

## ***Journey by Stages***

A Sermon Preached by the  
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Romans 4:13-25  
Genesis 12:1-9

A rabbi writing about this portion of the Torah has said, “The first book of the Bible might well be titled, ‘Genesis, or the Book of Divine Disappointment,’” since God hasn’t exactly met with resounding success up to this point – this point being the moment that God says to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”<sup>1</sup>

Overall, it was pretty promising when God started, at least until Adam and Eve and the serpent came on the scene and things started to go downhill. Cain killed Abel, Methuselah allegedly hung on for nine hundred and sixty-nine years, and then God saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that’s where we got on board Noah’s Ark last week.

Counting down from the time the flood waters receded and the subsequent scattering of the generations across the earth after the Tower of Babel, nine generations came and went before Terah took his sons Abram and Nahor and their wives and started out from the town of Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the land of Canaan, a journey that some have reckoned to be close to a thousand miles.

But, as often happens, they journeyed in stages, and when they came to Haran, they stopped and settled there. We’re never told why Haran became the last stop. Maybe it reminded them of home. It reminds me of how I could never figure out why Minnesota had so many Scandinavians until I spent time in Norway and realized that they were probably making the journey in stages, and when they got to Minnesota, it looked like home, so they stopped and settled here.

All of us have journeyed in stages, through various parts of our lives – family, education, vocation, our faith journey being only a small part of our life’s journey. A journey is a process that involves our whole being – including, sometimes, our feet as well as our minds and our hearts. Journey implies movement, movement from place to place, or from one experience to another. But it doesn’t always mean that there is a known destination.

Sometimes that’s what keeps us from ever taking the first step. We tend to want to know where we’re going. If you spend any time in Barnes and Noble, or

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Shai Held, “Birth of a Covenant,” beliefnet.com

online at Amazon.com, you can find more books about journeys that you can imagine. And most of them are written about starting new things or starting over. There are books about starting a diet and exercise program, starting a good nutrition program, starting to learn how to play a musical instrument or play the game of golf, starting to organize your closets or use your palm pilot. What it all seems to imply is that starting the journey is the most difficult part.

But let me propose that continuing the journey may be even more challenging. Wonderful writer and pastor Eugene Peterson suggests that in this culture of fifteen-second television commercials, instant news and analysis, and thirty-second popcorn, it's hard to sustain the initial enthusiasm that accompanies the start of a journey – especially our faith journey. When the going gets tough, we just go to the sidelines. Peterson says that there are many people interested in religious experience, but very little tolerance for what earlier generations of Christians called obedience, discipline and holiness.<sup>2</sup> Well, the truth is that we were planning to make the trip all at once, not in stages. The point of doing it was to get to the end, not to spend the whole time on the road.

Abram must have surely wondered just how long this journey was going to take when he loaded up his extended family, their possessions, the slaves, the livestock and anything else that wasn't nailed down and set off for an unknown destination. It surely took more than a promise of a future to get him on the road at the age of seventy-five, and keep him faithful for another hundred years. Goodness knows the going got pretty rough and at times there didn't seem to be much evidence of progress.

Speaking of making progress, there's a wonderful story told about Frank Harrington, who, for many years was the pastor of the largest Presbyterian church in the United States, Peachtree Presbyterian in Atlanta. A friend recounted that when Dr. Harrington was in seminary, there weren't any Committees on Preparation for Ministry to walk the journey with him, so the Presbytery of South Carolina decided that in order to provide a little accountability and discipline, Dr. Harrington should attend every meeting of the presbytery, and that the whole presbytery could ask questions at every single meeting. They also read aloud his grades, but that's another story.

Anyway, the members of the presbytery felt quite free to ask him questions about dispensationalism, predestination, pre-milleniumism, you name it. If you can come up with a big theological word, it was probably in there. At the end of every one of these grueling sessions, one of the elders, a man in his late eighties, would stand and Dr. Harrington would always know what the question was going to be. This elderly gentleman would always say, "Frank, are you making any progress on your journey with Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, quoted by Thomas Tewell, "The Bridge to Nowhere," June 30, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Tewell, June 30, 2002.

That's another thing that tends to stall us or send us to the sidelines – when not much evidence that we're making any progress. We're a culture that likes to measure our progress, and we do it through grades, promotions, retirement funds, and even relationships. Trying to measure the progress of our faith journey is like trying to nail Jello to the wall.

