

On the Road Again
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Genesis 12:1-9

Throughout the sacred story, God's people are on the move. Some of their journeys are long, some short; some of them physical, some metaphorical. But all of them are spiritual journeys.

Travel has always involved an element of risk. In biblical times, the risk was different than it is today. There was no hospitality industry in the ancient middle east. There were no signs to tell you where you could find your next meal. No AAA to provide roadside assistance. And no maps or GPS! How did they survive?

They depended on the kindness of strangers. Before we talk about Abraham and Sarah, the central characters in today's passage, let me remind you of all that has happened before this moment...

We have the two creation stories, Adam and Eve in the garden, Cain and Abel which we covered last week. By chapter six, people have messed up so badly that God wipes the slate clean with a great flood, survived only by Noah and his family. God then promises to never again destroy so much of the earth and gives us the rainbow as a sign of that covenant.

Chapter 11 gives us the Tower of Babel story, a strange and confusing tale which leaves us wondering where God is at work in the chaos of the world.

And that question is answered in chapter 12. God is at work in the world through an individual, Abraham, soon to be a father. Through his family God will make a nation, a people, who are told that they are set aside, set apart, chosen.

So the first word God speaks to Abraham is the word, "Leave."
Leave everything you've known.

Leave your country, your relatives, leave this home that your father gave you, the home you grew up in, and go.

I have to wonder how many times along the way, he regretted saying 'yes'. How many times did Abraham regret uprooting his family, not knowing where or how far God was going to take them? How many times did he wonder when or how God would make good on the promises of land & children?

Abraham's journey certainly wasn't an easy one.

It wasn't easy when they ended up in Egypt, and Abraham became convinced that he should pretend that his wife Sarah was his sister. He somehow got this idea in his head that if Pharoah knew that beautiful Sarah was his wife, he would kill him so he could marry Sarah. Abraham didn't trust that God would protect them in Egypt. And you'd think he'd learn, but years later he does the same thing again, just with a different king.

The journey wasn't easy when for so many years Abraham and Sarah remained unable to have a child. It must have been excruciatingly difficult to hold on to God's promise when another year would pass, and still no child.

And the road certainly was not straight when at last Abraham and Sarah gave birth to their son Isaac. Or years later when Abraham presented that same son as a sacrifice, only to be stopped by God at the very last second.

Abraham's "YES" to God's call was a moment of blessing, but it also led to many years of struggle and uncertainty. Like Abraham, many of us are here because we too have said "YES" to God's call in our lives. At our baptism, we were claimed as God's beloved children, but now, as adults, we continue to participate in the life of this congregation because we want to be here.

Whether we can put it to words or not, we are here because somewhere inside we feel drawn to be a part of this community of faith. My hope is that most of the time, being part of this community is a great blessing in your life, that this is a faith home where you find spiritual support and nourishment.

Because the truth is that journeying together in faith is not always easy. There are times when we may hurt one another with careless words or actions. There are times when we will be let down by each other. There are times when we wrestle with where it is we think that God is calling us together in our ministry. There will be moments when we wonder, "*is it really worth all this effort?*"

Maybe we even think from time to time of looking for a different congregation to be a part of – one, of course, that doesn't have any conflicts or complaints (and when you find that congregation let me know), a church where (in the words of Garrison Keillor) "*all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.*"

It's not always easy to find our way forward together. And yet, in spite of all the obstacles, even in spite of ourselves at times, God calls all of us, and keeps on calling all of us, to follow, to worship, to serve and to love.

In Abraham, we see that faith, that trusting in God, also includes moments of doubt, and moments of uncertainty (even moments of fear). But in Abraham's story and in his witness we also see a promise of God's love for each one of us. We see that God chooses us not because we are perfect or deserving or good enough, but simply because God loves us and wants to be in relationship with us.

This is what God calls us to trust: to trust that we are loved, to trust that we are blessed.

For Abraham, the trust was in the blessing. God promises a better future, not necessarily a future of privilege or financial success, not a future of power or prestige or comfort, but a future of meaning and purpose.

Being a chosen people doesn't mean that Abraham's descendants were God's favorite, loved above all others.

Perhaps it means, rather, that they are chosen for a purpose. God takes this small group of people, because God wants every community and nation to experience healing, harmony, wholeness - the Hebrew word "shalom."

You can almost hear God saying, "Let me try this experiment with a small group of people, then maybe others can see how it's done." So God gives some ethical rules to follow, and raises up leaders, and if the results are good, the hope is that others will want to emulate their example.

In the Bible, "blessing" is always communal; it's never private, individual or personal. It is always for the sake of a greater good. People who have been blessed are also given with a responsibility to share with they have with others: whether that is time, talent, treasure or any combination.

Jesus puts it this way in the New Testament: "To whom much is given, much will be expected.¹" Like Abraham, we can trust that when God calls us to something, God will equip us for that task.

Sometimes we make a faithful, risk-taking leap into the unknown. It may be a new job, a new relationship, a new project, a new home. We take our time to make the decision, not too much time but we're not impulsive either.

¹ Luke 12:48

We talk to others whose advice we trust. And then we step out, into a new world which is somewhat unknown, somewhat foreign.

I'm pretty good about change, personally. But I have been very reluctant to acknowledge the fact that we now live in the world that keeps many of us busy on Sunday mornings. I wish it weren't so. I wish that Sunday morning was still an unscheduled spot in the week. But I have finally come to accept that reality, and it is a waste of energy for me to complain about it.

Our families struggle mightily with the pressures that are placed on them today. They want their children to live well-balanced lives, they want them to have sports and music and free time and scouts and church. But the balance gets whittled away quickly. One dance team becomes two. The soccer tournaments multiply. And it's very hard to say "no" for a whole host of reasons.

I admire our parents and grandparents who want so much for their children's lives to be balanced, for their family to have a sense of that peace and wholeness that the Bible calls "shalom", who are trying so hard to make all of this work - everything in our society is working against them.

My hope is that by working together and forming strong relationships with each other, we will be able to make some headway in supporting one another nevertheless. It's a trusting way to live. Telling the truth of our lives to one another, asking for help and advice. Listening to the ways each person finds to take a step forward in faith.

Sometimes we go somewhere in life that we never would have chosen. We suddenly find ourselves caring for an aging parent. Or walking a path called "widowhood". We pitch our tent in a land named "unemployed." Or we end up in a wilderness called "chronic pain."

No one chooses these journeys. But lives take these detours and we find ourselves in new territory. It is hard to trust in God when you wake up every morning in pain – whether it be physical, psychic, emotional or spiritual anguish. It feels foreign and strange and we want nothing more than to go home again. Know that God has entered that new territory with you. Even though you don't want to be there, God will not leave your side.

Know that there is nowhere you will roam where God will not be. When we are in the waiting room, God is there. On the sidelines of the soccer game, in the carpool pick up line, God is there. There is nowhere we find ourselves where God has not already been. Amen.