

Faith

Genesis 12-23

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Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

² *"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;*

*I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.*

³ *I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."*

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.

Go. GO! Go.

That's God's first word to Abraham. Not "Hello." Not "Peace be with you." Not "You are my beloved child." God says "Go"—from the home where you are loved. Don't ask where. Go. I will show you.

Gen. 12 is jarring story. It's an unavoidable moment of transformation in our consciousness of God. From the beginning of the Scripture, we know that God makes the colors of the dawn, and the night sky full of stars, God makes watersheds and ecosystems and solar systems, God orders the seasons of the year and seasons of work and rest, labor and delight. In this story, that same God draws uncomfortably close to one particular family. God makes that family a promise.

Have you ever thought, "how oddly specific and disturbingly personal that the God of the universe would get so invested in one person?" Theologians have a name for this alarming divine intimacy: "the scandal of particularity." It's when that God-in-general becomes God-in-particular, when God whom it's fun and novel to think about as being somewhere "out there" is all of a sudden all up in your business. But perhaps we should ask: is there any other way for God to be than deeply personal? God wants to be loved. We only love what we know intimately and concretely. All up in your business is where God decides to be.

God speaks to Abraham. Their relationship becomes consequential not just for Abraham and his family, but for all of us. In this relationship, so much of how you and know how to relate to God gets worked out. Their relationship is awkward, sometimes adversarial, sometimes tender. There are mistakes by Abraham and by God. But together they make a pattern for the ongoing divine-human love affair. This pattern is this: God makes promises; human beings trust in these promises; God keeps promises.

We're going to spend 3 weeks exploring Abraham's relationship with God from Genesis 12-23. But we begin where they begin; Genesis 12, when God first speaks to Abraham.

- Let's locate ourselves so we can understand what's happening here. This is Abraham's world (show map)

It's worth noting that Abraham has no clue who this God is before God speaks to him. Abraham grew up out in Ur. YHWH was not there. Civilization was thousands of years old—there were many established pathways to holiness. But YHWH's voice was new. Abraham couldn't trace it to anything he'd known before. It's also worth noting that Abraham got no burning bush, no mountaintop encounter. Abraham only heard a voice. That strange new voice told him to leave home. This meant assuming great risk. Entering deep vulnerability. Abraham hears this voice saying "go in the direction of vulnerability"—what did he do? He got up and left.

What would you have done? Have you ever heard a voice speaking to you? I know—you rational people don't "hear voices." I'm not asking this question of your rational self. I'm asking the whole you (for a fully human person, divine-human encounters are not unusual at all). Have you ever heard God's voice? Tanya Luhrman studies religious experience at Stanford. She has talked to lots of people who hear God. This is how people say it happens:

Most of the time, God talks to people in a quiet voice that they hear inside their minds, or through images that come during prayer. God might touch their shoulder, or speak up from the back seat of the car and say, in a way they hear with their ears, "I love you." These experiences are brief: a few words or sentences. They are rare. They are not distressing, although people report they are often disconcerting and always startling.

Quiet voices. Images. A word or phrase. Rare. Not distressing, but still disturbing. Have you ever heard from God?

We are hungry for a word. We have questions that we want God to answer. What should I do with my life? Is this person "the one?" Why all this suffering? Still, for many of us who try to listen, instead of God's voice we hear nothing. God's silence becomes a crack in the door for doubt... anxiety... despair. We can go through our whole lives waiting for God to speak. In the great author Judy Blume's book for young people, *Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret*, Margaret is 11 and she already has a deeply personal relationship with God that isn't dictated by organized religion; she wants God to give her answers about all the mysteries that she cares about and worries about—puberty, menstruation, boys, family arguments: God, what's the right thing to do? Margaret gets so angry at God for not answering her urgent questions that she cuts God off.

What about you? Have you cut God off because of the long silences, or are you still listening, still anticipating a word?