Once we get stalled, it's pretty hard to get started again. We might remember the opening words of Abram's story. The Hebrew words are *lekh lekha*, which are often translated as "go forth." More literally, they suggest something like, "Go for yourself," or even "Go to yourself." Some have interpreted that to mean that Abram's journey was for his own good, that the journey wasn't simply one of moving from one geographic place to another, but was also a journey that would move him from what was safe and comfortable in search of a deeper relationship with God. And that takes a lot more courage and persistence than just loading up the family and the camels.

Sometimes we load up the family and the camels, but we don't get too far down the road before something happens and we abandon the journey and just stay put right where we are. I'm reminded of the story of the little boy who fell out of bed in the middle of the night. His mother, hearing the thud, went running in and said, "Honey, what happened?" The little boy was in kind of a daze, tears in his eyes, and he said, "I don't know. I guess I stayed too close to where I got in."

My experience as an interim pastor has taught me that congregations do the same thing. There's always a can-do attitude about starting the journey until we realize that we may not know the exact destination, and many of us don't live well with that level of uncertainty. If we're on the road, we want to follow the map until we get to the planned destination. We don't like being in the wilderness, even though we know that transformation always happens in the wilderness. And so we hold on a little too tight to what we've always known, afraid of what we might lose somewhere in the wilderness. Perhaps even afraid that we might lose ourselves.

There's always great enthusiasm for the future, until we start measuring our progress by worship attendance, membership, or next year's budget, and then we tend to stay too close to where we got in. What if it gets worse? What if we can't afford it? Maybe we'd better not count on any new mission initiatives this year. Maybe we need to just stay right here for the time being until we can be more sure of our potential for new members or an increase in giving.

There's always a sense of excitement about the journey until we realize that it means leaving the safe, comfortable and familiar behind, until we realize that it means some things will change. And right when we should be moving to the next stage of the journey, we circle the wagons and stop traveling. After all, we know far more about where we've been than about where we're going or where we'd like to go. We know far more about who we were, than about who we are.

Last week, I had the good fortune to attend a continuing education conference on change in congregations, an engaging topic for those of us who do interim ministry. There were some extraordinary insights into how congregations change and why. I was reminded again that we have to keep asking questions about our identity, our purpose, and our context: who are we, what is God calling us to do, and who is our neighbor? Identity, purpose and context.

Those questions were asked in a variety of ways in the congregational inventory that we worked on earlier this spring. We'll have the chance to respond to them again, probably in still different ways, when we gather on June 22 to talk about the results of the inventory, to reflect and remember our heritage and history, and to share our vision for the next stage of the journey. There will be more information coming to you this week in the mail; but in the meantime, please get that date on your calendar and plan to stay after worship that day for lunch and an afternoon of conversation. It's your opportunity to think and talk and imagine together about the next stage of this congregational journey. And if the next couple of weeks unfold as I think they will, we will elect a Pastor Nominating Committee who will take all of this input and move forward with the task of calling the next pastor for Oak Grove.

Abram was called to leave behind the land, his birthplace, the house of his father – all the things that make it difficult to do something new – because it's always too easy to fall back on those comforts of home and say, "We've always done it this way." Until we get away from everything that's safe and familiar, until we get to a place where old patterns, old behaviors, old expectations don't work, we are in danger of getting stalled somewhere along the way or never finding our way out of the wilderness.

Sometimes, like Abram, we just have to step out in faith, we just have to start the journey whether or not we know where we're going. Remember Paul's words to the church in Rome that Abram, "Hoping against hope, believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendents be.'" In spite of whatever doubts he might have had, Abram grew strong in his faith, fully convinced that God was able to do what God had promised.

And for his faith, Abram was blessed and told that he would be a blessing, that in him all families of the earth would be blessed, that he would embody blessing in his very being. It is still at the very heart of who we are: God calls us, God blesses us, and God sends us to be a blessing.

We are very blessed here at Oak Grove, blessed by our history and the decisions made by those who have gone before us, blessed by our ability to make a difference in this community and the global community.

If you've found yourself on the sidelines lately, I would invite you to get back on the road with us, to stay the course, to face the wilderness, to help us figure out what God is calling Oak Grove to be and do in the next stage of this

amazing journey, to embody the blessing. Now's your chance to step out in faith.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.