

Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.”

There is an entire backstory to that one sentence.

In this scene in the Bible, Abram is living in Haran, which is on the modern-day border between Syria and Turkey. Abram is living in Haran along with his father Terah, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot, whose deceased father had been Abram’s brother. This family had originally come from the city of Ur, located on the Euphrates River in what is now Iraq, some 600 miles to the east. That’s a long way to travel. The Bible does not tell us why this little family set out from Ur to make their way to the land of Canaan, but when they arrived at Haran, they settled there instead. Maybe Grandpa Terah was ill and couldn’t travel any further. Maybe they ran out of money and found work, or maybe they just needed to rest and regroup from the journey.

It is from here, Haran, that God called Abram and instructs him to go. To leave behind his country and his extended family and his relatives and to made a new journey to a new land. God called Abram to leave behind everything that had defined him – his nationality, and his ethnic character and even his family ties, and walk with God into a new identity.

Abram does not know what lies ahead. He trusts God to show him the way. It is too bad that the first reading this morning ends where it does, because it leaves out the details of Abram’s journey. If we were to continue reading through verse 9, we would hear that Abram and Sarai and Lot *departed* from Haran, they *set forth* to go to Canaan, they *passed through* the land to Shechem, they *moved on* to the hill country, and finally *journeyed on* toward the Negev. The story is dominated by verbs of travel and movement.

God did not give Abram and Sarai and Lot a road map. God did not give this little family directions or instructions for what to pack. What God gave them was a promise: the promise of land, the promise of descendants and the promise of blessing. Listen once again to God's promise: "I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you...in you all the families of the world will be blessed." Five times in two verses, God promises to bless Abram and those whom he meets on his journey. God's blessing flows outward, rippling from Abraham to all the families of the earth.

"So Abram went as the Lord had told him, and Lot (and Sarai) went with him." What would that be like? Most of here live in this nation because someone a few generations back in our family made a journey across an ocean and then across a continent. Think about the determination that took. Think about the risk. Think about how much your ancestors left behind and how little they knew about what lay ahead.

Right now in this country the debate over immigration has reached a fever pitch. Many voices suggest that we should be afraid of the people who want to come here, many of whom are fleeing war and conflict. What would it be like to imagine that those folks bring blessing with them rather than threat? What would it be like to lay aside fear and welcome the stranger? What would it be like to imagine that your family will be blessed when you bless an immigrant family? Just as God promised to bless those who blessed Abram.

Abram and his little family took a leap of faith when they set out to go where God directed them. Abram trusted that God would show him the way. That faith, that trust, is what the apostle Paul speaks of in his letter to the Romans. Abraham and Sarah (for God even gave them new names) did not have the law of Moses to tell them what was right and

wrong, to tell them what God commanded of them or expected of them. Abraham lived before Moses did. Abraham had only his relationship with God – a relationship of trust. He trusted that God would show him where to go. He trusted that God would give him children with barren and elderly Sarah. He trusted God’s promise of a five-fold blessing. He trusted that God’s word was true.

This is what Paul means when he quotes Genesis 15:6: “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Abraham trusted God to set him right instead of trying to be right on his own. Abraham’s faith was forged on the journey. Abraham’s faith was road-tested.

It is God’s amazing, precious gift of grace that Paul is describing here. What we do, our works, are unnecessary. It is God’s grace that transforms us, which creates in us new life, which gives us new birth in the water of baptism and brings us back again and again to the promise God gives us – to lead us, to bring us to new places and possibilities, and to bless us.

New birth. Born from above. Born of water and the Spirit. This is what Jesus tells Nicodemus has to happen in order to see and enter the kingdom of God. In the water of your baptism you leave behind your old definitions of identity and walk into a whole new life.

I think there are times when we long for what used to be. We remember the good old days, when the church held a place of privilege in our society. That, too, is part of the debate going on in this nation. So much has changed – in our own lives as we get older, and in the culture that surrounds us. Nothing seems to be trustworthy anymore. Part of what

makes us so uncomfortable is that we are in new territory, without a road map, and sometimes it feels like we have no idea which direction to go.

We would do well to remember that the little church in Rome, to whom Paul wrote his letter, did not hold a place of privilege either. The early church lived on the edge of the prevailing Roman culture. There was no such thing as a denomination, or a Reformation, or a Christian nation. That little Roman church had no power or influence within the Empire that ruled over them. But what they did have was a trust that God would lead them, that nothing could separate them from God's love, that God's promises were true.

This morning we have considered what it means for this congregation to “embrace one another in God's love.” God's love – the same love with which God loves the world, the same love with which God sent his only-begotten Son, the same love with which God loves us. When we connect with each other in prayer, when we take time to find out about each other's lives, when we show each other that we care about each other, we do so in God's love. When we are reminded at the end of the service to “Go in peace and serve the Lord,” we are sent from here to extend God's love and blessing outward. It all begins here in the water of our new birth and ripples from the center to all the families of the earth.

For God so loved the world, so loved the human race, so loved the earth and all the millions of creatures, plants, rocks and landscapes that are part of it, so loved the stark lonely places and the towns and cities that humans have built. God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. That word “believe” – that is the key word, but not, perhaps in the way we thought. Faith is not a decision that we make, but a journey that we take.

Each of us is on a journey of our own. Each of us is drawn into the story of God's promise and God's blessing that begins today with Abram, Sarai and Lot. We do not know where we will end up, but we trust God to lead us.

What would it be like for this congregation to answer God's call in the way that Abram answered it?

- **We would trust in the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst and through each one of us.**
- **We would step into new roles, roles we hadn't thought of for ourselves before.**
- **We would welcome strangers, embracing them, too, in God's love.**
- **We would leave behind old disagreements and old resentments.**
- **We would walk forward into blessing, finding ourselves blessed, and being blessings to others.**

Would you turn to page 304 in the front of your hymnal. At the very bottom of that page is a prayer of trust for the journey. Would you pray it with me now...

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.