

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: March 5, 2023, Yr. A, 2nd Sunday in Lent

Text: Genesis 12:1-4a and John 3:1-17

Title: How Do We Begin Again? (From *Sanctified Art*)

Focus: God may call us to a new place or thing. Our ability to respond depends upon listening to God's call, trusting in God, and having the courage to step forward despite the risks and stressors.

First Reading: Genesis 12:1-4a

¹Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

The Call of Abram and Sarai

What do you think about this story from Genesis?

"The Lord said to Abram . . ."

This is Abram, who is later known as *Abraham*. He is married to Sarai, who is later known as *Sarah*, and we are in chapter 12 of Genesis. It is pretty early on in the Genesis story.

"The Lord said to Abram, 'Go. . .'"

Can you imagine yourself in that setting--stopping right there in the story: "Go!"

You might wonder, "Go where? What is it going to be like? What is it going to be like? Who's going to be there?"

As the story is told, it's just "Go!" At least in this part of the story, there is no detail—in fact, not even *any* information at all about this new place and what it will be like.

In contrast, I would guess if you have even *traveled* to a place you've never been—meaning short-term—that it's likely that you've purchased a guide book from the bookstore. You may have scoured travel websites for the best places to stay or the best restaurants to enjoy or fun things to do. You've quizzed your friends either in person or on Facebook who have been there about what they did and what they'd recommend. You may have watched YouTube videos about places to stay and things to do. You

planned and made a list of things or even a full itinerary. And all that research for a short visit.

We even have apps like Yelp to help us decide where to have dinner this evening. That's a pretty low-risk outing—one evening of time and some dollars, and yet we have all these tools to help us decide.

There is a lot more at stake for Abram and Sarai with this call or command to “Go!”

- From your country
- And your kindred
- And your father's house

Basically, leave everything you have known to go to this new place.

“Where?”

“To the land that I will show you.”

“You're going to show me?! Show me when? You're not even going to tell me about it now? What's it like?”

When Have You Moved Somewhere New?

When Have You Moved Somewhere New?

In our Tuesday Bible study class, we talked about the times when we have moved somewhere new and the challenges of doing that:

In 1973, **Sharon** was a young woman, discharged from the Air Force, married, and pregnant with her first child when her husband wanted to move from Southern California where Sharon had grown up to an 8,000-person town in Iowa where he was from. She knew no one there and it was so different from the Long Beach and Lakewood communities in which she had grown up and the Southern California region she had known. There were a lot of changes in a short period of time for Sharon: leaving her birth family and home at a young age, serving in the Air Force, being discharged, getting married, moving to Iowa, and having a child.

In December of 2020 during the height of COVID, **Dale and Roberta** moved from Indiana near Indianapolis where they had lived for 17 years. They had lived in other places since getting married, but they had raised their two kids there and New Joy Lutheran Church there had been their home as well. The church was a place of deep connection, with long-time friends, meaningful service, and mutual support.

The scariest thing, Dale said, was losing connections. Isn't that like the Abram and Sarai story in Genesis? They were leaving country and kindred and their father's house.

Dale and Roberta were looking for a place that would be home, but they also moved in December 2020 in the height of COVID when opportunities to meet people were limited.

Dale described how they were looking online at churches—viewing their worship services. They figured when worship services were open for in-person attendance, they'd visit all the Lutheran churches in the area, see how that went, and then map out a strategy for visiting other churches beyond that as necessary. I think he was anxious that this process of “church shopping” would take a long time.

They longed for connection and belonging and I'm sure they wondered how it would turn out. Maybe they were anxious that they just wouldn't find what they were looking for in this new place.

Kris and Steve are a couple in our New Member Orientation class which met this week. They have their own story of starting somewhere new: They moved to Reno from St. Louis, where they raised their two now-adult kids and were a part of the Trinity Lutheran Church in their community. . . **for 45 years**. Kris had a catch in her voice as she told me about what that church family means to her and how hard it has been to say goodbye. “The move has been monumental for us, leaving all of our beloved friends behind. Still, we feel like we made the right decision for us and our family.”

When Have You Moved Somewhere New?

Change is Stressful

Maybe it's just stating the obvious, but **change is stressful**. Even when we look forward to change or when we choose that change and wish for that change, change is still stressful.

