

TO BE A BLESSING

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

February 17, 2008

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Dorothy Bass, a theologian at Valparaiso University says that religious identity is forged by three crucial elements. Those three elements are people, place, and story.

Place has always figured importantly in Israel's identity. From Abraham's call to go forth to a place, he knew not where - to God's leading Israel out of bondage in Egypt to a yet unseen Promised Land - God's relationship with Israel has always involved a place to be. It is a key to understanding why modern Israel fights so fiercely to maintain the claim that Israel as a nation with a particular land is so important to its identity.

Almost all of us have a story rooted in a place, the places where we have lived, the place where we are. "Well, first we lived in Oklahoma City, and then we moved to Chicago and we lived there on Dogwood Street, and then we moved to St. Joseph and had that house on Ashland Avenue." We tell our story connecting the dots between what happened in our lives and the places where we were. "Oh yes, the baby came after we moved into that apartment in the Village..." *Place* is where our story unfolds.

And *people* are crucial to our understanding of our story. The people in our family, our spouse or partner, our children, our parents all tell us who we are in relationship to others. In the South, the question of import is always, "Who's your daddy?" Which is shorthand for "Who's your kin folk?" Southerners know that defining your *people* shapes your self.

People, place, and story are key elements if defining our spiritual identity. So imagine the dislocation when God said to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred, and your father's house to that place that I will show you..." In other words, everything that gives you orientation and connection and rootedness and history, everything that defines and shapes your story, I want you to leave behind, and follow me to a place you know not where.

People, place, and story got swept off the table for Abraham when God called him to up and leave Haran where Abraham's father had made his home, "... and take your wife Sarah, and I will show you where to go." It's no wonder that Abraham is described later in the scriptures as a wandering Aramean. "A wandering Aramean was my father," the book of Deuteronomy says of Abraham (Deut 26:5). And that is his story. He becomes at God's beckoning, a Bedouin of the desert, waiting upon God to show him what his future will be.

We have heard stories like this before. Only a couple of weeks ago, Jesus walked around the seashore near Capernaum, calling Peter and Andrew and James and John to be his disciples. And on the simple invitation to "Come and follow me," they dropped their nets, gave up the fishing life, and followed him. They gave up people, place and embraced a new story for the sake of an uncertain future.

I don't know what it was that made Abraham pliable like that; whether there was something in his genes that had the wanderlust, or maybe he hated his hometown of

Haran, maybe he was one of those fellows who thinks the grass is always greener on some more distant lawn, or maybe it was simply blind faith. Whatever it was, he dropped everything and gathered up his wife Sarah and they started out on the road the next morning after a tearful and bewildering goodbye to all his kindred there in Haran, who probably thought old Abraham had finally lost all his marbles.

Unlike modern life where we are used to moving with work, relocating when the apartment gets too small, moving in a career from New York to Denver to Los Angeles and finally settling in retirement in Tampa, there was not the same mobility in village life in the Middle East in the time of Abraham. To venture out and leave home and family and personal history behind in order to respond to God's call was rare and exceptional.

A friend of mine, Ted Wardlaw is president of Austin Theological Seminary. Ted and I have known each other for twenty some years. Before Ted moved to Austin, he was pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, a great old bastion of progressive Presbyterianism in that city. Ted was talking to the presidential search committee at the seminary and he had pretty much decided that this was what God wanted him to do; that he was called to this new ministry as a seminary president in Austin.

His daughter Shelby who is now a sophomore at Vassar College, but who at that time was a high school junior took her father aside and said, "Daddy, are you sure that God is calling you to take all of us to Austin, Texas, me and my sister Claire out of school, mom out of her career, and you out of Central Church and go to that place where we don't know anyone... are you sure, because none of us have heard God say anything to us!"

God's plan for Abraham could not have been more disruptive. And I don't know exactly why Abraham did it except that it was God who was asking, and God said that losing house and family and history in this case was worth it, because eventually Abraham would be a blessing to his people; from him a great nation would arise, who would remember his name and bless him for his faithfulness.

Leaving and risking is not an unfamiliar thing in our lives, come to think of it. We all of us at some time or another let go of what we have and leave where we are and trust that God will make of what happens next a blessing.

You meet someone special, you fall in love, or better said *grow* in love, and you decide that you cannot live apart. So you cast your lot with another person, and maybe you move to another city, and start a new life there, take a new job, start a family. You relocate place, and incorporate new people into your life, and leave some friends behind, and thus change the story of your life. And who of us going into it knows where it will lead? What ventures along the way we will experience? What heartbreaks we will know? What disappointments and what joys we will have?

Abraham set off to a far country, and he took his wife Sarah, and they did not know where they were going. College juniors and seniors understand this story. You live with the anxiety of realizing that the day will come when you have to move on, beyond the protected confines of the university, to the work world and the responsibilities of self-sufficiency. The fact that a lot of kids come back home after college these days,

or go on to graduate school, does not change the fact that eventually they must move out on their own, they know not where they go.

We all know what happened once Abraham got out there, to Canaan, with Sarah in tow. The blessing that God had promised of a great nation that would rise from Abraham and Sarah was delayed, complicated by aging and fertility problems. And then there was that sidetrack that Abraham pursued with Hagar, his wife's handmaiden, and the son Ishmael he sired by her, (the line of Islam), but still not the fulfillment of the promise that God had given to Abraham of a great nation that would rise from him and Sarah.

