

February 28, 2021
The Second Sunday in Lent
Year B
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Journeys

Every other year, when we're in our Bible year, and when we can be together in person for Confirmation class, the Confirmation students and I go on a trip. You might be thinking that I'm talking about our annual trip to Confirmation Camp at Camp Calumet. We do go on that trip, every year, in fact, but the "every other year trip" that I'm talking about is our trip following in the footsteps of Abraham and Sarah as they journey from their home in Haran to the land of Canaan; a journey that encompasses hundreds of miles and at least eight chapters of the Bible. The journey that I'm talking about finds the then named Abram and Sarai, traveling between their home city of Haran to Canaan and then around Canaan, to Shechem, Bethel, then to Egypt, then back to Bethel, then to Hebron.

If you ever hear the Confirmation age kids talking about the bathrooms under the Narthex being Bethel or the Bathrooms at Bethel, that's because when we were making our journey around the church, imagining that we were following in Abram and Sarai's footsteps, carrying our blankets, our baskets, our cooking supplies, our food, and our stuffed animals, which represented Abram's herds, and the place under the steps represented Bethel, where Abram and Sarai ended up twice before it was moving time again.

At each place where our travels in Abram and Sarai's footsteps took us, we read the scripture passages associated with that location and discussed

what had prompted Abram and Sarai to move there and what challenges they faced, either once they got there or on their way. Sometimes they traveled because there was some issue with the place where they were, like a drought or a famine or political trouble, but most of the time Abram and Sarai moved because they experienced the call of God moving them forward, moving them on.

Genesis 12:1 and 4-6 tell the story of the beginning of that journey:

Now 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.

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh.

The verses make it sound so simple. Now the Lord said “Go,” so Abram went. The biblical text hints at what an effort would have been involved in this act of obedience, this response to the word “Go”, but a verse is hardly sufficient to capture the scope of the thing; the scope of Abram moving himself, his wife, his nephew, their servants and the enslaved people who were part of their household, their material possessions, including their animals that made

up their livelihood, and setting off on foot on a journey of over four-hundred miles through territory for which they did not have detailed maps.

Many of the kids in the Confirmation classes with which I have shared this story and this journey have had experience with moving from one house to another, often in the same town where they started, sometimes crossing town and state lines, and they have been able to articulate how hard it is to move; to have their whole lives upended, to have to learn new places and new people, in a new neighborhood, or new community, or new school, to live out of boxes for days, weeks, or even sometimes months as things get sorted out and put away, and they get back into the rhythm of their lives again. Of course, what the kids are describing when they talk about moving, what most of us have experienced in moving, is having a few weeks of packing, followed by a truck showing up at our house and people moving boxes and furniture out of our house and into the truck and then the truck showing up at our new house and people moving the boxes and furniture into our new space. Stressful, yes. Disorienting, yes. Exhausting, yes. But nothing at all like what Abram and Sarai experienced, as they said their goodbyes to their family in Haran, knowing that they would never see them again, and then making an arduous journey at times through mountainous and desert landscapes, based solely on a word from God, a command and a promise.

We find the promise that prompted Abram and Sarai's move reiterated throughout their story.

It's first made in Genesis 12:2-3:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I 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.'

A variation on that promise is made in Genesis 15:5:

[The Lord] brought Abram outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'

And then again, the promise is made in our Old Testament reading for today, in Genesis 17:2-4:

...the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "...I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

...and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations."

A sign of that covenant was the new names that God gave Abram and his wife Sarai. Abram's name went from being Abram, which means, "High Father" to being Abraham, which means "Father of Many". Sarai's name went from meaning "My Princess" which could be understood as a term of personal affection, a name given by a loving mother or father to denote the preciousness of their new child, to being simply, "Princess" which is more of

a title, recognized by those beyond the immediate connections of the woman bearing the name. It is appropriate that a woman who has been promised that kings would come from her, should be named, “Princess”.

