

Places Where God Comes: The Journey

**Hebrews 11: 8-12
Genesis 11: 31-12: 9; 15: 1-6**

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“Abram, it’s time. You must go.”
And he went.

That’s the gist of Genesis 12 - the calling of a man from the city of Ur, challenged to move to a foreign nation and culture to serve a God not recognized in that place. An average man with an average faith.

Facing a challenging call - maybe even a bit threatening.

It’s also a call that echos through the pages of scripture, the same call that comes to believers down through the ages.

It is your call. And mine. In this the second week of Advent I invite you to hear that call again. I invite you to join me in seeing God promise to be with Abram in his time of uncertain journey.

Last week we began to celebrate this time of spiritual preparation before Christmas - Advent, preparing for the coming of Christ -

- remembering his first coming
- getting ready for his second coming.

We’re considering the places where God comes.

Last week we thought about how God appears in Eden - in the Creation, the tragedy of sin and how humanity was expelled from the Garden and from the daily Presence of God. We remembered how Jesus brings us a hint of Eden in restoring to us, through Himself, the reality of God’s presence in our lives.

Today we’re talking about journey; the time of not being settled, when things aren’t clear, or stable or certain or restful;

when we’re not sure what we can count on.

Which is how it was for Abram.

He first moves with his father and family out of the home city of Ur, in the land of Mesopotamia. Then stays for a while. Later, Genesis 12.2, he’s called from that new place, where’s he’s now probably just beginning to feel at home, to hit the road one more time. It’s off to Canaan.

Abram - his name is from the past.

And his story of travel, of an unsettled life, is an old one.

HOWEVER

- His challenges remain very real.

As real as the culture from which he came. He’d probably feel right at home here in Ottawa. Growing up in the big city of Ur. Historians tell us that it was a culture which had architecture, astronomy and math that was cutting edge, social structures that were very intricate, and economy that was fantastically wealthy.

Abram wasn’t from the fringes. No - he was from a culture as alive and moving as any, ever. Smart. Aware. That was the Mesopotamian culture of the day. And we can make a pretty fair assumption in judging that Abram was a slice out of that culture.

In it.

With it.

Till God says, “*Come out of it.*”

And slices him away.

Leave the city streets you know so well.

The scenes you find so comfortable.

The social networks that keep you stable.

The recreation spots where your heart relaxes.

and go.

Just take the first step.

Don’t worry about forecasting and projecting outcomes.

Leave that to me.

Get.

And I’ll guide you.

Abram “gets.”

Living out what Psalm 37 proclaims:

*"If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm;
though he stumble, he will not fall,
for the Lord upholds him with his hand."* [Psalm 37:23-24]

While Abram may not see it all -
God is drawing the roadmap.
God prepares the destination.

God will be with Abram in the journey.
And God says, "as you go, Abram -
I will bless you.
I will make you a blessing."

The world "blessing" - what does it mean?
It's one of those great faith words we use so often.
In your daily prayers, how many times will you repeat this word?
Can you write, 20 words or less, what "blessing" means?

Blessing - from the ancient, pre-Hebrew word meaning
"to transfer beneficial power which renders life fruitful."

It's a term closely related to "shalom", which is a state of being where life **IS** fruitful and well-ordered, meaningful, as it should be.

Blessing in one's life is the power that moves a person towards being shalom-filled.

Obey God by going and Abram will find meaning greater than any he could find by staying in the tech centre of the Ancient Near East.

Go with God and shalom will settle on you, Abram.
God with God and shalom will flow **through** you, Abram.
I'll make you a blessing to those around you.

And Abram -
"Whoever curses you, I will curse...."

Curse - I'm sure you can figure out that it is a word meaning exactly the opposite of blessing. It means power that drains your life of meaning, that leaves you fruitless and empty.
Futile.

Abram's journey stands as a prophetic hint of a greater journey taken by another one called of God to leave the comfortable, safe home environment.

Jesus Christ.
Called to travel here to earth, to risk everything, in order to become a blessing to other people.

The Son of God - out of whom came a great people, the Church, as many believers down through time as the stars in the sky. Descendants, in faith, of Christ. And, says Romans 8, co-heirs with Christ of the inheritance of heaven.

Jesus - who made the greatest journey ever imaginable, the journey to the cross, into death and to a direct confrontation with the master of death and evil and destruction, the devil himself.

Jesus - who at the darkest point of that journey found himself **unlike** Abram. For while Abram had the promise of God to be with him at all times, Jesus hung on the cross in the darkness of a late afternoon. And he cried the words of Psalm 22, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Jesus, whose journey of suffering and death paid for our sin so that we would **never** be forsaken;
so that we would receive His promise -
"Surely, I am with you always..." *(Mt 28)

With us always - in our journey of life.
For that is what it is.

The job you have is not your final destination.
The home in which you now live is not your final destination.
Even the marriages that many of you enjoy are not the end point of your life.

I sometimes get a little sick and tired of hearing people say, "*That's what it's all about...*" as they are commenting on some activity or another.

Well, sometimes it is right to use.

Your job or school is not what your life is all about.

Your home is not what life is all about.

Nor your marriage, or family.

Certainly not your cottage (insert here "boat", says some wag looking the pastor's way!).

Key to my existence on earth and yours is that through this journey where everything keeps shifting and changing and coming and going that we hang on to the one thing that doesn't change -

- and that is the presence of Jesus Christ in that journey.

Hang on tight to him.

And be willing to hang on much more loosely to everything else.

To live with an open hand towards everything else.

Letting it go.