Sharon herself, during Tuesday's Bible study, talked about the stress scale. It's a self-assessment tool that helps you recognize stressful life events that you have experienced in the previous 12 months. Moving is a major stressful event.¹ Also, if you're moving, it generally means a lot of other things are changing at the same time. If you're moving, then there is likely also a change in

- Your relationships with friends and family
- New job
- Financial impact
- New church and doctors, and other community relationships

¹ See, for instance, “Top 10 Most Stressful Life Events: The Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale” Pain Doctor, March 2, 2018. <https://paindoctor.com/top-10-stressful-life-events-holmes-rahe-stress-scale/>

What's the Good News?

This reading is pretty brief—just 4 verses. And it's pretty sparse of details. Here's something not to miss: Though God does not describe what that place is going to be like, God does promise particular things—check out the “I will” promises:

- I will make of you a great nation.
- I will bless you.
- I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.
- I will bless those who bless you.
- I will bless all the families of the earth through you.

And what's the result or the impact?

The text is blunt, direct, and sparse in detail: **So Abram went. . . and Lot, (his nephew), went with him.**

We don't know to what degree Abram struggled with deciding to go or not. The text just says he went. In the following verses beyond what the Lectionary designated for us, there's some additional description: Abram was 75 years old, Sarai went with them, they took a number of possessions, and they headed for Canaan.

I can't imagine that leaving “your country and your kindred, and your father's house” --really, all that you have known--is ever easy or comfortable.

With this story of Abram and Sarai and God's call to a new place and God's promises to them and with the story of Jesus and Nicodemus, the folks at *A Sanctified Art* direct our focus to the question, “How do we begin again?”

I hear in that question some of what we have already acknowledged:

- Change is stressful.
- Being new is difficult.
- Giving up what you know for the presently unknown is risky and scary.

How do we begin again?

Moving to Johnson City, Tennessee

The biggest or most challenging experience I had of moving, being new, or beginning again was when I moved as a young man of 23 from Southern California to Johnson City, Tennessee. When I lived there, it was a town of about 50,000 people. It's in northeastern Tennessee—it takes less than an hour's drive to the east to be in North Carolina or about the same to the northeast to be in Virginia.

I knew no one within at least 1000 miles of there. I went to work at First Presbyterian Church as the Director of Youth Ministries. After growing up in Southern California and also going to college in Southern California, I wanted to be in a whole

new cultural environment. I wanted to work full-time in a church. I didn't want to come out of seminary ready to be ordained as a pastor having never lived anywhere else and would therefore be struggling with how to decide about where to go.

How do we begin again?

I hear in that question some of what we've already said:

- Change is stressful.
- Being new is difficult.
- Giving up what you know for the presently unknown is risky and scary.

How do we begin again?

From hearing Abram and Sarai's story, from observing the stories of folks like Sharon and Dale and Roberta and Kris and Steve, from thinking back to my own story of moving to Johnson City, here's what I think:

Our ability to respond depends upon listening to God's call, trusting in God, and having the courage to step forward despite the risks and stressors.

- **Listening:** I thought and prayed a lot about moving to Johnson City. I talked with pastor/mentors and with family members about it, which helped me sort out my reasons for going.
- **Trusting:** When I asked the Tuesday Bible Study Group for what they saw as the Good News in this passage, Stephen was the first to respond: "Trust," he said. Trust in God—God is trustworthy and Abram's trust in that promise of blessing.
 - **How has trust factored in the decisions you have made?**
 - Trust is a part of that listening process—trusting that God wants what is best for you and that God will be present with you.
- **Courage:** It takes courage because you still have to act. You can't just listen or contemplate or pray about something, but you have to take a step forward. Courage is an expression of faith, of trust. Courage is taking a step forward even when you know it's going to be hard or even when you know it's risky and that risk is scary.

I hear courage in Kris' comments when she says: "The move has been monumental for us, leaving all of our beloved friends behind. Still, we feel like we made the right decision for us and our family."

And if making such a decision and taking action takes trust, then trust can be reinforced. For me, my trust and confidence were strengthened from my experience in Johnson City.

The first year was the most difficult. Getting to know people—they getting to know me. There's trust in that relationship, too.

When I persevered through the challenges of adjusting to living there and I was ultimately "successful," then the trust and confidence I gained was that if God called me

to this place and I can persevere and do well, then I have confidence or trust in God in the future that when God calls me to a different new place then I can be successful there.

In your own journey, may you listen well, clearly hear God's call, and respond with courage.