

Genesis 12:1-9

Romans 4:18, 20-22

"Home Is Where the Heart Is"

A few years ago, Steve and I were in the El Paso airport just before Thanksgiving, waiting at the gate for our flight. Next to us was a young father with his 3 or 4-year-old-son. They were talking about the trip they were about to take. The father asked his son, "If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?" The boy answered, "I would go HOME!

I can understand - and I'm sure you can, too! Our homes are filled with our comfortable and treasured favorites. This story describes a basic human condition in us all; we love the security a home provides!

Even though this little child was probably flying to see his grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins for the holiday -- and even though he knew that happy times awaited him, he still longed for what he knew best.

Similar images could have been on Abraham's mind as he reflected on what must have been an incredible one-on-one encounter with God -

a directive to pick up his belongings, gather his flocks and herds, collect his family and his people, and Go --- to a place he had never seen.

Abram was a prosperous rancher and businessman in Ur, a highly respected and thoughtful man. And yet, when God told him that he was to go where God would lead him, without question, followed.

His obedience was astounding. He asked for no guarantees, he simply picked up and went where God told him to go. His obedience to God thus set in motion the long journey of his people, to find their home, their gift of land from God, which would be a blessing to them, and in turn, a blessing to others.

Since the Bible simply tells us that the LORD said to Abraham, "Leave your

country", the sparse scripture invites us to imagine Abraham's experience:

God was asking Abraham to uproot himself from everything he knew.

God made a deal with Abraham:

I am willing to give you something -- if you are willing to give up some things first:
his home, where he had, so far, thrived.

God did not make harsh demands;

neither did he declare that he was the one true God;

but God's voice must have said it all, a covenant promise offered
to a faithful man.

It is clear that God initiated the encounter with Abraham in order to form a
relationship that would, in time, reveal who God was.

God was patient with Abraham.

Abraham would have no map for his journey; he only had the assurance that God
would guide him. He did not know what lay ahead;

all God had told him was that he must go to a Promised Land.

The land would be blessed, and God would bless Abraham's people -

and those people - Abraham's descendants—

would, in turn, be a blessing to others.

The blessing was also that Abraham would become the father of a great nation.

Abraham could have refused to go, for God has given us free will;

but Abraham walked away without question from the home he knew -

and began his journey.

What faith! What obedience Abraham possessed!

He apparently spoke no word in response, as though he already trusted that God would do as He said.

Abraham was not a super-hero; he was an ordinary man, with human flaws.

His obedience to God would make him and his family aliens in a foreign land; but he held on to the promise that God had given to him.

How did God accomplish this acceptance of purpose in Abraham?

God first sought a relationship with Abraham, and then showed him the way.

Abraham must have known that he was an instrument of God,
because -- he responded;

and although the LORD had promised Abraham and Sarah that they would be the parents of a great nation, it would have been easy to doubt, for at this time they were childless; and Sarah was 90 years old. Yet, Abraham depended on God in all circumstances, and thus allowed God's plan to be fulfilled.

Abraham had some tough times as he traveled in the desert wilderness. There was a devastating famine that forced him to divert to Egypt so his flocks, herds and family could survive; life-threatening dangers confronted him along the way; they were immigrants in an unknown land, yet God protected them with His wisdom and power. /////

The fertile land on which we live is a sign of hope, and anticipation for a new life. The gift of land is God's invitation to acknowledge that it is possible to begin a new history.

On this Fourth-of July weekend, let's flash-forward a few thousand years to the settling of another Promised Land, America.

The Pilgrims were English immigrants, and many of our great-grandparents and the generations that came before us came from Europe. Steve's heritage is mostly Black Dutch, but also includes his great-grandfather, who was a member of the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma. My heritage is a 50/50 mixture of Finnish and Croatian. My mother spoke no English when she began first grade and my father was also raised in a bilingual family. He remained fluent in Finnish.

We indeed have received God's gift and blessings in this great land of ours,
and have been given freedoms that no other country on earth can
equal, but the struggle to become the nation we are today did not
come without many challenges on the part of our forefathers.

Here is a bit of Presbyterian history from the eighteenth century: the story of one of our forefathers who also responded faithfully to a call from God.

John Witherspoon was born in 1723 in Scotland and was the son of a Presbyterian pastor. His mother, who was the daughter of a minister, taught John to read the Bible when he was 4 years old. He had an incredible mind and memorized most of the New Testament.

Witherspoon graduated from the University of Edinburgh at the age of 16, studied theology for 4 years, and became a licensed preacher at the age of 20. His life was remarkably good.