Quaker Christians have practice of listening to God that dates back the '60s (the 1660s) called a clearness committee. In a clearness committee, a person seeking an answer to an important question in their life can gather a circle of friends... and the friends' job is to ask good, honest, open questions—"what are your options here?" "What is your best hope for this situation?" "Where do you feel joy or heaviness as you think about this issue?" These questions strip away the voices of confusion until you are left to hear the answer that God has already spoken and placed within you. A clearness committee *assumes* you hear God. What a wild, wonderful assumption.

God speaks to Abraham. Abraham hears. And what Abraham hears is an audacious proposal.

"Go from your country... journey to the land I will show you.
2 "I will make you into a great nation,
I will bless you;
and all people on earth
will be blessed through you."

What an offer: a great name, a great nation, a legacy of benevolence. God's blessing. Who wouldn't say "yes," even if the yes meant you had to step out into great vulnerability?

I do want to make this a bit more complicated than it looks. All of us, like it or not, are conditioned by prosperity preaching to think of God's blessing as a promise of material riches (#blessed). That's not what blessing is. Blessing has its origin in the practice of *smearing blood on something to make it sacred*, #bloody. To smear someone with the blood of a dead animal is to connect the life of the blessed person to the death of another being; blessing yokes you to a long chain of sacrifice—of giving one's life so that others may live. Yes, blessing is a gift. It's wondrous. It's a mark of God's love and care and presence. But blessing is a burden, too—a blessed person is not their own. When God blesses you, *your life and your purpose is no longer yours—it is God's*.

I hope you will read Abraham's from Genesis 12-23 this week. As you read, you'll see that Abraham does get stuff: wealth and kids and land. But his wealth comes from prostituting his wife, Abraham bargains with God to finally have kids, and by the end Abraham has to buy land in order to bury Sarah in this foreign country. The stuff is not the blessing. Blessing is not reward. Blessing is having *your* life wrapped into the divine life. In life, in death, you belong to God. Nowhere you go, nothing you do is outside of God's care. #blessed

We should note one more thing about this story: Abraham's remarkable "yes." God offers this promise of blessing; this promise to enfold Abraham's life in the life of the divine. If we take the premise of this story seriously, we have to believe that Abraham made some kind of choice, some kind of assent, some kind of "yes." The story does not give a reason for going. Maybe it was Terah's wish for him. Maybe he was trying to get away from his father—some of us do. Maybe he was fleeing, with Sarah, the stigma of being childless; shame is a strong motivator. Maybe Abraham was just a wandering spirit.

But there seems to be something else. When Abraham steps out of Haran, with his whole family, and leaves behind all he knows, he does this at the whisper of God's promise. This step of Abraham is about the most extraordinary thing in the Bible. It is the leap of faith.

In the leap of faith, there is nothing for you to see. Nothing is for sure. Internally, you are outside of your "right mind." There is no good justification, no rational cogitation, no reasonable explanation. This step of faith, this leap into uncertainty, into vulnerability, this "yes," is Abraham's soul coming alive at the promise of communion with the divine.

So often when I speak of faith in God I try and make it sound reasonable. Reason is a powerful force. We need more of it, not less, especially in religion.

But I'm always embarrassed when I talk about faith like it's reasonable. I know I'm dancing around something fearful and awesome and wondrous. So today, let's all look. The Maker of Heaven and Earth whispers in your ear. The architect of all natural beauty and the arbiter of all justice speaks your name. The great beating heart of the world, the ground of all being, the eternal I AM, the Word through which all things are made comes close to you, and says, "I will bless you. And I will make your life a blessing. Go."

What do we do? We can say no. No, I can't. No, I won't. No, I will stay here and be resigned to all this that, at least, is familiar.

Or do we risk this idea that we not are not particles alone, that we are charged bodies, made for communion with the divine? Do we step into what is unknown and risk not death but risk being alive?

God call you. What else is there to do but leap?