When God’s covenant, God’s promise, was made with Abram and each time the covenant was reaffirmed, Abraham reacted in faith to the promise that God was making with him.

He acted in faith when he was first called and left his father’s house, his country, and his kindred and started a long and challenging journey to an unknown land.

When God’s covenant was made with Abram in chapter 15, when Abram was again promised ancestors and a land, even though he knew that Sarah was barren, Abram believed the promise that God had made him, even though he had already waited a long time and had not seen the promise fulfilled. Genesis 15:6 says that this was Abram’s response to God’s promise, “And Abram believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

You might have noticed that today’s reading jumps around a little bit. It goes from verses 1-7 to verse 15-16, leaving out verses 8-14. That’s because verses 8-14 include the command to circumcise Abraham and all of the males of his household. What happens in verses 23-27 is that Abraham and all of the males in his household are circumcised as a sign of faith in the covenant that God made with Abraham.

But still, Abraham didn’t have a son. He was still waiting for the fulfillment of the promise that God had made to him.

Of course, we know the rest of the story. We know that Abraham and Sarah did have a son, that they named him Isaac, which means laughter, that

he went on to have children and that his children had children and that the story of Abraham's ancestors has become our story as we have been grafted into Abraham's family through the blood of Jesus Christ. We are part of the multitudes that came from God's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham. But Abraham didn't know how the story would end, when he left his home and his extended family. He didn't know when he was journeying in and around Canaan, unsettled, and in-between, creating altars to the God he was determined to believe would be faithful. He didn't know how his story would end when he and all of the males in his household were circumcised. He was still waiting for the fulfillment of the promise.

Since this pandemic began, we have been praying a prayer that I always think of as Abraham and Sarah's prayer. We pray it during worship. We pray it at the close of our prayer group. It is the prayer of people who are living in unsettled and in-between times. It is the prayer of people who are on a journey. It is the prayer of people who are determined to believe that God is faithful, but who are still waiting for the fulfillment of the promise. It is this prayer:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Is it strange that I think of a pandemic that has largely trapped us in our homes, in our states, in our nation, as a journey that none of us wanted to

take? We have indeed left behind many things that we thought and felt were things that we could take for granted:

We have had to give up the idea that we could pretty much do what we want when we want.

We have had to leave behind the idea that our choices only affect ourselves or those closest to us.

We have had to give up the illusion of independence, as we have come to realize how interdependent we truly are.

We have had to leave behind the idea that there is only one way to do things, as we have had to discover new ways to do almost everything in order to make our lives work and in order to care for each other.

There have been no promises attached specifically to this pandemic journey, and yet, our faith, tells us that the God who made and kept promises to Abraham and Sarah, and to their son and his sons, and their descendants, is with us on this journey. Our faith tells us that the God who raised Jesus from the dead, can bring hope and growth and blessings out of the most desperate of circumstances. Our faith tells us that God who is with us, the God we call Emmanuel, can bring us through this time and into new life.

The story of Abraham and Sarah can remind us to be faithful and to trust. But in this sermon, I didn't tell you, and I won't, at least not today, about all of the times that Abraham and Sarah struggled and doubted and tried, unsuccessfully, to take matters into their own hands. Their story reminds us to be faithful and trust, but it also reminds us that even in those times when we struggle and doubt and think that we couldn't possibly wait a moment

longer, that we couldn't possibly keep putting one foot in front of the other, that God is still with us. God keeps being faithful. God knows the ending of this story, and God will not abandon us, even when we make mistakes, even when we're tired, even when our hearts cry out, "How long?"

God was with Abraham and Sarah, on their journey in the wilderness and God is with us in ours. Our journey is different from theirs. Our stories are different from theirs. Our hopes may be different from theirs. God's promises to us might be different from God's promises to Abraham and Sarah, but one thing is sure. Like them, we are not alone in the wilderness and God will bring us home. Amen.