

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

18th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

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Text: Genesis 12:1-9

Title: “New Beginnings: Living with Uncertainty”

When Lynn and I travelled to Scotland a few years ago to celebrate our 30 years of married life, I was excited and anxious. Together we had planned the itinerary. We decided not to use a commercial touring agency because whenever we travelled before we did so and this time we wanted to be able to roam at will. So we rented a car and I was to be the driver. Of course, cars in the United Kingdom are assembled backwards—at least for those of us in the U.S. they are backwards. The steering wheel is on the right side of the car AND of course you have to drive on the wrong side of the road. Having never driven on the wrong side of the car and the wrong side of the road, I was a bit anxious about it, but I also thought it wasn't impossible. I could do this!

So we fly into Edinburgh airport, make our way to the car rental counter, receive our keys, make our way to the car. We sat there in the car for a few minutes to get a sense of being on the wrong side, checking out where the headlights were, the turn signal, the gear shift since it was a manual transmission, the wipers and so on. Then I started the car and slowly made our way out of the parking lot onto the highway and headed to our destination. We had rented an apartment for a week in the city and I had been communicating with the owner who gave me written directions that we both had trouble making out. When we entered Edinburgh proper, the traffic was heavy and the streets, we discovered, were much narrower than in the U.S. It was fast and dizzying driving as I tried to keep my wits about me driving on the wrong side of the road. We looked for the road signs which weren't always readily apparent. It's a fairly large city, and we kept trying to find our way but after 30 minutes or so of driving around in circles I just had to admit that we were completely lost.

I think about that when I think about the way life sometimes is for us. We are on a journey. All of us are born into this life. We live. We move. We breath. Our lives are filled with happenings that bring meaning. We go to school, meet people, form relationships. We make our way through life but there are times, aren't there, when we get lost. There are times when we experience uncertainty, what the next step might be. What do we do then? Where do we go? To whom do we turn?

The story of Abraham is the story of a family on life's journey. The journey begins in Haran, now located in southeastern Turkey. In that place, Abram hears from God that he is to take his family and go to a place that God will show him. Now Abram is no “spring chicken” at this point. Seventy five years old the NRSV says. And though the Old Testament counting of years is different from ours, still it's clear the man is not in his twenties. But God tells him to leave his extended family and the place in which he had his roots. Age doesn't matter. Familial ties do not matter. Hometown attachments do not

matter. “Go!” God says.

Yet, this divine directive is not without promise. In fact, God makes three big promises to Abraham: descendants, land and blessing. These aren’t conditional promises. By that I mean God doesn’t say to Abraham: “If you will do this, then I will give you this.” In other words, “You have to give me something before I give you something in return.” No, God tells Abraham “I will give you descendants so numerous that you will become a nation. I will give you land. I will bless you so that you will be a blessing to others. Therefore, go!” God tells Abram before he even makes the trip that these promises will be kept. Even if Abram gets lost, the promises will be kept. Even if Abram makes mistakes, the promises will be kept.

So Abram, aging man that he is, does as he believes God instructed him. He packs up his belongings, his family and presumably his slaves and begins the trip. What is so intriguing about this particular trip is that he doesn’t really know where he is going. God didn’t buy him a ticket to Edinburgh and tell him, “This is where you are going. This is your destination.” Abram is flying blind here. All he has to go on is the Word of God telling him to go which is why when the book of Hebrews defines faith as

...the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen[, Abram—who will have his name changed to Abraham--is mentioned as an example of such faith. Hebrews goes on...] 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ... 8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ... 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead[--the book of Hebrews thinks he is that old--], descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” (Hebrews 11:1-2; 8-12)

Abram made the journey without a clear destination because he trusted in the One who told him to go. He had “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” He had faith. And because he had faith, he could live with the uncertainty of not knowing exactly where he was going. This was a step-by-step journey, a step-by-step journey that was based on the promises of God, promises that evolved out of God’s love of Abram and Sarai who would become the nation Israel. And that nation would experience their own journey with God. They, too, would have to deal with uncertainty in their own journey through their shared life. They, too, would not know exactly where they were going. They, too, would discover God’s profound love for them in spite of their missteps, in spite of their rebellion against God. God would remain faithful and true to promises made.

