time. Our custom was to walk down Shasta to Park Avenue, and then six blocks to the right, past the middle school and the Rosicrucian Museum, to the little market on the corner of Park and Naglee. There, we would buy an ice cream bar, finish 90% of it, and give the rest to Woosha. On the way, Beth and I would talk things over.

In my dream, I walked Woosha alone. After the ice cream at the market, we retraced our steps homeward. Across Naglee, past the Rosicrucian Museum, past the middle school. All of a sudden, I heard hard soled shoes clicking behind us. And I was immediately terrified. Woosha and I began walking faster, and the shoes behind us walked faster. We began to jog, and the shoes behind us began to jog. Then, to Woosha’s great delight, we began to sprint. We sprinted past Magnolia, we sprinted past Hester, Shasta was a block away, but the

shoes were right on our tail. We got to Shasta, with home being a block and a half away, and the shoes caught us.

I was breathing hard, Woosha was happily panting and wagging her tail. I turned around to face what I considered certain doom. Instead, to my great surprise, the person in the shoes handed me a present, and said, "Here, I have been trying to give this to you." And then, I awoke.

I talked with others about the dream, but I already knew what it meant, and what God wanted me to do. I re-read Genesis 12 and the word "Go" jumped right off the page at me, and my decision was made. I was to leave the ministry at San Jose State. But for what? I did not know.

I did have a sense that the ministry at San Jose State had become part of my identity, and to even think of leaving was a threat to my well-being. It became clearer and clearer that God wanted us to move on, and I was reading that situation like punishment, like a threat, like something was being taken away from me. And yet, God's call to leave turned out to be a rich blessing, a gift, not only to Beth and me, but to all we have had the honor of serving in the 28 years since.

There were several things in the Genesis 12 passage that stood out to me as I pondered them in the weeks, and months, and years following that dream. And this morning, I would like to share several of them with you. I hope I can be clear, as this is a very dear and powerful passage that God has used in my life over and over again. And I hope you can catch a glimpse of what it means to me, and what it might mean to you.

The Call

First, the spiritual life is a response to the call of God, not a do-it-yourself life. No one begins to follow God because they want to, or because they were curious, nor because they woke up one morning and decided to follow God. Following God is a response, initiated by God. This spiritual life that God calls us to is a good life. God would not call us to an empty and purposeless life. God had plans for Abraham, God had plans for me, God has plans for you. And these plans are discovered by listening and obeying God's call.

Genesis 11 ended with the statement that Sarai, Abram's wife, was barren. The story from Genesis 3-11 is all about the self-will of human beings who have decided that they know best how to run their lives. The hard work and creativity produced nothing that lasted, nothing that blessed other people. The idea that our lives and our purposes are self-generated leads to barrenness.

A month or so ago, I built a planter box in our back yard. I planted zucchini, cucumbers, strawberries, and tomatoes. The zucchini plant is about to take over the whole planter! Now imagine the zucchini plant trying to decide that it does not want to grow zucchini, but apples. Will it be able to produce apples? Certainly not! And yet, if it tries to produce apples rather than zucchini, what will it produce? Nothing! So it is with human beings, apart from responding to the call of God, our lives will be barren, like Sarai's.

Responding to God's call is far different than asking God to bless the plans we already have made. Doing that makes us the ones responsible for our lives and decisions, and makes God into our servant. To honor God is to pay attention to what God is doing, to where God is leading, to what God's plans are.

There is a scene in the movie, "Entrapment", where Catherine Zita-Jones has to navigate a room covered with laser motion detectors. Sean Connery guides her and instructs her through. She must trust him, because she cannot see the lasers, but he can. So he tells her to bend, to stand up, to lift her leg, to raise her arms, etc. And if she does not obey his commands, the alarms will go off and they will be caught. The call of God is like that. God sees what we do not see. We ignore God's call to our own peril.

High risk, high reward

It was very difficult for us to leave San Jose, and move to Southern California. We left our family, our friends, our church, our jobs, our ministries, a familiar culture, roots that for me went back fifteen years, but for Beth the roots went back almost 30 years. The radio stations, the theaters, the restaurants like Henry's Hi Life and Happi House, all left behind.

But for Abram and Sarai, the difficulty must have been enormous! Abram was about 75 when they left Haran, so he had 75 years of history with his family, with deep roots in Ur and Haran. Leaving family and friends and culture must have been extremely

painful. No one leaves with that much invested without shedding a tear or two.

The point is what Bill Hybels calls “high risk, high reward.” That is, the bigger the risk taken, the larger the potential reward will be. Conversely, the smaller the risk, the smaller the potential reward will be. This is true in financial investing, and in the spiritual life. A high rate of return usually comes with high risk, a low rate of return comes with minimal risk.

When faced with these sorts of choices, we often want to know what the gain is for us. If I risk it all, what is the benefit?

