

Genesis 12:1-9 (NRSV)

*The Call of Abram*

(Acts 7.2—5)

**12** Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”<sup>a</sup>  
<sup>4</sup>So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup>Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup>Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak<sup>b</sup> of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup>Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring<sup>c</sup> I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup>From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. <sup>9</sup>And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Or by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves

<sup>b</sup> Or *terebinth*

<sup>c</sup> Heb *seed*

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

## Abraham, Called from Home

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Genesis 12:1-9

Abraham and his family went a long way. In fact, today's journey actually begins in the previous chapter. There we read: "Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there." As a young family Abraham and Sarah, or Abram and Sarai as they were called at first, journey 600 miles on foot with their families in tow to the land of Haran.

The text gives a very sparse description of why they stopped in Haran. They were headed to Canaan, but they settled in Haran on the way. It's not hard to imagine the reason, though, is it?

"Enough, enough," says the old man Terah. "We've got children and grandchildren, men and women, flocks and belongings. We've gone 600 hundred miles, often hungry and thirsty. Our feet are worn; our patience is running out. Let's just stop and settle here. This is a good place, between the two great rivers the Tigris and the Euphrates. The land is fertile. There's water to drink and rain enough to grow the grain. There's grassland to pasture the animals. And the Lord knows, we desire a place to live, a place to settle, a place to call our own."

God, however, had other things in mind. This was but the first 600 miles of a journey that would take Abraham and his family over 2100 miles in all. What was that like, a journey of 2100 miles? It was like taking the family, all their belongings and animals, the full extent of the Appalachian Trail, from Springer Georgia to Mt. Katahdin, Maine. Young hikers in the prime of their life find it a hard enough hike. And they pick up re-supply along the route. They sleep in hotels every so often. They even call for help on cell phones. Imagine Abraham and Sarah's group. Everything from infants to the elderly. Herds of goats and sheep. No supply outposts. No stores. No special tents from Eastern Mountain Sports. It was an almost unimaginably journey. No wonder Terah tried to stop a third of the way through. And the 2100 miles wasn't really the end of it. That was just Abraham and Sarah's part. The full journey was a journey that neither this first family of travelers themselves, nor many other generations to come after them, would see the end of.

These families and their descendants would travel back and forth for generations over the ground of Canaan and Egypt, attempting to avoid famines and conflicts. Their story would come to include not just Sarah and Abraham, but Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers who sold him off to slavery, and then the countless generations until there came a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph and put them all under bondage. And then would come Moses and the flight from Egypt. But even Moses would not see his people populate the promised land of Canaan. He died looking at it off in the distance.

Of course, in this story there is an even more vexing truth. Not only did it take generations, thousands of miles of travel, and hundreds of years to accomplish the journey to live

in Canaan, but life in the promised land, once they got there, was also short-lived and uncertain. The whole of the Old Testament is, in one way of reading it, a story about a people constantly on the move in a constantly changing world.

And then, by the time we get to the New Testament, the Greeks and the Romans have controlled this whole area, and Judah is but a vassal. It is telling that Jesus himself has no real home base. He doesn't have a synagogue or church some place. He doesn't have a special town to which he keeps going back. When he went home to preach, they tried to throw him off a cliff. Jesus says of himself, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

The whole of the Biblical narrative seems to say that there is no there there. As the old joke in Maine goes, you can't get there from here. There is no end point. There is no steady state. Things are in constant motion. Nothing stays still. "There is nothing permanent except change." The old Greek philosopher Heraclitus may have been the first to write that saying down, but everyone in history has experienced it. So, then what are we to make of God's promise to Abraham? What are we to do with God's promise, "To your off-spring I will give this land"? What are we to make of the fact that despite a promise for a land to call their home, Abraham and Sarah and their descendants never really got one?

There's a wonderful story of a tourist from the United States who in the 19th century goes to visit the famous Polish rabbi Hafez Hayyim.

The tourist was astonished to see that the rabbi's home was only one small, simple room, and that the only thing in the room were the rabbi's books. The tourist asked, "Rabbi, where is your furniture?"