Abram and company made their way to a place called Shechem in central Palestine. It wasn’t however, free of inhabitants. The Canaanites were there. At least one interpreter wondered whether or not Abram was confused by traveling so far and finding that the land he thought might be the place was already occupied, and so he went to the well-known Oak of Moreh, where people went to hear from their gods. Maybe Abram went there to listen for God’s voice, to check out whether or not this was the land that God had promised, to wonder if he heard God correctly. In that place, God appeared to Abram and

told him clearly, “This is the place. This is the land I will give to your offspring. You heard me right.”

Having been affirmed, Abram built an altar there, a symbol of worship, a sign that he met God there, that once again as he took the first step God was still with him. God was still faithful.

From there Abram traveled further to the hill country where he pitched his tent and there, once again, he built an altar, marking another encounter with God. As the scripture says, Abram went on from there, traveling by stages into the area known as the Negev, today called the Sinai Peninsula.

Abram lived with the uncertainties by continually turning to his relationship with God. That was his habit. And that would continue to be his habit as he made his way through his life in response to God’s call and claim on him. Like him, the nation that descended from him—Israel—would do the same. They would ignore God, rebel against God, but God still loved them, still sought relationship with them. Throughout the biblical story of their journey, they returned to God over and over again.

When Lynn and I got lost in Edinburgh, we decided to get away from the main roads and pull off the road so we could call Gordon, the landlord from whom we were renting the apartment. We were definitely living in uncertainty at that moment. Uncertain of where we were, uncertain of where we were going, uncertain about whether or not Gordon was available or if he could even guide two lost souls to where we needed to go. Even our GPS which we brought with us with freshly loaded maps wasn’t getting us there. It, too, was uncertain. So we found a place with an empty parking lot and pulled off. I called Gordon who asked us where we were. Of course, we didn’t know, so I got out of the car and began looking around, describing buildings we saw around us and then I turned and got a look at this sign on the building whose parking lot we were in. It read: “University of Edinburgh: The Divinity School.”

I started to laugh. How appropriate it was that lost as we were, here in this foreign place was a sign of God’s presence.

I have thought about that experience a lot since then because that seems to be the pattern of following God. I think I hear what God wants me to do or where God wants me to go, so I act but then I become uncertain. Sometimes things don’t work out as I imagined they might have. The initial excitement of responding to God’s call gives way to that uncertainty, and I find I have to go back to God. For me that takes shape by going to God in time away in devotions. I have a prayer guide I use that helps me center and guides my time with God. It has a basic order of devotion with an opening prayer, a psalm reading for the day, some readings for reflections and then other scripture readings. It also allows time for journal writing which has been of great help to me in helping me listen for the still, small voice. Sometimes I need to vent, so I vent. Sometimes I need to question and so I question. Sometimes I need to praise and express gratitude and so I do so. What has been so helpful to me, though, is to know that when I do become uncertain, it’s okay. That’s the way life works sometimes, even with faithful people, uncertainty creeps in, because I can’t anticipate all that life will bring on this journey. What I can do is continue to build altars. I can continue to turn to God for guidance, affirmation, signs that God is with me.

Where are you in your journey? Are you feeling lost, uncertain? Maybe you are in an altar building place in which you feel close to God and you have “...the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” If lost or uncertain are what you are experiencing in your life, consider taking up the habit of altar building. Consider finding time to spend alone, just you and God. If you want a simple devotional to guide that time, pick up an Upper Room at the Welcome Center. If you want to go deeper I’d be happy to talk with you about other resources. The main thing is to seek intentional time with God.

As a congregation, we share a journey together. Sometimes things feel uncertain, especially when

change is in the works. But that's why we are here in worship, to remember that all of us are called to come to God together, to seek to listen for the direction of the Holy One, who calls us and claims us as a people. When you feel uncertain about where we are going as a church, then please pray for the church, bring your church to God, support your church, as we take this journey together. Because sometimes we get lost, sometimes we don't know really where we are going, but the story of Abram and the people of Israel is a reminder that God is traveling right along with us, uncertain though we may be. God is on this journey with us and has made some promises, all of them based on God's gracious love. And that we can never shake.