

Go!

Genesis 12:1-4, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

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“A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Deuteronomy 26:5-9

These verses of Deuteronomy, observes Gerhard Von Rad, comprised a prayer to be spoken when the first-fruits were delivered to the Sanctuary by the ancients.¹

Indeed, Von Rad later adds, “The ancient credo of sacred history touched upon the patriarchal period in only one statement: ‘A wandering Aramean was my father.’ And how powerfully this statement is unfolded in Genesis chs. 12-25! In fact the story of each patriarch (with the exception of Isaac) is itself filled with suspense because of a great display of divine promises and fulfillments.”²

The stories of Genesis tell the story of promises kept. So much is the importance of God’s reliability to keep God’s word that the foundational act of worship, the act of acknowledging God’s gifts to us by returning the first fruits, is marked with the reminder that the very food we eat comes to us out of the abundance of God’s goodness.

¹ Von Rad, Gerhard. Genesis. (Westminster, Philadelphia, 1972) p14

² Ibid. 165

Promise-keeping, trustworthiness, is the bedrock of the stories of the patriarchs. But at the same time, it wouldn't be truthful to tell these stories without acknowledging that God's faithfulness to God's promises means faithfulness to a group of highly erratic, highly unpredictable, highly dysfunctional people whose only claim to faith is that they followed when called. I am referring to good old father Abraham and his family.

Trashy novels have nothing on the Bible when it comes to salacious stories.

It all starts out, I suppose, respectably enough. We read about how it started this morning, those brief verses from Genesis wherein God said to Abram, "Go!"

God set a promise in place: I will make of you a great nation – Abram's part was to go, to leave, to set out for an unknown future with only the promise of God's blessing.

If the bible were a novel, as indeed pastor/scholar Walter Wangerin has endeavored to make it in The Book of God, I am unclear as to what sort of rating it would carry.

Indeed, I wonder at times whether if the story of Abram and Sarai, those were their original names, before God changed their names to show that there was something new, I wonder if their story wouldn't be more likely to be a reality television show than a sacred text. Genesis is the stuff of Jerry Springer.

Let's just have a brief rundown, shall we?

Within minutes of God's announcement of the call to Abram, the whole thing winds up in serious jeopardy due to Abram's misguided attempts to save his own skin. Upon going to Egypt in search of food, Abram's wife Sarai is observed to be a rather fetching woman by Pharaoh. Abram suggests that they masquerade as brother and sister, and so Sarai is taken into Pharaoh's harem and Abram profits handsomely. Never mind the fact that there is a word for men who use women to make money, they do it any way. God is not

pleased and a plague descends on Pharaoh's house. If by chance you want your full-body shudder for the week, check out the version of the same story that is recounted in Chapter 20 of Genesis. Abram, now known as Abraham, pulls the exact same stunt, this time in the house of Abimelech, allowing his wife to be seen as his sister and taken into the harem, and when the same results come about, defends himself to Abimelech with the not so squeaky clean revelation that in fact, she is his *half-sister*, sharing a father with him, but not a mother.

I promise you, I am not making this up. You can find it for yourself. Add in the element that this woman the men are lusting after is, according to the text, approximately 90 years old, and the whole mess is just beyond belief. Oh, and I forgot to mention that while Abraham and Sarah were waiting on God to get around to honoring the promise of offspring, they cooked up a completely hare-brained scheme whereupon Abraham and Sarah's maid conceived a child together, to which God replied, "No, Abraham, I meant you and Sarah would have a child together."

Years ago I preached that this story was evidence that God uses very ordinary people, but I am prepared now to revise that assessment. There is nothing ordinary about this story. This story is *messed up*.

"A wandering Aramean was my father..."

From this very flawed, very human vessel, God forged God's witness in the world in the people of Israel.

But more than that, from this very flawed, very human vessel, God showed God's way in the world, that of God's creative nature doing a new thing, moving from brokenness and barrenness to fruitfulness and hope.

It is always helpful when looking at Scripture to consider what happens right before and right after a given passage. And I think we have a clear sense of what happens after: We have the cycle of the patriarchs: of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and from there the stories of Joseph and his brothers, the twelve tribes of Israel going to dwell in Egypt through the whole of the Genesis narrative, and then we read in Exodus of God's saving activity for God's people who groaned in bondage, we read how God brought the people out with Moses, how God gave the Law to the people at Sinai as blessing so that they might be a people – God's people, who live so that the world knows who God is. All of these things, all of these formative moments for Israel, the foundation of our very faith – Paul said we are grafted into God's people through Jesus - it all starts here. It all has its genesis here in *Genesis* with this very flawed, very human vessel who listened when God said, "Go!"

But what came before?

Immediately prior is the story of the tower of Babel, where the people of the world sought to attain the very heavens and God, seeing our foolishness and hubris, scattered us. And immediately prior to that is the story of Noah and the flood, God's great cleansing of the world of evil followed by God's covenant with Noah, visible in the rainbow, that never again would God destroy creation. Karl Barth once declared that in that covenant with Noah, God demonstrated God's intention to be *for* humanity.

Henceforth, God declared, no matter how big the mess, I will be with you in this.

And in all of this mess, in all of this disorder of chaotic languages and destructive people living destructive lives, God sings out of the sky to Abram, "Go!"

And then he goes!

Paul said in Romans that this faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. Amidst all of the mess of Abraham's story, and it actually goes downhill from this model of gleaming decorum and chastity I've already told you about... through all this mess, Abraham lived trusting God.

