

August 7th, 2016

Heb.11: 1-3,8-16; Gen.15: 6; John 21:18

Set Out on a Journey

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Anthropology was my first academic love: the questions of community identity, culture, and relationship are fascinating for anyone who loves people. Over the course of my sermonizing, you will surely find many bits and pieces from this discipline. My current “reading for fun” book is “Cro-Magnon”, the story of the development and conflict between two species: European homo sapiens and Neanderthals.

Anthropologically speaking, this ancient story of Abram-become-Abraham appears right at the cusp of a sea change in human behavior, as humans moved from subsistence hunting and gathering to a lifestyle of sedentary grain farming. People had discovered the secrets of land cultivation, and were able to stay in one place while storing enough grain to get through the winter without moving. The Middle East – that fertile crescent we all learned about in school - was the first place that sedentary city-states developed.

Hunter-gatherers, in contrast, were always on a journey; home was temporary concept. Farmers lived in permanent communities and rarely travelled. Abram lived in a northern part of the Middle East called Ur; we don't know whether he had actually been a settled farmer before responding to God's call to move into the land of Canaan. But God picked him out to send on this journey, saying, “Go: I will show you to a new homeland.”

The Greek word for homeland is “patris”, a new nation. Go out and journey to this new land and you will find a place to stay. A place to belong. A place to call your own.

Much of the Hebrew scripture displays this tension between the theme of journey and the theme of home. And most human beings have that tension within ourselves, as represented by the brothers Cain the farmer and Abel the herdsman. We have both the desire to be safe and secure at home, and at the same time, a curiosity about travelling to new adventures.

What made Abram decide to leave home for the unknown? Genesis, in one of its many different oral threads, says “Abram believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” That

phrase is a little high-brow: I prefer to say that God counted Abram's response as "right living", living in harmony with God's will, even though that meant breaking ties with his original home and family.

I have had a very special relationship with this scripture from Hebrews. Exactly 33 years ago I preached my first sermon ever, which was based on this text. A few weeks later, I left on my own journey in response to God's call, leaving behind friends and a job and a boyfriend, in order to attend seminary on the mainland. In packing up to move here to Burlington, I actually rediscovered the original manuscript from 33 years ago, typed on an electric typewriter in that faraway time before computers. It was titled "This Thing Called Faith." It was much too long and preachy; I would be embarrassed to preach it to you now. But imagine this: I have now been preaching for more years than I have not. That's a long time.

Oddly enough, this same scripture kept popping up every three years at critical junctures in my life. Three years later, having obtained an M.Div, I preached this text a week before we got married. (And yes, this does mean our 30th anniversary is coming up in ten days.) The sacrament of marriage was another kind of answer to God's call and began a new segment of my spiritual journey as a joint effort. Three years after that, when the scripture popped up again, we were embarking on the journey of being new parents. After that, I had a in August for many years, and didn't revisit for a long time.

That is, until 1995, when it came up, entirely by accident, as the lesson for a candidating sermon for my first church back east. The theme of setting out for a new homeland without knowing where it is, or what it would be, based solely on faith in God, once again came alive in my life.

Many, many Augusts later, I find myself not on vacation, but at another new call, a new journey, a new "setting out" for a homeland here in Burlington. Thirty-three years later, God finds me in a different place, not only geographically, but also physically. The accumulations of the years, the chore of moving it, is mountainous. We'd be a lot better off in a tent, in my opinion... Then there's the need to find one's way around a new grocery store and city streets, navigating a new health care system, making new friends. This feels a lot harder than it did in my twenties. Then, I'd pick up and go to a new place in a heartbeat. Not now. The less agile physical mobility – the

arthritic knee, the extra pounds – make journeying much less attractive. What is there new, under the sun? Why not just stay home?

At this time of life, I tend to identify more with the Genesis scripture we heard on Laity Sunday a few weeks ago, when Abraham's elderly wife Sarah is hiding in the tent when the three angelic strangers stop for hospitality. She hears them predict her upcoming pregnancy. She can't stop laughing. What, me? No way. You must have me mixed up with someone else. But then it happens. No matter our age or position, we must remain open to what God plans for us.

How could God possibly be calling me to set out for a new homeland? I'm approaching the stage of life where every time they moved to a new campground, the Native Americans had to carry their elders in a travois pulled behind a team of dogs, or horses. The strength and agility and adventurousness of youth is mostly gone.

And so I turn the same question to you: how could God be calling YOU to set out for a new homeland? Don't be silly, you say, hiding behind the flap of the tent, laughing. We are too old. It's too late. We are here, and this is our home. We don't need to set off for a new homeland, we're fine just as we are.

Well, maybe God's challenge is not about going anywhere. Maybe it's just the other part of what was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness: belief in God, and faith in what God offers us on a journey toward newness. Maybe we will hear God's voice calling us to something new, to new forms of worship, or new forms of community outreach, or new forms of relationship and networking. Maybe we are called to believe in that future, even if it seems distant or impossible. As I was putting finishing touches on this sermon, I heard Ira Glass on "This American Life" on NPR. He was talking about a thirty year old man who had been in a corporate job, who was concerned that his life was frittering away. So he came up with the idea of recording one significant second on his camera-phone during each day of his life. Then after a year, he stitched them altogether into one video just a minute long, that made a snapshot of the change and the growth which had occurred in his life. In fact, I understand that this man has now created an internet application with this idea – we can all do it – and it's turned into a job for him.

Take, for example, the four years that you might spend in college. You are not the same at the beginning as at the end, and four minutes of such a video will make that very clear to you. We do grow and change and ripen as we respond to the beckoning of Life.

This overview of a life can happen for an individual, but it can also happen over the life of an organization. There are people who study churches for a living: how they organize themselves, and how they grow, and how they decline – anthropologists of a sort. When we do interim minister training we learn about the Life Cycle of a church. Its new beginning and rapid growth, its productive years at the top of the game, its mature years after a peak and gradual decline, and then, if nothing changes to prevent it, institutional death. Churches have a need to be re-born, re-newed, re-envisioned at some point in their life cycle, if they are to continue being the agents of Christ's mission in the world. We will talk more about this life cycle over the interim period ahead.

Imagine, if you will, that some camera phone had been recording one second for each Sunday of this church's life, 52 seconds a year. Eventually we'd have a quilt of more than two hours of history sewn together. Surely we would barely recognize ourselves in that original church; and surely our founders would barely recognize themselves in us. Yet there is continuity in the life cycle, and it's probably been "reborn" two or three times in the course of these two centuries.

I've been reading the history compiled for your bicentennial, bit by bit each evening. Some themes remain the same, while many are very different. As we look at the community identity of this church over the long range, and then peer into the future beyond, you will need to keep what is central to your self-understanding, and jettison some things that are not, in order to reinvigorate that life cycle. Even if we don't "go" anywhere, we can believe in God's faithfulness to us in this present time and attempt to follow whatever that call may be.

As for my own life, as I mentally watch the old movies from three years ago, six years ago, twelve years ago, thirty-three years ago, there is a pattern in my response to new and evolving aspects to my journey. Surely we will also find patterns in the journey of this church community,

ones that will lead us to listen again for God's call, in this time and this place. Won't you join me?

Sing: I'm going on a journey (repeat)

Oh won't you come and go with me (repeat)

Through mountains and through valleys (repeat)

For God is at the beginning and at the end.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Genesis 15: 6

And Abraham believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

John 21:18

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.'