One of the benefits of risk-taking is intimacy with God. Did you notice in the passage how personal God’s promises are? They are not just predictions, but God says “I will” six times. “I will show you [the land]”, “I will make you into a great nation”, “and I will bless you;” “I will make your name great,” “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.”

How intimately God is involved in His call to Abraham, and to us! God’s call involves Himself. God’s call to go to the doctor involves God being with us as we go. God’s call for us to sell our homes and move involves God being with us as we move. God’s call for us to do things differently involves God being with us as we do. God’s call for us to trust him with our finances involves God being with us as we do. At every step of the way, God is intimately involved in the details of our lives brought about by the call.

But there is something else to consider. It is right to wonder what will happen if I go, but we often forget to ask what would happen if I do NOT go!

If Abraham does not go, he will not be blessed, nor will there be a nation (three world religions) that revere him, and no blessing of the entire human race. The implications of not risking, not trusting are HUGE, and the effects go far beyond our own lives.

If Beth and I had not left San Jose, there are hundreds of people in Southern California that might not have been influenced by us. Our own lives would have been smaller, and the lives of those we touched would have been poorer.

During my first stint at Arcadia Presbyterian Church as an intern, I must have used the phrase “blessed to be a blessing” dozens of times. I tried to convey to the young adults that we are not to be containers of God’s blessing, but conduits of God’s blessing. We have been blessed to bless others. I said it so often to so many people, that when I graduated from Fuller Seminary, the group gave me one of my most cherished possessions: an etched glass plaque with a picture of Beth and me on my graduation day. The plaque reads, “Blessed to be a blessing- APC College Group, 1988”.

If I respond to god’s call, there are the promises of blessing. If I do not respond to God’s call, it is not just my life that suffers. My family life suffers. And people around the world will suffer the lack of God’s blessing because I did not respond. The call of God is serious.

The call of God involves risks, and people and churches that are growing take risks. People and churches that do nothing but play it safe are dying. If Abram had not responded to God’s call to leave Haran, he would have died there. He would have died with no children. He would have died a wealthy man, most likely. But certainly no nation would have called him their founder, as Israel does. And more than likely, the three largest monotheistic religions in the world would not have called Abraham their father in the faith. For it takes no faith at all to take no risks.

This morning, what is God calling you to risk? Is it a conversation with someone that you have been trying not to have, because you are afraid it will change things? Perhaps the risk is to go to the doctor and discover what exactly is wrong. Perhaps the risk is to seek counseling for an issue you cannot control, and which controls you. Perhaps the risk is to take your hands off something so dear to you that you are trying to control it, and in your controlling it you are actually killing it. What is God calling you to risk today?

Trust God

The most astonishing thing to me about Abraham’s call is that it is non-specific. When God calls him to go, there is no roadmap, there is no GPS unit, there is no address of the destination. When God called Abraham to “go to a land that I will show you”, it essentially means, “keep walking, I will tell you when to stop.”

When Beth and I were dating in college, she invited me to dinner at a famous Scottish restaurant. While I wanted to spend time with her, I was a little spooked about this. I am not someone who is a risky eater. I pestered her about things like, “What kind of food do they serve?”, and “How should I dress?” I was anxious to make a good impression, but I was also anxious about not making a fool of myself. But I trusted her. And it was to my great relief that the famous Scottish restaurant that she took me to on Shattuck and University in Berkeley was.....McDonalds! Trust.

It would have been a great relief to me had I known that it was McDonalds from the beginning. But it forced me to trust Beth, that she would not do something to embarrass me (I take care of that plenty on my own, thank you). And so it was with Abraham and God’s call. The call was primarily for Abraham to trust in God, not in where he was going. It was the relationship with God that was primary.

This is very difficult for many of us, especially those of us who like to be in control. When I am driving somewhere, I am in charge of the route. When I am riding in the car, I am often faced with a choice. I can trust the driver, and enjoy the company. Or I can be anxious about the choices the driver is making. The important thing is the relationship of trust, not that things get done my way.

Communion

On this Communion Sunday, God calls each of us to draw near to Jesus Christ. In the words of the great Charles Wesley hymn, “And Can It Be?”, “He left his Father’s throne above, so free so infinite His grace, Emptied Himself of all but love, and bled for Adam’s helpless race. ‘Tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God, it found out me. Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”

Jesus Christ obeyed the call of God, trusting in His Father, took great risks, and became the means of salvation for every human being who has ever walked the planet. If Jesus had possibly said, “No”, where would we be?

But he did not say “no”. He took a risky journey, and during the darkness and pain of the cross, entrusted himself to God. And His obedience to the call of God has blessed the world.

Is it hard for you to trust, to risk, to let go, to answer God's call? Then draw near to the One who did it completely, and who will walk with you each step of the way. This table is a place of strength for the weak, a place hope for the despairing, a place of comfort for the grieving, a place of peace for those who are conflicted, a place of nourishment for those who are hungry and thirsty.

Come, be blessed and become a blessing.