God's calling is notorious in that God doesn't call the best and the brightest, or the dullest and the dimmest, God doesn't call only those who are most equipped nor does God seek those with no gifts. God doesn't call the most moral and righteous or those who live in the moral sewers. God calls those who will *go*.

In Abraham's call, God set a people in motion, God's people.

God's people are God's blessing to the world.

I wonder how much more the global church could do if we stopped waiting for the right time to do something and simply listened for where God is saying "Go!" I don't mean this church particularly. If anything, Morningside stands as a model of a church who heard God's call to "go" into uncertain territory and went.

And we have to keep going. We have to continue as a congregation to look ahead not seeking certainty but seeking God and God's people.

The transition team recently asked me what my greatest challenge had been on arrival and what I anticipated my greatest challenge to be. As I answered, I realized that I was in fact describing my greatest fear, that after the hard work was done, after the Time of Promise Campaign and the year of transition for you, after a grueling fall where I sought to discern where I was called next doing with several PNCs what I was doing with yours, that we would all breath a collective exhalation and slump back into our chairs exhausted, and wait for someone else to take their turn. I understand that temptation. And there's

another that accompanies it, that we might think to ourselves, “We’ve done big things here! We just managed to squeak through it, though, we better be careful of our next move. We better pull back just a bit from doing so much big work.”

I understand all of these feelings. I am one for planning and careful, sober decision-making. But I also know that God is calling us. God is calling us.

Dr. Bruce Larson tells this story:

“I learned a great lesson from our youngest son, who is presently a senior criminal prosecutor in Seattle. When Mark was nineteen, he took a year off between high school and college and worked as a laborer in Florida where we lived. At the end of the year, he got a tax refund from the government and he decided to use it to buy a racing bike (something he had always wanted). Returning home with the great bike he had bought, he announced, ‘Tomorrow there is an all-Florida professional bike race in Fort Myers. My buddy and I are going to sign up for it.’ With the faith of a father, I said, ‘You’re crazy. What do you know about racing? You just bought this bike!’

‘I know, Pop,’ he said, ‘but it’ll be good experience.’ So the next morning, off they went. Later that night they arrived back at our house and Mark had the first-place trophy! I said, ‘What happened, didn’t anybody else show up?’

‘Oh, no!’ he said, ‘it was a big turnout.’

I was really puzzled. I asked, ‘Well how did you happen to win?’

‘Well,’ he explained, ‘I knew I didn’t know what I was doing. So I just started out pedaling as fast as I could, and nobody ever passed me!’”

Dr. Larson concludes, “And from Mark’s racing story, I developed my now famous slogan, which I will pass on to you right now as invaluable advice: ‘if a thing is worth

doing, it is worth doing poorly.’ Don’t wait until you have all the equipment, all the training and all of the courses you need (unless you’re a brain surgeon). If God gives you a dream, don’t spend too many hours, days and months in getting ready. Launch out!”³

A wandering Aramean is our father... I don’t have the faintest clue yet what the dream will be, what our call will be over the coming years, other than to listen when God calls. God is calling us. God is calling you.

We are the heirs of a great history of divine promises and fulfillments. To tell the story of the faith, the story of the patriarchs and matriarchs, of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Joseph, the story of Ruth and Esther, of Deborah and Samson and Isaiah and Micah is to tell the story of God’s faithfulness to God’s promises. To those whom God has said “Go!” God has been faithful.

It’s an old truism, so much so that I hesitate to recite it yet again that God doesn’t call only those who are equipped for the call, God equips those whom God has called.

Let me tell you a personal story. I have a couple of pictures that I treasure. One was taken a while back and it is of me teaching a class of adults of every age. I love it because it shows me doing what I always thought I’d be called to do, to teach and to seek to walk alongside others and ask the questions of faith in such a way that the answers are not pat but are thoughtful and maybe, frankly, to learn to be comfortable without answers. That was what I thought I was called to do as a minister, and I still do. I prepared for it, I trained and read for it and I don’t think I’m half bad at it. But then there is this other picture. It was taken the last day that I was at Trinity Church in Charlotte and it means the world to me. It is me with the big black robe on in a reception hall with

³ Larson, Bruce. *On the Road Again, The Journey of Life* in The Library of Distinctive Sermons, Gary Klingsporn, ed. (Questar, Oregon, 1996) p215

four young men around me, one a high school senior and the other three sophomores in college, who had come home to be in church when I preached my last sermon there. The reason that second picture means so much to me is that Youth Ministry not for what I prepared myself. I was going to be a scholar and think deep thoughts and assist others in thinking deep thoughts. I didn't arrive at Trinity with a single gift or skill I knew about that I was prepared to throw into the aspect of my job that was to oversee Youth Ministry. I didn't go to seminary with the faintest glimmer of desire to sleep on fellowship hall floors and de-bone chickens in soup kitchens with high school students on mission trips. I never dreamed I would officiate weddings for 19 year olds who didn't plan their pregnancies or write letters to judges to try to get lighter sentences or celebrate receiving Phi Beta Kappa. Not one of these things was what I went to school to learn how to do. I just accepted a call one day and close to nine years later realized God had done something, and there was this picture of me with these young men I arrived not knowing how to be their minister.

A wandering Aramean is our father. That's where we are today, you and me, waiting to see what God is going to do, because God has said, "Go!"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.