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Genesis 12: 1-4a

“The Lynchpin of the Bible”

Last week I began a short sermon series on “Bible Stories Everyone Should Know”. I started the series at the beginning, literally, with the story of creation, a story most people know but misunderstand. Today, we’re tackling the story of the call of Abraham.

One writer calls this story the “lynchpin of the Bible,” (John C Holbert, www.patheos.com) because it’s the turning point, the story in the Bible on which everything else hangs. Let me explain . . .

After God created the world, things took a turn for the worse. God left Adam and Eve alone in the garden to explore Eden and in no time flat things started to fall apart. This was followed quickly by Cain killing Abel in chapter 4, and by the time we get to chapter 6, mischief has gone universal and God is planning on wiping out the whole creation with one big flood. Now before you start thinking that this “Old Testament” God is impatient and vengeful, keep in mind that in all these stories God is willing to make adjustments and go with Plan B. In the garden of Eden God decides making clothes for Adam and Eve is better than punishing them; God still protects Cain even though he killed Abel, whom God really loved, and God decides to save one family, Noah’s family—from the big flood.

But things don’t work out so well with Noah; he too brings shame on the family and God in an Anthony Wiener like moment, and by the time we get to chapter 11 the people are building a big tower and getting along happily without God. Quite honestly, if I were God I would have called the whole thing quits right then and there. But instead, even though people have really messed things up, God is still willing to give them the benefit of the doubt and hang in there with them.

Which brings me to today’s story, the story of Abram (or Abraham as he’s commonly referred to). I think it’s fair to say that Abraham is God’s last hope for the world. If things don’t work out with him, there aren’t any other places left to turn.

Now, sometimes when reading the Bible it’s just as important to note what isn’t written down as it is to note what is written down. Noticeably absent in the story of Abraham is his list of qualifications for being the guy in the Bible upon whom everything else hangs. In other words, we don’t know anything about the guy. What makes him qualified to be the forefather of Judaism, Islam and Christianity? What special qualities does God see in him? Was he particularly strong, adept, or astute? Or did he just happen to be in the right place at the right time? Or, depending on one’s perspective, the wrong place at the wrong time? We don’t know. About all we do know is that he was old, about 75 years old, childless, and married to a woman who couldn’t have children. If you ask me, he was an

unlikely candidate for being the father of a great nation, let alone the father of 3 major world religions. Why God called Abraham, we do not know. At best we can only fathom a guess. About all we can do is let the story serve as a reminder that sometimes God calls the least likely suspects to do some pretty extraordinary things. But that's a different sermon.

Instead, in this one, I want to focus on Abraham's response. I find it amazing that Abraham went when God told him to go. In fact, I'm always amazed at the people in the Bible who go when God commands them to go because as I've said on numerous occasions, I'm just not sure I could do that. I like being settled and comfortable. The older I get, the less prone I am to seek out adventures. I get enough adventure with 4 children, you know what I mean? I have all the adventure I can handle.

But the Bible is full of stories of people who follow God's command to go . . .and while some of them do protest (Moses, Paul), they all go. They all leave the old life behind to go where God commands them to go. Like Abraham, they go without knowing all the facts that lie ahead. Gosh, Abraham didn't even know where God was going to take him, but he still left his father's land . . .which was very risky.

I find it interesting that the land Abraham left behind was named Haran, which translated means "crossroads". Knowing this subtle detail, I can't help but reflect on some of the crossroads I have faced in my life, which aren't all that dramatic, but had I chosen a another path to follow, my life would be different. There was a time in seminary that I nearly quit. Had I done that, my life would be very different. When Terry and I were looking to leave Wisconsin, opportunities to go to Columbus Ohio or Indianapolis Indiana presented themselves. Our lives would be different had we taken that turn in the road. Had we decided not to have 4 children, our lives would be different.

Think of the crossroads you have faced . . .the job you didn't take or the job you left behind; the home you left for a new city and new adventure; or the phone call you made that changed your life. How would your life be different had you chosen another path to take?

Think of the crossroads you as a congregation have faced; the decision to leave Geyer Road and move here; the decision to build this sanctuary, the decision to merge two congregations, to decisions to call pastors and say goodbye to others; the decisions to elect elders to lead you, to begin new ministries, and to end others.

These are crossroads. And when we come upon them, it takes trust to follow down a path whose future is unknown and uncertain. When Abraham was at his crossroads, he went where God commanded him to go because he trusted God.

This story is so important and so foundational to our faith because it teaches us that the life of faith requires trust. More than anything else, it requires trust. This lynchpin story of the Bible shows us that our faith doesn't begin with a set of rules or a set of doctrines to believe in; it begins with an invitation to trust in God in the midst of life. When we

baptize Phil and Weston, listen to the questions I ask them—they are questions of trust: do you trust in God's mercy? Do you trust in Christ's grace and love? The life of faith that Abraham entered into began with trust; the life of faith we begin at our baptisms also begins with trust.

But we are given one assurance when we decide to journey out, one very important assurance, and that is that God will bless us. God promised to bless Abraham when he set out; God promised him a great nation, and to make his name great; and God promised to bless those who blessed Abraham. So, even though Abraham didn't have any idea where he was going or what was in store for him, he did have the assurance that God was there with him and would protect him and bless him.

The witness of scripture tells us that the God who calls us also equips us for our journeys, blesses us as we go, and remains with us throughout them. In our baptisms we are given the assurance that the God who claims us knows our names and calls all of us to be the person we are meant to be and gives us the tools we need to be that person. God gave Abraham the tools he needed; God gives us the tools we need. God will give us the tools to face difficult times, discouraging times, and depressing times; and God will give us the courage and stamina to recommit, dig in, have at it again, and find a deeper and better self during those times. God did this for Abraham, and God will do the same for us.

I've learned a lot from Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner, who says that the life of every single one of us is a sacred journey, by the fact that we have had a traveling companion every day, every step of the way. *"Listen to your life," Buechner says over and over like a mantra. "In the privacy of your heart take out the album that is your life and search it for the people and places you have loved and learned from, and for those moments in the past—many of them half-forgotten—through which you glimpsed, however dimly or fleetingly, the sacredness of your own journey."*

Whoever you are, whatever you are doing this morning, know that when you come upon your crossroad, God will equip you for your journey.

Whoever you are, and whatever you are doing this morning, God has high hopes and expectations for you. God calls you, calls forth the you God intends you to be.

Whoever you are, whatever you are doing this morning, wherever you are on your personal journey, the promise is that God is with you and will be with you always, every step of the way, calling you forth, calling you to go and follow.

Amen.