

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Lent 2A, Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121, 3/8/2020
(Elizabeth Felicetti)

In Genesis, after the stories of creation and the Tower of Babel and the Flood, we get the stories of Abraham and his offspring, which extend all the way until the end of the book. That long cycle of stories starts right here in our Old Testament reading this morning at the opening of chapter 12. God calls, and Abram answers.

God makes promises and God makes demands. God doesn't say, hey, follow me and your life will be easy and wonderful and you will be rich. God says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

Sounds a lot like Jesus saying, leave your family and your possessions and follow me, doesn't it? God tells Abram to *leave*. To leave what's familiar. To leave places and people he loves.

God gives a reason for this, which is often overlooked when we think about God's "chosen people": "I will bless you, and in you *all the families of the earth will be blessed*." The promises aren't just blessings for Abram and his immediate family. God is promising to set them aside to be a blessing to others.

Abram trusts God to fulfill his promises, and he goes.

Psalms on Sunday function as a response to the Old Testament lesson. Psalm 121 fits very well with Abram leaving his country and his kindred and his father's house for a land that God will show him. From where will Abram's help come? Abram trusts that his help will come from God. The psalm starts out in first person, and we can imagine Abram praying those verses, and then the psalm switches to second person, and we can imagine those being said to Abram.

The Lord shall preserve you from all evil. The Lord shall watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth forevermore.

So Abram went, as the Lord has told him.

Since starting my sabbatical writing program almost four years ago, I find myself analyzing pieces of Scripture differently than I did in seminary. I've also learned that I have to pay more attention to description in my own writing. What did things look like? How did they smell? What were the sounds?

The next time I receive such feedback I will be tempted to say, hey: I'm just a Bible girl, so I'm in it for the dialogue and the action, because that's what the Bible focuses on. That's all we get in today's snippet. God tells Abram to do something, and he does it. Boom. We don't get lengthy descriptions of his father's house or what his homeland smelled like.

We also don't get any interiority, and that's something I do write about a *lot*: how I feel inside about things that happen around me. So, I will have to resist my temptation to be snarky and blame my writing style on the Bible, because there isn't any interiority here. We don't know much about Abram's discernment process. Something must have happened between verses three and four.

How did Abram know it was God talking to him? What had his relationship with God been like? Did he discuss this plan with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot? Did the three of them—and maybe even Lot’s wife, whom you may remember eventually became a pillar of salt— did they ruminate over this call over many meals? Or did they all just trust in the Lord, chant songs that sounded a lot like psalm 121, hitch up a wagon and set out to Canaan as quickly as this story makes it sound?

Last Wednesday, Dana Blackman offered her testimony at our Lenten Eucharist. Dana said in her outstanding talk, “Some signs are so obvious it’s like being smacked in the face with a billboard. Others are so subtle I wonder if it is actually a sign from God, or just something I created myself.” (https://b4ad5ca0-7c6e-4c5a-b2bc-13583f0f9e28.filesusr.com/ugd/d3d363_a396a01b5b0d4c5090a01b215af21133.pdf)

How did Abram discern that God was talking to him, and that this was one of those billboard-type moments? How did Sarai and Lot discern that seventy-five-year-old-Abram hadn’t lost his marbles, but was in fact getting direct messages from the Lord?

What about our own discernment today personally? How did Dana discern that she was called to vestry service, and then to becoming senior warden? How do we discern whether we are being called to a particular ministry in the church or in the world, rather than just filling a perceived need? Notice that I said “perceived.” Sometimes ministries have to die. Sometimes things change.

Church is changing. This has been the theme of most clergy conferences and diocesan conferences I’ve attended in the past fifteen years. I used to hear about Phyllis Tickle and the emerging church; then I’ve heard from so many other people with so many other books that I couldn’t begin to share with you their message, other than the theme that the institutional church is dying. Fewer people are willing to do what others did in years past. So as a church member, how can you tell if you are truly called to a particular ministry?

And as a church, how do we know what we are called to do? Some fifty-three years ago, in a different time in the life of the capital-C church, someone thought another church was needed right here at the corner of Providence and Reams Road. Even though there are several other Episcopal churches in easy driving distance. I think it’s safe to say that things have changed in fifty-three years—but how do we discern?

The season of Lent is an ideal time for discernment, as humans and church members and as a church, and Abram, in these sparse verses, can serve as an excellent guide. This part of Abram’s story has long been used to hold up trust in God and in God’s promises, and I have no intention of disabusing that, but I want to make sure that we remember that, in addition to being offered promises, Abram was being ordered to give something up.

Go, God said. Leave your country, and your kindred, and your father’s house.

When you are trying to discern if God is calling you to something, as opposed to , in Dana’s words, just creating something yourself, think about what you are being asked to give up. This can be helpful when addressing temptation as well, a subject we dipped into last week.

Whenever you say yes to something, as you've surely heard, you are saying no to something else. What are you saying no to?

In addition, think about who's being blessed. God isn't saying that God will curse all Abram's enemies for fun, but that Abram and his family will be blessed so that *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*.

So as we look to make decisions as a church, for example, we need to ask ourselves who will be blessed. Let's take Springfest. I'm going to tell you a secret, because I have recently realized that I don't really have any secrets from you all after nine years here, because you know me far better than I think you do. So here's my secret that probably won't surprise you: Springfest is not my favorite event that we have. In fact, *I don't like Springfest*. I don't like yard sales. I don't like having four parking spaces taken up on Sunday mornings by Springfest leftovers. I don't like that every year someone thinks that if we just hang on to one article of clothing or piece of furniture it could yield fifty extra dollars so it lingers in the parish hall or closet for four months. I don't like that more members come to Springfest than to the Great Vigil of Easter. I'm convinced if we invested the human-power and hours and hours and massive energy we put into Springfest into something else, we would accomplish something amazing and raise more money.

But, I reluctantly recognize that Springfest is something that has benefits *beyond* St. David's. Springfest, bless its heart, blesses the larger community.

At one of my four medical appointments last week, a nurse asked me what I do for a living. I told her, she asked where, and then she said, "You know, I go to a big yard sale there every year. And it's a *really good* yard sale." As Gary and I left, and she said, "If I don't see you before, I will see you in May."

What are you being asked to give up? Who is being blessed?