

“Spiritual Wanderlust”

Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

March 8, 2020

Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake

The call of Abram is one of my favorite stories in the whole Bible. I have moved quite a lot, and the experience of packing up my life in New York to move to North Carolina nearly three years ago is still fresh in my memory.

The challenges that face Abram and his family, of course, are exciting, too, (and daunting!), but certainly *not* without their cost. I love the way the call is *vague* about the destination: it seems that *getting moving* is more important than knowing the final details.

Liturgically, we nearly always start reading this story at Genesis 12, and by doing this we create the impression that God’s call comes to Abram *right out of the blue*, as if it has never before occurred to Abram to travel to another land.

But if you go back to chapter 11, you discover that Abram begins his nomadic journey *years earlier* with his father, Terah. They leave Ur of the Chaldees, Terah and his sons and their wives and children, and their destination is *Canaan*—the place Abram will eventually find as the land of promise.

But at some point the whole family stops in *Haran*. Do they change their minds about Canaan and decide to settle down? Or do they just intend to break the journey for a while, and then somehow they never get moving again?

We don’t know, but what we can see is that God’s call to Abram isn’t something he’s never imagined before. *It’s a call to resume a journey he has already begun years earlier, but for some reason has forgotten or given up on.*

You see, the call of God can be *as simple* as a reminder of something we used to do and have somehow stopped, something we started and never finished. The call of God might be quite the opposite of *mysterious*: it may be a question that asks *why* we’ve settled down, or *why* we’ve given up, and that gently prods us *to start again*.¹

¹ Maggi Dawn, *A Call Without Mystery*, The Christian Century, March 10, 2014

And note that Abram is *not* promised that life will be *better* in Canaan. He is told that his *name* will become great, that he will be made into a *great people (goy)* and that he will be a *blessing*, but *not* that he will be *materially* better off.

Actually it's almost guaranteed that *at first*—when he's left behind his known language of communication, his reputation, his kin network, his knowledge of a place and how to survive in it—*life will be worse*.²

You see, the *issue* at stake for Abram and for us is the issue of "*calling*." Often we are encouraged to make *choices* that result in the highest financial return or the most personal gain. The *dominant concern* of many young people today is finding a job that provides high pay, security and "no risk."

In *Who Will Go for Us?* Campbell tells of an undergraduate who talked with Campbell about problems he was having with his father. The father had a very specific plan for his son—*college, a corporate training program, an MBA, and finally a career in corporate finance*. But the son was not interested. He had recently worked with children at risk as part of a church-sponsored summer program. Mature and socially adept, he learned that he was effective in public speaking, community organizing and human relations. He wanted to spend his life addressing society's urban problems. The result was serious conflict. As the son said to Campbell, "*My father has one definition of success: making a ton of money and being totally independent.*"

A college chaplain told Campbell that she rarely gets calls from parents upset about how their children are doing in school, either academically or socially. But parents will call about a child's *religious commitments*, especially commitments that may involve *mission opportunities*. Parents can accept their child's religious involvement—*as long as that child is not allowing his or her life to be influenced by a sense of calling*.

In order to live out the truth of our calling, God challenges us to *listen* to one voice—a voice that brings *challenge and comfort*. Sometimes the voice says "*leave*" and at other times the same voice says, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*"

² Wilma Ann Bailey, *Spiritual Wanderlust*, The Christian Century, February 12, 2008

Ask yourself: *What was Abram thinking when he heard the voice? Go to a land he had never seen and follow a voice that seemed to know him better than he knew himself? Or stay in Ur and put down roots?*

As heirs of this Chaldean pilgrim, we must know that our lives are not so much about *choosing* as they are about being *called*. But this kind of thinking runs contrary to cultural norms. We are so accustomed to charting *our own* course and making *our own way* that yielding our lives to God brings genuine struggle.

Yet the consequences of not engaging the struggle can also be devastating. Ask the young woman who married the *“right man.”* Or the man who pursued the *“perfect career.”* In many cases you will find that although they made *all the right choices* (the lucrative career, the dashing or beautiful spouse, etc.), their lives are still *empty* because they have no *purpose* and no *guide* greater than themselves.³

Think about this in terms of the fact that we are a nation of *spiritual seekers*. We are hungry to learn about the *life of the spirit*, although many of us hesitate to translate that hunger into institutional allegiance. The majority of us are *“unchurched.”* Others are drawn to *“seekers’ churches.”* Still others are exploring the life of the spirit within a denomination and a tradition. But for all of us, Jesus’ meeting with *Nicodemus* is *powerful*, for Jesus sees the *longing* in his heart, recognizes a *sincere seeker*, and responds with *compassion*.

We might, in fact, call Nicodemus the Patron Saint of Seekers.

His pharisaic training, however, seems to trap him in the minutiae of the law. And we can never seem to decide: *is he too smart for his own good? Or is he, in fact, an embarrassment to his kind, too dimwitted to understand about being born again?*

But Jesus receives Nicodemus *as a pilgrim*, (a wanderer) a sincere religious seeker. Jesus welcomes him and his searching mind. Jesus immediately senses that this learned Pharisee, this member of the religious establishment is responding to something in Jesus’ teaching. He seems to know that Nicodemus

³ Prince Raney Rivers, *Listen Up! Genesis 12:1-4*, The Christian Century, March 22, 2002

is willing to *risk* leaving behind the truth as he has known it in order to explore something new. Jesus invites him into a new realm of insight, and takes Nicodemus seriously even as he pushes him far beyond his comfort zone. Recognizing a *spiritual pilgrim* who is starting down a path, Jesus seeks *not* to embarrass Nicodemus, nor condemn him, but to offer him, instead, *the possibility of new life*.

Jesus *ushers* this seeker into a realm of *wisdom* that is more complex, deep and rich than anything Nicodemus has known. Using language that is *poetic, metaphorical, suggestive and imaginative*, Jesus talks of being *born* from above.

We do not know how long Nicodemus dwells in this *liminal space* between worlds, moving back and forth between what is *familiar* to him—the world where his status is recognized and esteemed and his worldview reliable—and this *new world* of life everlasting on the wings of the wind of love. Later we are told that he lands on the other side.

When we see him again he is accompanying Joseph of Arimathea to the darkness of Jesus' tomb, and offering his beloved teacher gifts of precious ointment, aloes and myrrh. The *Word made flesh* becomes Nicodemus's text, and the *living water of the Torah* an ever-expanding *pool* of wisdom.⁴

Friends, for 21st-century Christians, there are so many voices competing for our loyalty and obedience that we must *retune* our ears daily to the One who is calling our name.

Oprah's voice (even in re-runs!) reaches 20 million viewers daily. When she speaks, people buy books. Magazines in the check-out line at the grocery store clamor for our attention with the cacophonous voices of "experts" who will fix our relationships, mend our brokenness and supercharge our self-images. Politicians promise programmatic and economic panaceas for society's problems. But we, members of the body of Christ, are *not* to take our cues solely from them.

⁴ Patricia Farris, *Late Night Seminar: John 3:1-17*, The Christian Century, January 30, 2002

Instead, we must listen and respond to the only voice that can redeem us. God will visit us where we are. This is both exciting and terrifying.⁵

Abram heard the voice of the Lord and followed that voice to a place he had never seen before. He accepted God's gracious call even though he did not have all the details in the beginning of the journey. When he packed up his family and departed from Ur he took his first steps on the journey of redemption. Whether he knew it or not, he was in for the ride of his life!⁶ (And so are we!)

⁵ Prince Raney Rivers, *Listen Up! Genesis 12:1-4*, The Christian Century, March 22, 2002

⁶ Ibid.