During his young adulthood, Witherspoon had paid attention to the issues of his day, and early on he vowed to support individual freedom over tyranny in his homeland during the Scots rebellion. His fame spread to the American colonies, where leaders had begun to establish a new, independent society apart from English rule.

Another young Presbyterian from Scotland who was affiliated with the College of NJ, now Princeton University, traveled back to Scotland to meet Witherspoon -- and invited him to be president. of the college.

Witherspoon, unlike Abraham, said, "No." His life was comfortable in Scotland, yet he was intrigued. But more important was the fact that his wife Betsy refused to move with him and their 5 children, for she was comfortable in Edinburgh and regarded America as a small group of barely-civilized colonies in the middle of a wilderness of Biblical proportions (which we have to admit, was true)!

But the American colonists were convinced that Witherspoon, who had become a great force for Scotland during the Scots Rebellion with England, should be their leader. A few years later, John Witherspoon was approached again by the college, and though he had rejected the first offer, he had continued to discern God's call, and this time he accepted. Despite his wife's reluctance, the family moved to America.

They arrived in 1768, and Witherspoon quickly became active in the movement to declare America's independence from England. He was an instant patriot, and was quickly recognized as a man to be heard and respected, in the pulpit and the classroom, where he both preached and taught theology and ethics .

Many students at Princeton stayed on after graduation to learn more from Witherspoon and to discuss the principles that would form a more perfect and free society. Witherspoon thus trained these young men for leadership in the American colonies. He actively participated in the Continental Congress and served on more than 100 committees over the years. He was the only career clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

The legacy of John Witherspoon is remarkable:

Of the **417** young men who graduated from Princeton during Dr. Witherspoon's

tenure, and over the years to come,

114 became ministers,

13 became state governors,

3 became Supreme Court Justices,

20 became United States Senators,

33 became U. S. Representatives in Congress,

and Aaron Burr became Vice-President.

One exceptional theology student, James Madison, became Princeton's first graduate student, the fourth President of the United States, and is remembered as the Father of the Constitution. Witherspoon's legacy, grounded in faith, obedience and Christian ethics, is the foundation of our country's legal and social system.

In these stories of Abraham and John Witherspoon we can see obedience and blessings lived out. Their lives were changed forever by calls from God, as they moved by faith in completely new directions. When we contemplate the legacies that result in such obedience, we realize that their legacies are ours to enjoy. Genesis 12:3 assures us that by blessing ourselves through communion and obedience with God, we are then equipped to be a blessing to others.

The legacy of Abraham is most remarkable: he became the father of the nation of Israel, and all the world was blessed by the coming of Christ, who is a direct descendant of Abraham's family tree. And in Jesus Christ, we acknowledge and gratefully accept the greatest legacy of all - eternal salvation;

and we affirm that the fullest example of obedience is the life of Christ.

Obedience is an individual matter as well as a church matter - we are simply God's instruments for mission. God also calls our church to create a legacy, a heritage

that, over the years, will slowly be formed by individual decisions which affect the whole community.

Steve and I gratefully recognize the legacy of First Presbyterian Church in Las Cruces:

We came to this church when we were 21 years old.

We raised our 3 children here, and two of them raised their six children in Las Cruces with their spouses.

Over the years, our children participated in Salt and Light, VBS, worship, music, youth groups, and mission trips; and as adults have served on the Deacons and Session.

Steve and I have been richly blessed;

and we thank you for nurturing not only our children and grandchildren,

but all the children, as your own.

You have responded to God's call in many ways, to be a blessing to others.

This congregation is in its second century of ministry and Christian witness., and our ministry continues on the wings of God's grace.

I will leave you with a few questions to ponder for the future legacy of this church, my dear friends:

1. How will we discern the call of God, especially when we are called to do something that is not comfortable or predictable in our eyes?
2. How do we get beyond the familiar and actually SEE what God has in store for us?
3. How do we take a leap of faith when we often doubt ourselves or our situation?

May the work of our hands and hearts continue to prosper, in this place we call Home, and may we always respond to serve God in the world; for it is what we are called to be - the kingdom of God on earth.

Please pray with me:

Eternal God, this is your world. This is your church. We are your people. On this weekend of remembrance we celebrate our good heritage for on a strong foundation, You have built this church.

We wish that the founding members of this mission church could see the fruits of their labors and how the seeds they planted have come to fruition.

Help us, O God, to be faithful to you and your church in our own day, for the sake of your Son, and for the sake of those who come after us. We ask these things in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.