Taking a risk and stepping into uncertain challenges, if that is what you believe the Lord is calling you to do. Leaving the results to Him.

Whether that risk be giving of your time and energy for volunteer work in a downtown mission; or taking the risk of going public with your faith in Jesus to a co-worker; or taking the risk of saying "no" to a relationship with someone that seems quite attractive, and whom you'd love to date... but who DOESN'T share your commitment to Christ; or heading overseas for a volunteer term in relief work; or increasing your charitable donations; or changing your consumer habits.

You find yourself asking, "*If I start, where will this all lead me?*" And then you're answering yourself, "*Frankly, I'm not at all sure.*" But deep inside, you know that the tug you're experiencing is from God.

So you take the risk and start the journey in obedience.

And leave the outcome in God's hand.

Because you know that on the journey, He will be present.

Fellow pilgrims in faith, know this.

When you surrender your life to Christ, and are willing to respond to tugs that he places on your mind and heart, to opportunities for service and sacrifice that he lays in front of you -

- when you're willing to take the first step on that journey of faith

He will respond by blessing that obedience.

But if we insist on keeping our lives nicely contained, predictable, safe, constantly hedging our bet and saying "No" to taking risks for the Lord

- if we insist on that personally

- or if we insist on that as a congregation

there will be no blessings.

And we will not be used to be a blessing.

Just like Abram.

It may not be a way we understand.

It may mean taking some unsettling steps.

It may even push us into strange, scary territory.

It may even seem at times as if everything is coming apart at the seams.

But when you go with God

You are going towards shalom.

A shalom that will spread beyond you to those around you.

And, oh, how desperately our culture needs that blessing, that shalom.

It strikes me every time I read contemporary literature, view contemporary art, dance or drama –

– do you notice it, too? –
how dark and empty so much of it seems.
No form. No structure. All over the place.

Tell me, honestly..... do we seem a society at peace, fruitful, in shalom?
or.... would curse be a better word?
Fruitless. Empty.

Tell me - Are we a nation, a city, with or without the Lord?

Well, Abram ends up in Canaan. Builds an altar and “*calls on the name of the Lord.*” That language means something stronger than a quiet, private devotional prayer. It’s public. Almost loud. It’s strong.

Abram is very open about God in a land where people were quite inclined to worship the creation, to interact with natural forces and powers and consider them divine. Abram points beyond them to the Divine Creator.

And he pitches a tent there. He never hunkers down to become integrated into their society.

Some of our Kuyperian Reformed leaders used to use the term “*antithesis*” to describe this dynamic as it plays out in the life of a believer.

You engage the culture.

You work with it. In it. Try to transform it.

But you ***DON’T*** allow yourself to become sucked up by it.

You ***don’t*** buy into its values and agendas and priorities.

You remain, to use the language of 1 Peter 2:11, “*strangers... pilgrims.*”

Whatever the thesis, the core driving reason for being, that this society has, there remains something in you that is directly opposed to that,

anti...thesis.

Which, at times, can put you into a tight bind.

But because the Lord goes with, you’re willing to take that risk.

Willing to face the call of God to “*Get!*”

Willing to live as pilgrims, calling on the name of the Lord in a land which we engage but whose values and priorities we refuse to accept.

Antithesis.

Willing to follow One who took the greatest of risks to win our salvation;

Willing to represent Him in a world that desperately needs saving, spiritually, economically, socially.

And trusting the outcome to Him.

When we can't see it, He does.

When we feel weak, He remains all powerful.

When we grow confused His holy awareness guides us.

Jesus said, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me....*”

With that authority, he utters the next word –

---- remember it???

“*Go!*”

And these words:

“*... urely I will be with you always!*” (Matthew 28)

Abram’s name is included in Hebrews 11, an accounting of heroes of faith, believers who obeyed God’s call. One important refrain of that chapter is that they never saw full completion of their mission. It was handed

down to those who followed..... including us. And then come these words, ending chapter 11 and beginning chapter 12. With them I close:

"As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses round us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end." [TEV Heb 12.1-2]

Can you imagine it?

With the eye of faith can you see the pilgrim Abraham, watching us run the race of life and cheering us on?

Can you hear him call?

"Don't run alone! Run in the draft of Him who runs with you. Hang on to his hand as you head up those steep hills. Let Him steady you along those dangerous cliffs, and down those slippery slopes."

In February, a sole runner is going to enter a stadium in Turano, Italy carrying a torch. That runner will light the Olympic flame and the Winter Games will begin to a huge roar and celebration. That runner is only one in a long line of runners who carried that torch for thousands of miles from its source, through all kinds of weather and situations.

We're runners. Torch bearers for the Kingdom of Christ. Runners in a long line of runners, each one carrying the torch a little further. Never sure if we'll be the last runners, the ones there at the time and place of God's sovereign choosing when the trumpet will sound and the celebrations will begin, the celebrations of eternal new year in a new creation.

We're runners. Those who have finished their leg of the journey, Abraham and Sarah included, are cheering us on. Calling us not to quit. Keep going.

And so we continue in Advent, 2005.

Oh, it won't always be easy. Like Abraham there may be times when we can't see beyond our limited horizons.

There may be times when our faith almost runs dry and we're left to mumble, as Abram did, "Lord, what could you possibly offer me?"

And just when we think we've regained our footing and gotten used to the situation, we'll round a curve, the landscape will be different and everything will change again.

But through it all -- hear those voices of the runners from the past. And reach up for the hand that steadied them.

The only hand that is a constant in time.

A hand with a nail scar in it.

A hand reaching for you.