

To Love the Whole World

The Second Sunday in Lent, 8 March 2020.

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 21; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17.

Consider Abram and Sarai. Later, they changed their names to Abraham and Sarah. But consider Abram and Sarai - before the journey, before the promise, before the blessing, before the child.

The Lord said, "Go." And Abram and Sarai went.

We often praise their faith and obedience, but they were not simply being blindly obedient. Let's be real. The Lord offered some pretty nice incentives. I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you. I will make your name great. I will bless those who bless you. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. That all sounds pretty good.

But while there may have been a sense the journey would lead somewhere good, there was no guarantee any of this would happen. There was no clear picture. And there was no way to know what the journey would cost. What would they lose? Would it all be worth it? They had no way to know.

There were, of course, many reasons not to take this journey. Abram and Sarai were generous in years, let's say. They had suffered a lot of hardship. First was the disappointment of not having children. Then Abram's brother Haran died way too young. His father Terah in his grief decided to move the whole family from Ur where they had been living to Canaan. But along the way they stopped in a place that either was already named Haran or that they named after the lost son and sibling. Then Terah died, so Abram buried his father there. This family had been through quite a lot. You could understand if they chose not to embrace another big change.

There was also nothing forcing their hand at this point. The Lord did not threaten a warning to oppose to the blessing. This was not "an offer you can't refuse." Presumably, if they did not go, they would not become a great nation and their name would not be great. But the Lord did not say, "If you do not go, I will destroy your family, curse your legacy, and blot out your name from the earth." Nothing forced Abram and Sarai into this choice.

But the scriptures say Abram went. And Sarai and his nephew Lot went with him.

So many choices in our lives are like the dilemma facing Abram and Sarai before they set out on their journey. We often feel called to walk in a certain way. Deep in our hearts, we believe life will be better for us and for everyone if we move in this direction. But we do not know what life will look like. We cannot see clearly where the path will lead or what it will cost. We can think of dozens of reasons not to move forward. And nothing is forcing us to take that first step.

Many personal decisions are like this. Marriage comes immediately to mind, but in some cases also divorce. Parenting or foster parenting. Choosing a career or changing a career. Deciding to quit drinking or get healthy. Joining a church. Choosing to be baptized. We consider these journeys with a sense that they will lead to blessing, but there is also a cost. We cannot anticipate all the details. There are hundreds of reasons **not** to move forward. And nothing is forcing us to change.

Likewise, many social and cultural decisions are also like this. We want to live in a world where all people have adequate food and shelter and equal access to education and opportunity. That is a promise of blessing for everyone. But there are all kinds of excuses for keeping things as they are. And nothing is forcing us into social change. The virus outbreak is reminding us again how important it is for everyone to have access to affordable health care and paid sick leave. This is a path of blessing and greater safety for everyone. But the details about how to get there are not clear. There is plenty of pressure to keep things as they are. Nothing is forcing us to take this step.

Some situations do, of course, eventually force a choice. Things can get so bad that we have no choice but to live or act differently. We sometimes call it hitting bottom. Humanity may have been headed in exactly that direction when God called Abram and Sarai. Genesis 3 to 11 is one calamity after another. Adam and Eve were booted out of the Garden. Their son Cain killed his brother Abel. People on earth grew so violent, God decided to send the flood to wipe almost all of them out and start over. Then human beings got so arrogant and bold as to build a tower and try to take over the whole earth. After that, the family of Terah suffered multiple tragedies. Things were not looking good for humanity.

But before everything fell apart, God graciously offered Abram and Sarai an invitation to a new kind of life. No one forced them to into this. But maybe the struggles they suffered made them more open to trying something new. Go to this new place. Live in this new way. Try something you have not tried before. I promise - You'll be blessed.

We often stand at the threshold with Abram and Sarai, confronting a decision. Do we change our lives? Or do we remain the same?

We heard a profound story of personal change this past Wednesday night as part of our Wednesday Lent Series. During Lent we are exploring the call to care for God's creation. This past Wednesday, Stefan Bloodworth was our guest. He is the Executive Director of Columbus Botanical Garden. He did not talk about the Garden that much. Instead, he talked about how his whole life now is about taking care of the earth. He moved to Columbus not just because of a new job but also because he saw in this move an opportunity to live with less. Less stuff, less house to manage, less time on the road, less strain on the resources of the earth, less of a carbon footprint. He no longer owns a car. He rides his bike. He is trying to move into an even smaller home. He does not eat meat. He recently had to go out of town on a business trip. He researched the least costly way to do this from an environmental perspective and decided to take the bus.

Someone in the room pointed out that it must be hard to make these kinds of sacrifices. That is why so many people do not make these choices. But he responded, "I don't think of it as a sacrifice. I haven't lost anything. My life is so much better. I've been set free."

And at the end of their journey, I am certain Abraham and Sarah said the same thing. We are so glad we took this step. Life is so much better because we followed God's invitation to a new way of being. But at the beginning, they had no way to know.

I think that is why Jesus talked about being born again. These transformations in our lives are as dramatic as a new birth. We are born again into a new way of being alive and there is no going back.

Nicodemus could not believe it was possible, and we sometimes can't either. How can we possibly – fill in the blank. Get out of a bad relationship or into a good one. Adopt healthier habits. Follow a calling into a new profession. Throw our whole lives into following Jesus. How can we possibly create a world that works for

everyone? And in keeping with our theme for Lent, how can we possibly embrace a way of life that loves the whole world the way God does – all people, all animals, all plants, even the microbes?

There is so much pressure to stay the course. We've been disappointed so many times before.

But, friends, we know a different way of being is possible. A different way of living with our neighbors and living on this planet is possible. It is a path of blessing for the whole world that God's loves. We can't always see it with our own eyes. But the Spirit gives us the courage to open our eyes and step into a wild and wonderful new kind of life.

Like Abram and Sarai, we all stand at the threshold of blessing. We stand at the threshold of choices or commitments or changes that will bless us and bless others. The work required to move forward is not simply mental or emotional. We won't be able to think or will our way into it. It is spiritual work. It is the work of God within us, which means it is more about surrender than control.

Will we stay where we are? Or will we take that first, trusting step?

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