

## LETTING UP – PRESSING ON

Genesis 11:27-32

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

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That strange text Hannah Faye just read for us from the Book of Genesis may seem like an odd choice for today, but bear with me. It's one of those parts of the Bible we often skip over when we read. There are others – the laws in Leviticus, for example; one can get bogged down there. The details of the conflicts in the Book of Kings can seem tedious. Some of the lamentations get a bit long. And always, there are the genealogies, with all their names that are difficult to pronounce and all the people who lived to incredible ages. Genealogies seem primarily the province of historical and literary scholars, and though sometimes full of little surprises, they are hardly the stuff of morning or bedtime devotions. The tendency for most of us is to skip or gloss over the details of these family trees and get on to more interesting narratives.

If you were to ask most folks who know the Bible, for example, where the story of Abraham and Sarah begins in the Book of Genesis, most would say chapter 12. And they would be almost right. Almost, I say, because back in the closing verses of chapter 11, hidden in all that genealogical data, is a reference to ol' Abraham and Sarah. Abram and Sarai, they were called then. The story tells of Abram's father, Terah, and how he and his family set off for the land of Canaan, which came to be known later as the Promised Land. They set off from the prosperous but pagan city of Ur, near what is now known as Basra in modern Iraq and headed for Canaan.

The problem was that between the starting point and the finish line of that journey there stood a great desert (the Syrian desert, we call it now), and so the journey to Canaan had to be made along a northern circumferential route, along the Euphrates River, up into modern-day Turkey. To give you some perspective in terms of miles, the journey itself was equivalent to a trip from New York City to Memphis, by way of, say, Ann Arbor, Michigan. A good hike, to say the least.

Now, the writer of Genesis seems more interested in genealogy than geography and doesn't provide any details of the trip. There's only one verse of description. But curiously, Terah and family don't make it all the way to Canaan. Genesis says, "...but when they came to Haran, they settled there." (Gen. 11:31) Haran was Ann Arbor...without the Big House, or the University, or Zingerman's Deli. Anyway, Terah's family made it about six hundred miles, but still had another seven hundred miles to go. When they came to Haran, they settled there. The civilization in Haran was probably a bit more advanced, and the circumstances a bit more comfortable, perhaps. But Haran was only halfway to the land of promise. Terah, Abram's father, died in Haran and never made it to Canaan. He stopped short.

That simple story got me to wondering if that's not something many people do, maybe many of *us*, much of the time. It seems to me people are forever stopping in the land of Haran, before they get where they're going. Haran is a tempting place, after all. It is a place of rest after a lengthy journey. It is a place of welcome respite from daily battles and struggles we have had

to endure along the way. It is a place to settle down and enjoy some of the fruits of our labors. It is a place where we can ease up on our commitments and on our intellectual and spiritual growth, and rely on what we learned before, and begin to live off our untested assumptions and rehearsed refrains.

The land of Haran, you see, is not so much a geographical place as it is a state of mind. It is the locale of the human spirit whenever we are tempted to settle for less than we might do or be, to accept what *is* instead of pressing toward what might or should be, to let go of hopes and dreams and to succumb to the temptation to stop before we get to whatever promised future we are pursuing. So, let us ask ourselves: have we settled into Haran and left the land of Canaan out there as just another dream deferred? Have we been willing to settle for less than our best intentions, less than our true calling?

These are especially crucial questions for a community of faith. Are we using all our capabilities, exercising our minds and hearts and wills in the service of God's grace? Are we still pursuing a vision of God's kingdom and the promises of Christ? Are we still committed to the journey toward faithfulness in response to the grace and goodness of God? Are we still willing to wrestle with the principalities and powers of this world in behalf of those too often left behind? Or have we stopped, and settled in, and shifted into neutral?

Stopping is understandable. After all, faithfulness takes time and effort and energy; it often asks of us single-mindedness. And we are a people who are over-scheduled, over-stressed, over-committed, and the truth is, until Covid-19 came along, most of us didn't have time to be single-minded about anything, much less the journey of discipleship. The call to faithfulness and compassion and the struggles for justice are especially before us in these days, and for once, perhaps, we are not so distracted by all our busyness and will pay attention. Until March, it was a different story.

Even now, under the weight of trying to manage work, and family, and school, and technology, the stress can be overwhelming. We may think, if only things were less crazy! Maybe we'll find the time when the kids are older, or when we don't need to produce at such a high level, or when we retire. My friend Michael Jenkins was, before his retirement, president of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. In a blog post from his working days, he wrote about his own busy schedule and said, "It is striking how often we seem to think that our life is something that we will get back to or start, once the present thing we're [experiencing] is finished." He said it startled him one day in the middle of yet another business trip to come to terms with the notion that his busyness *was* the life he was living. He said,

My life does not just consist of the settled relatively routine round of familiar work among the staff and students I so enjoy working with and talking to. My life consists [of] the moments I wait for a workshop to start, as well as the workshop itself, the time spent waiting ... to get a hotel room and talking to a desk clerk, the hours spent in [travel], in dinners with strangers or long-distance colleagues. Sitting there, it suddenly hit me (although I know I knew this): This is your life! Right here! Right now! Not back home! Not somewhere else when things "settle down" (whatever that might mean)!