"Where is yours?" asked the rabbi.

"Mine? But I'm only a visitor here."

"So am I," said the rabbi.<sup>2</sup>

It's interesting to imagine that we are really visitors wherever we are. I think we often try to become permanent residents. We try to nail things down, get them under control, make them to our liking, make them home, bring in the furniture, arrange the place, get it into shape.

When I think of the promised land, that's how I'm inclined to think of it—that final destination where everything finally seems right, where I can relax with the way things are and where everything stays the same. I think of sitting out in the back yard, firing up the BBQ, and relaxing with a sigh of contentment. Like Terah in Haran, that settling in to a happy equilibrium becomes a big part of the picture I construct—rest, staying put, settling down, keeping things constant. The problem is, the story God tells just doesn't turn out like that. The story God tells is a story on the move. To live as God would have us live, then, maybe we need to learn from rabbi Hayyim how to be a visitor. Maybe there's something about the promised land that doesn't work as a permanent residency.

G.K. Chesterton once said: "All conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone you leave it to

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<sup>2</sup>Told in *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart: Parables of Spiritual Faith from Around the World*. Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, editors. 347.

a torrent of change. —G.K. CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*<sup>3</sup> What Chesterton meant, I think, is that change isn't simply inevitable. He meant that trying to prevent change requires such an extraordinary denial of reality that you chase after invented fantasies, and you thereby lose control of even the things you could control.

There's the old story of the man looking under a street lamp for a coin he lost. A neighbor comes by and begins to help. He asks, "Exactly where did you lose it?"

The man answers, "Oh, I lost it in the back yard somewhere."

Flabbergasted, the neighbor says, "Well, if you lost it in the back yard, why are you looking here on the street under the street lamp?"

The man answered, "Because there's no light in the back yard."

The man looked under the light because it was the easiest way to see. In so doing, he completely missed any opportunity to find what he was looking for.

There is no greater example of such foolishness and denial than is found in the history of Israel in the promised land. The prophets tried to tell the kings time and again that change was upon them, and that they needed to face it. Whether it was Assyria's army camped at the back door or the reality of moral decay at the society's center, the kings chose to close their eyes. Rather than make changes to deal with the changes upon them, they strove to keep everything the same and thereby sentenced themselves to even greater and more destructive change than they needed to. It is quite certain that what God had in mind for Israel was not a land in which they could live in denial. At the end of the day, God's idea of the promised land may have been more a verb than a noun. God never meant the people to associate the promised land with retrenchment, pulling out the hammock and engaging in willful blindness. Throughout their travels, throughout their history, God's hope for the people seems to have been that they would be a people who noticed the worlds around them and responded to it appropriately. As long as the people remained on the move, aware, honest with themselves and agile, the more the people saw themselves as visitors rather than permanent residents, the better was their life and the better was their capacity to be God's people. The people lost sight of these ideals and fell into the most trouble when they became attached to the status quo, when their desire to sit still and to prevent change clouded their vision, clouded their vision of the world around them and their vision of what God's promises were meant to be.

In that wonderful piece on the shepherds at Christmas, the one Fred Buechner wrote and David Anderson often reads for us, there is a wonderful description of the kind of coming to we are talking about. The shepherds says:

"That's how it was this night, anyway. Like finally coming to—not things coming out of nowhere that had never been there before, but things just coming into focus that had been there always."<sup>4</sup>

The shepherd ends the whole piece the salient command. He looks upon the Christ child, and he exclaims, "By almighty God, brothers. Open your eyes. Listen."<sup>5</sup>

And, of course, when open our eyes, when we listen, what we see and hear is anything

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<sup>3</sup>Merriam-Webster, I. (1992). *The Merriam-Webster dictionary of quotations*. "A Merriam-Webster."; "Quotables from notables"--Cover.; Includes index. (Page 243). Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster.

<sup>4</sup>Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, 72.

<sup>5</sup>Buechner, 73.

but static. What we see and hear is pulsating, vibrating, moving and changing, and calling us to join in dance, or as Abraham and Sarah, to join in the journey. Thanks be to God. Amen.