

We don't know much about Abraham and Sarah's life in Haran, which is now a part of Turkey, except that they were doing pretty well. When they later traveled to Egypt they had enough possessions to attract Pharaoh's attention. We also know they were originally from Ur of the Chaldees, which was on the Persian Gulf, but moved to Haran because Abraham's father Terah wanted to live in Canaan. However, for some reason he never made it to Canaan and settled the family in Haran.

One day, in Haran, God gave Abraham a calling. Maybe it came in his sleep or through the voice of an ancient priest. Maybe it came in the midst of a busy day, breaking through the dust of the tents and the bleating of sheep:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

Isn't this what we all want? We may not be interested in founding a great nation, or have our names made great, but we all yearn for a sense of calling to our lives. We want to get life right, be faithful to our moment, and do well with our fleeting years. So at every stage of life, the question keeps returning: “What am I supposed to do now?” And those of us who believe in God keep looking for holy responses to this question.

Prior to becoming the first president of the free Czech Republic, the playwright Vaclav Havel was in prison for his writings against their totalitarian government. While he was there he wrote about his experiences and his observations about life. These writings were smuggled out of prison disguised as letters to his wife, and were later published under the title, *Letters to Olga*. In these letters he claimed he could withstand the hard labor of prison if he could just become clear about his calling. “The secret of human beings,” he wrote, “is the secret of their responsibility.”

We may not have been imprisoned for our convictions, but we know about hard labor. We know about knocking ourselves out at school, work, or with the demands of family. And struggling with health that seems to be slipping away or hearts that are easily broken. We know about struggling with the passages of life from one stage to the next. And at every turn of life the questions keep returning: “What is my responsibility now? What am I supposed to do? What is my calling?”

The only other thing we are told about Abraham and Sarah's life in Haran is they had no children. This is incredibly important in understanding them, because it sets the problem to which God is responding with a calling.

There are so many, perhaps some here today, who struggled to have children. If you haven't been there, you can't know their pathos. But in ancient society to be childless meant something a bit different than today. The whole purpose of getting married for the ancients was to have children, and the purpose of having children was to have hope. In ancient society no one looked for hope or meaning to live in their jobs. Instead, the purpose of their lives was found in their place among the generations who preceded and followed them.

This is hard for us to understand because we live in a society in which life's meaning and calling is something we construct for ourselves untethered to any memory of those who have gone before us. We leave home to discover for ourselves who will be and what stars we will chase. But the ancients and all premodern society found the meaning, and calling, of their lives by being caught up in a drama that preceded and would long outlive them.

So when the Abraham and Sarah story starts by telling us they had settled into life in Haran it was telling us they had settled into a life without a future.

And doesn't that seem relevant to our own day? We're so politically and socially polarized that we have no compelling vision that binds us together. We don't even know where the center of society is anymore, much less if the center will hold. Social injustice abounds, and it is robbing another generation of young people from a future. And creation is now in so much anguish that our future as a planet is in question. But our greatest danger is that we are tempted to settle into this society without a vision of the future and just tend our own gardens.

It is at the point when we've settled for how it is that God, who never settles, comes with a calling. And that's what restores our hope and vision. As the Apostle Paul said in our NT Lesson today, "Abraham hoped against hope" for a new future when he was called.

Notice that this call story with Abraham and Sarah begins with the call to leave. "Go from your country, your kinsmen, your father's house to a land I will show you."

Remember Abraham's father started on this journey to the Promised Land, but for some reason stopped his pilgrimage and settled at a place along the way. Perhaps you too can remember starting out with magnificent dream but the demands of life, the job, the kids, the bills became consuming. And the dream was placed on a shelf in the closet of your soul. You could blame the loss of the dream on your family, your health, or the economy. Or you could in all honesty say that life in Haran is comfortable. (Settling into comfortable despair is one of the greatest threats to hope.) Or you could say that too much of your life is behind you to think about dreams and calling. But Abraham was 75 when God called him, and the drama was just beginning.

Imagine how the conversations went at the country club in Haran: "You're doing what Abraham? You're leaving? Why? Because you have a call from God? Uh, huh. And where is God calling you to go? To a land God will show you. Right." Why would old Abraham put up with that? Because the call from God kindled something that had almost died in his soul – hope.

According to the Bible, you have to leave what is known to find hope. In the opening pages we are told that marriage is a matter of leaving to cleave to another. The Old Testament is filled with the drama of the Hebrews on the move toward the land, away from the land, or returning to the land. Oddly this always when they are in the best shape spiritually. They more often got in trouble when they try to settle in the land. Abraham doesn't leave a settled life in Haran to settle in Canaan. Life with God is never about getting settled. It is always about following the sojourner God who is on the move to a new creation.

Jesus called his disciples to leave their fishing nets, sin, guilt, and self-righteousness to follow him, even though they didn't have a clue where he was leading. Why did they do it? For hope! Jesus had found something holy in them, and when it came back to life so did they. The Gospel is always about leaving and cleaving - leaving what is known but barren and cleaving to the holy promise of hope.

What does this mean for the members of the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill? It doesn't necessarily mean you have to pack up and move again, although so much of my own confusion about calling has come around literal moves. But it does necessarily mean that God has something more for you, even if you stay put. It means you can never settle. And you cannot receive the next blessing from God, and you cannot cleave to it, without letting go of what you had.

It doesn't take a prophet to know that the church is in a season of transition. Russell Sullivan and I've been called here as interim pastors to be with you, as part of you, and perhaps as guides on the journey. The first and most important thing I want to tell you about the journey is that God is with us along the way, and it is going to lead to a blessing.

I can also tell you the purpose of this blessing, according to the call of Abraham and Sarah, is to be a blessing: "I will bless you, so that you may be a blessing." That is what our souls have always yearned to find – to be a blessing to others. When at some time in the future the congregation regathers in this sanctuary for your funeral, don't you hope someone will stand up at the lectern to tell us that you were a blessing? I can promise you no one is going to read your resume. Nobody cares about that then. What we all care about is that a life was well lived, as a blessing to others.

I don't know where the church will be in a year from now, but I do know that if we have been attentive to the Sojourning God with us, we will have found that we had to leave behind the pastors and maybe congregation we knew in order to have our hearts open to the new blessings to which God is leading us. And the purpose of all this transition is to allow us to be a blessing in the future as have so many generations here been a blessing before us.

But now, when we are clearer about our losses than where God is leading, we have to choose to believe – it will all lead to a future filled with hope. This why the Apostle Paul uses Abraham as his example for living by faith. Abraham believed and began the journey of faith.

When I was a seminarian and the Phillies were in the world series in 1980, they won the final game with a relief pitcher named Tug McGraw. I loved that guy because he was so dramatic, and he could capture the intensity of the high moments of a game. It was the ninth inning, the bases were loaded, with two outs. I can still see him on the pitcher's mound patting his heart as if he was trying to bless himself. Then he struck out Willie Wilson to win the series. It was an extraordinary moment, but it took a lot of faith on a long road for him and the team to get there. Tug McGraw's favorite phrase was, "You gotta believe."

That is essentially Paul's point in referring to Abraham in his letter to the Romans when he says you have to hope against hope. "You gotta believe" It is the only way to get to the future blessings of being a blessing. Amen.