

# A Promise and A Journey

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*Text: Genesis 12:1-9*

Sometimes the who is more important than the what. A few years ago there was a member of this church having a birthday, and this person's family wanted it to be a surprise. So I was given the task of getting the guest of honor to the appointed place at the appointed time. How do you summon someone to a party they don't know is happening? How do you get them to come with you? I can't remember exactly what I said—I think it was something like, "I've got something I need to talk over with you." And the astounding thing is, it worked! This person actually showed up, without hesitating or objecting. And they were surprised too, meeting me with a look of someone who's being called to the principal's office. What does my pastor want with me? Am I in trouble? I have to say, I felt honored that my say-so was good enough, that I had inspired that much trust in someone. All I had to say was, "I need you to be here." Because so often when it comes to an invitation, the who is more important than the what.

Today's scripture brings us an invitation. God calls Abram, someone who later comes to be known as Abraham, to bring his family on a journey and to receive a series of blessings. And Abram's trust in God becomes a model for us—what does it take to answer God's invitation? Do you have to know where you're going? Do you have to prepare yourself? Do you have to understand how you're going to get from where you are now to where God needs you to be? In Abram's story, none of that is as important as the fact that God is the one issuing the invitation, calling him to get up and move. The who is more important than the what. Let's listen to the story and try and learn something about the "who." Who is calling Abram? Who is calling us?

The invitation to Abram comes when his family has already been on the move. They began their journey in Ur of the Chaldeans, in what is now southern Iraq. And before they heard anything from God, they started northward along the fertile crescent, intending to make their way to the land of Canaan. But their journey has stalled along the way, in Haran. Abram's father has died. Sarai hasn't been able to have any children. I don't think it's a stretch to say that there's some disappointment in this family. Their plans have fallen through, and they've chosen to settle down where they are and make the best of it.

And then Abram receives an invitation: "Go," says God. Before anything else, Abram is given a command. He's supposed to get moving. "Go," says God. There's no room for compromise or half-measures. He can either stay where he is or hit the road. But where is he supposed to go? "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house," says God. Leave behind this settled life, everything that is comfortable and familiar. Leave behind even the family that grounds your sense of identity. Leave them behind and go "to the land that I will show you." Abram is being called to leave behind everything he knows and set out for a destination he does not know. He will know he has arrived only when God shows him.

So this is a God who calls us to make a decision, to make a clean break with the story we've been living and enter into a new story. God tells Abram, "Go." The risen Jesus, we heard, tells his disciples, "Go, make disciples, baptize, teach." What is it God is calling you to leave behind? What adventure, what new thing is God calling you to undertake in this season of your life? Where are you experiencing discontent—in your career? in the patterns of your relationships? in the way you've come to deal with something that happened to you? in the injustices and hurts you see in the world? Sometimes God speaks to us not in words, but in unsettled feelings around the things that fall short of God's intentions for us and our world. What Abram's story shows us is that, when we are not where God needs us to be, God will call us to "Go!"

God tells Abram "Go," but "Go" is the first word, not the last. After Abram is given his marching orders, he also receives a promise. He is being called to leave what he knows and to set out for a land he does not know, but this isn't just a harsh demand but rather a covenant. Last week we heard about the way God made a covenant with Noah and his family and every living creature that emerged from the ark after the flood. This covenant was a binding promise from God never again to destroy the earth by water. God chose to limit God's own possibilities. Before the flood God chose to be the destroyer of the world, but afterward, by God's own choice, God will only ever be a protector and preserver of the world God made and saved. This covenant God is making with Abram is also a limiting of possibilities. God is choosing to enter into relationship with a particular family, to take a particular interest in their well being and to create a future for them. From now on, God is going to identify with the family of Abram, to bless their friends and curse their enemies.

You might want to ask, why? Why Abram and Sarai? Why this particular couple? You'd think that if God were in the business of raising up great nations with great names, there might be easier places to start. Abram is 75 years old, and Sarai, we learn later, is only 5 years younger. Here's an elderly, childless couple, and God is going to turn them into a great nation. There's nothing about them that makes them likely prospects. If you or I were to put out a job listing—"Wanted: one family to start a great nation"—we would have thrown Abram and Sarai's resume into the trash. The fact that they already tried going to the land of Canaan and never made it is a strike against them: they have a history of starting projects that they don't finish. And there's no way they're going to be able to produce children. How can they possibly hope to start a great nation? No, I'm sorry, but you're not quite what we're looking for... Next!

They're not suited for the job, but God chooses them anyway. God makes crazy promises that can't possibly come true: "To your offspring I will give this land," God says to Abram. There is no offspring, nor is there likely to be. Yet here is God, binding God's self to a covenant promise that looks to be impossible. So let's ask again, who is the God who makes this invitation? This is not a God who settles for doing what is easy or obvious. This is not a God who picks people who are clearly strong or capable or up to the task at hand. This is a God who delights in upsetting our expectations, who takes pleasure in bursting apart the constraints and conventions, like brick walls that prevent us from hearing God's invitation to "Go," or from moving if we do hear it. This is a God who wants to work miracles.

I asked you a moment ago to think of those places in your life where you are feeling restless and discontented, and to think about whether that discontent might be God's invitation to you to go, to make a break with an old story and enter a new one. And if you did that, if you took a moment to think about a career that's leaving you feeling empty, or relationships that aren't what they ought to be, or a too easy acceptance of injustice and hurt in the world around you, maybe you also thought

about all the reasons why you can't possibly make a change for yourself or a difference for anyone else. Does it change your outlook to remember that God is in the business of making miracles? Would it help you if, rather than seeing all the obstacles as your problem to deal with, you offered them up to a God who delights in shattering barriers?

God chose Abram and Sarai, not because they were the most qualified, but because God wanted to. But it would be a mistake to think that, in making a commitment to them and their family, God was somehow forgetting about everyone else. "In you," says God, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This is a new invitation. It's the start of a covenant relationship that hasn't yet unfolded. But the promise is that the blessing offered to this one particular family is going to benefit the whole world. And so we know this about God, that God's blessings are particular, but not exclusive. God's invitation to you is personal, but it's not separate from God's all-encompassing love for the world. When you say yes to God, you're not entering into a private bubble of a relationship, but one that connects you not just with God, but with your neighbors and enemies as well. And maybe that's one way to distinguish God's voice from all the competing voices: is this journey that I'm hearing myself invited on a journey that will benefit me exclusively, or does it bless others as well?

We are called to set out on a journey from what is comfortable and familiar, but also limited and limiting. "Go," God says to us, shattering barriers, making a way where there was none, and showering blessings. And so my hope and prayer for you is that you would listen to the disquiet and discontent in your life. Listen for God's invitation to pass through every obstacle and receive a blessing for yourself and for the rest of us. "Go," says God, "and become a blessing." Amen.