It wasn't until Abraham was almost in a wheelchair, so old and decrepit, and Sarah, one foot in the grave, became pregnant, and the promise was fulfilled in the birth of a child named Isaac, which means laughter.

We are by nature, I suppose, home bodies. We like to nest and make a place comfy and put down roots and settle in. But the nature of life today is such that we are constantly being acted upon from without, pressured to change, moved to do things differently, to leave home and go elsewhere, and tell our story as the story of a Bedouin *on the way* to something else.

If a wandering Aramean was our father, so are we today, wanderers, making our way in new settings, finding our path in a world that often seems strange, living in a land that sometimes resembles a foreign place where we do not speak the language and cannot pitch our tent.

One of the prayers of the *Book of Common Worship* which I so love speaks to this wandering. It beseeches,

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

It is a prayer that I think serves as a flashlight in the midst of a storm when the power has gone out. We cannot see all that is around us, nor anticipate every danger, but we can see what lies before, enough that we may make our way even though all around us is darkness.

Abraham is promised that his faithfulness will lead to blessing, that his name will be honored by the great nation that will rise from him. And somewhere ages and ages hence his name will still be recalled with affection, a blessing to Israel.

One might wonder what would have happened if Abraham had proved unresponsive, if he had said "no" to God, that he liked home too much, or had he made excuses for Sarah, said that she was high strung, had a nervous condition, it would be hard on her and on their marriage for him to uproot his family. What if Abraham had balked at the idea of doing what God had asked him to do?

The future, after all, is sometimes scary, sometimes fretful and worrisome. We none of us know what life will bring, and long is the way, and dark is the night sometimes on the path of life. It is not always easy to keep going.

There is a story that when Jesus had finished his earthly journey and had returned to the heavenly courts, there was a great welcoming home party, and all the angels and archangels, saints and heavenly host gathered around to hear Jesus tell of his adventures. When Jesus got to the part about choosing the twelve and calling the disciples and all the followers whom he had gathered to himself and entrusting the message of the gospel to them, there was an audible gasp on the part of the heavenly host.

One of the angels asked in horror, “Oh my Lord, what if they don’t do it? What if they fail? What if no one carries forth the message that you have given them?”

After a long pause, Jesus answered, “I have no other plan.”

Well, I have no idea whether God had another plan, Plan B, in mind if Abraham had not responded as he did, to go to a far country, to leave house and kindred and worldly goods and go to that place, he knew not where. I simply know that Abraham did as God asked. And because he did, he became a blessing. And so it is with God.

Everybody here will eventually stand in Abraham’s shoes some day. We are, all of us, finally called to leave family and kindred and home, and all our plans and hopes and dreams, to trust God and believe in the promise that God has given us that we will be a blessing to those who will come after us, and we will receive a blessing for going where God leads us.

All our tentative goodbyes after all, from the farewell each morning, to the new ventures we take on that lead us elsewhere, to the goodnight kiss; are but a rehearsal for the final farewell that we must all say to this place, and these people, and our story.

Life comes to an end at some point for each of us, and much as we have our unfinished projects, and much as we might wish to stay longer, we cannot. And so we like Abraham must finally let go of all that is familiar for the sake of that which is not, the promise that all shall be ours in a far country yet to be seen, where we have not been before. And yet which holds the promise that the God whom we have always known will meet us there.

I think I may have shared with you before a wonderful poem by a former parishioner on Long Island, Dr. Clifford Swartz, who spent many a Sunday not listening to my sermons, but writing poetry in the choir loft as I preached. In this particular poem he muses on death and the unfinished projects.

If I were faced with death, Lord,
And, of course, I am,
I would worry most about
The projects not yet finished.
I know it is presumptuous
To imagine my own schemes
Are specially privileged in this universe,
And that my work will somehow matter,
But it is a common delusion.
We go from project to scheduled project
The way a schoolchild goes
From grade to higher grade.

And after graduation there is
Marriage and the children
And their schooling and the job
And house and cars with
All the little projects in between,
Followed closely by retirement plans.
Our frantic fear of death
Is that we might fall short
In all of this, with the world's
work -
Our share at least - undone.
St. Francis had an easy answer:
"If my soul were required tonight,
Why, I would till my garden."
But how can one be sure that
Other hands know how to reap the harvest
And not abandon seedlings in the ground?...¹

I am not sure any of us is quite as ready to leave house and kindred, work and home as was Abraham, even though in a lifetime we may have many rehearsals of precisely that on a smaller scale.

But just as God has met us in the past along the way on ventures where we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown, so God promises to bless us on our way in what we have not yet seen, every bit as much and more than in what we have seen and where we have been.

Our life is not our own. And this is a truth that is hard for all of us to hear, because we spend so much time building up a firewall to protect us from that fact. Setting down roots, hallowing home, deepening relationships with kindred and friends, and understanding our story in terms of what is now. But God is ever calling us to a far country, to what is new and unfamiliar, and uncharted, and unknown.

And like Abraham we can reckon with the possibility of not going, but in the end must accept in our hearts that the blessing is not in staying but in going.

Which may be enough to push us out, and on our way, trusting in God's promise, even though we do not know where we go, save that God's hand is leading us and God's love is supporting us every step of the way.

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¹ Unpublished.