The same is true for all of us.

So I had a little talk with myself [Michael said]. “If you want to locate the meaning in your life,” I said to myself, “If you want to locate the vocation, the purpose in your life, you have to discern these values *right here*. If you want to experience joy, let alone happiness, you can’t defer [them] to sometime or somewhere else. This is your life. Don’t waste these moments not appreciating them, not paying attention to them. You live here just as much as anywhere because you are alive here now.” [Michael said,] It was a good little talk.

If “this is our life,” suspended always between birth and death, always between right and wrong, always between the past and the future, always between here and there, always between history and eternity, then being at home means coming to terms with the reality that life (our life) is indeed what happens to us, not when we’ve arrived at a destination we identify as “home,” or “refuge,” but also on the way, and not just when we’re “busy making other plans,” as John Lennon has said, but when we’re waiting for the next meeting to begin, ... or this mound of dirty dishes to get washed, or the kids to be driven from [here to there], or caring for this loved one who struggles sometimes to remember our name, or waiting for the surgeon to invite us into the little family room to hear what [she] has found.

This is your life. Right now. Right here. We’re not waiting for life to happen. It is happening, whether we are paying attention or not.... Let’s not miss our life by mistakenly believing that we’re just sitting in life’s waiting room.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, if we make that mistake, we may find that despite all our busyness, we aren’t really on the journey anymore, but have stopped in Haran, just part-way to our true destination.

One of my mentors during my years as a pastor was Ralph Dunlop. Ralph was a retired pastor who served as chaplain at Northwestern University before retiring to the university town where I was serving. He was an intellectual and moral giant. I remember a conversation we had once about the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. Ralph had walked with that crowd back in 1965. Fifty-five years ago! And the battle is still being fought. Ralph spoke of the uneasiness he felt driving into Selma in the dark of night in a van provided by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, but also about his firm conviction that he was being faithful to his calling to be there. We talked about the sights and the sounds, about the resistance the marchers met, about the difficulty of those days for everyone involved.

The Movement, as it was referred to in Alabama and elsewhere, engendered a community with its own language and stories. Ralph told me one of those stories that someone shared in the tense hours before the march, as a call to steadfastness. It was the old story about the hog and the hen in a barnyard across the highway from a busy restaurant. Out in front of that diner there was a sign each morning that said, “Ham and Eggs, \$1.25.” The hen pointed to the sign with her wing and said to the hog, “You know, it does my heart good to know that my personal sacrifice makes

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Jenkins, *Thinking Out Loud* blogpost, April 18, 2017.

it possible for someone to enjoy such a hearty breakfast.” To which the hog snorted in reply, “Well, it may be a sacrifice for you, Sweetie, but for me it’s a total commitment.”

Fifty-five years after Selma, I am grateful for those who gave so much of themselves, sometimes even their lives, to stir this nation’s conscience, the people who made total commitments to the journey toward justice in God’s name. Some of them are still marching. Still calling this nation to establish justice in the land, while the rest of us make small sacrifices. They could have stopped and settled in. It might have been much easier to find a comfortable routine in some place like Haran, undisturbed by the fears and hungers and breathless cries of others. Thank God these faithful witnesses did not do so! There has been some progress, perhaps, but none of them have yet lived to see the promised land, though they keep on pressing toward the prize.

You know, friends, we’re still not in Canaan yet. The struggle for civil rights, for voting rights, for human rights, still goes on. The heart-rending voices of the poor Americans featured in yesterday’s Virtual Poor People’s Campaign rally lent eloquent testimony to how far we have to go. The need for truth-telling and faithful witness in the halls of power is every bit as compelling now as it was in 1965. The demands of faith and life in the church are as imposing upon us now as ever. But the same could be said for the distractions from such calling. There are so many things we would like to accomplish, so much ground to be plowed and planted, so much good we would like to make possible. And some may think, maybe, when circumstances change, there will be time. In the meantime, it is tempting to think we can still be faithful in doing less. But, let’s not miss our life or our calling by mistakenly believing that we’re just sitting in life’s waiting room.”

Bishop Nathan Soderblom was Archbishop of Sweden when he began to feel some weariness from his many responsibilities; so he went to the king with a request. “Your majesty,” he said, “there is a little island off the coast of Spain [under Swedish governance] ...with one little church, only one main street, and only a few hundred people... I want you to release me from my duties here in Stockholm and send me to that little church.” The king considered his request for a moment, and then replied, “Ah yes, I know that island. It is very lovely. The people there need a postman to take the mail through the town once a day. Bishop, I would like to be that postman.” The bishop got the point and pressed his request no further.

All of us would like life to be simpler, less demanding. And some along the way will settle down and never push beyond Haran.... But then, after all, Haran’s a nice place. It’s safe, and comfortable, and at least we can take comfort in the fact that we spent a good bit of time heading in the right direction. You know, there’s much to be said in favor of settling in. After all, it’s still a long way to the land of promise. The journey is going to be difficult. It may well be taxing... may test our limits physically, spiritually, morally. It might be better to stop. Certainly, it would be easier to stop.

I will tell you that, though I am once again this close to retirement, I have no plans to stop. But what do you say? Will you press on? Will you commit yourself to the hard journey now before us? Or are you satisfied just to stop here?