

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

15th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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Text: Genesis 12:1-9

Title: "A Way Out of No Way: Blessing"

On Thursday morning of this week I met with a group of clergy I've been meeting with once a month for several years now. It's a support group really, and this was our first meeting of the fall. We write cases about situations with which we are struggling or unsure about and we follow a process that provides an opportunity for the one presenting the case to receive the wisdom and experience from the group. Two pastors present each month.

Anyway, we took some time to catch up with each other at the beginning of our time together and one of my colleagues shared her experience with leading a camp this summer. I texted her and asked if I could share her story with you this morning and she said "Sure. If it may help someone else then go right ahead. "

She described the trip with 24 junior high students traveling to Manitou Island which is off the coast of Leland in Lake Michigan. They packed all their gear and food in and spent the week out there hiking and camping and building Christian community. Only this journey was not all she'd hoped it would be. In fact, she said she'd never do it again. It was too many kids to begin with AND it was more of a strain on Christian community than it was a genuine expression of it.

She described the fact that they had limited food and some of the students happily shared some of their food with those who were still hungry. Others, however, were not so generous. In fact, there were three boys in one tent who had an incident. Two of the boys woke up to find that their lunches for the next day had been eaten by their partner. It couldn't have been an animal, she said because the Ziploc bags were neatly opened and closed. There was no tearing involved, no claw or teeth holes punching through the plastic AND they didn't hear anything, so their tent mate stealthily opened their packs in the night and consumed his partners' food for the next day's lunch. "More like the Donner party", I said, "than disciples sharing food with the 5,000."

Such things happen though on our journey through life with other human beings. There are snags and pinches and challenges that leave us less than inspired and hopeful, and in fact they can injure our confidence in the value of making this journey with others.

Life is a journey with others that sometimes gets messy. And last Sunday we remembered God dealing with messy human beings. We remembered God's bow in the sky and the story of Noah which recalled God's attempt to deal with human sin by wiping out all of human kind except the righteous few of Noah's family. We remembered God's promise never to use that tactic again when it came to dealing with the evil behaviors of human beings but rather

to come in the Christ and die himself in order to reveal what God's love really looks like.

This morning we turn to Abraham and his journey. What Noah and Abraham remind us is that life itself is a journey. Both of these patriarchs live out their journeys listening to the voice of God. Abram—who at this point has not had his name changed to Abraham--was a member of a family of journey takers. His father pulled up stakes at Ur and for reasons unexplained in Genesis began a trip to Canaan, but they never made it. They stopped short and settled in Haran where Terah died. And it was there, according to the way Genesis tells it, that Abram heard from God:

12 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. 2 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. 3 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."

4 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. 5 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, 6 Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. 8 From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. 9 And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb. Genesis 12:1-9 (NRSV)

Thinking about God's promise to Abraham, Rabbi Marc Gellman, wrote in his book Does God Have a Big Toe? that...

"Most people do not realize it, but God put in calls to other people before finally putting in a call to Abram.

First God called Eber and said, "Eber, leave your country and your neighbors and your family and go to a land I will show to you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing; all who bless you will be blessed and all who curse you will be cursed and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

And Eber said, "Who are you?" And God said, "God." And Eber said, "The God of what?" And God said, "The God of everything." And Eber

said, "Don't be ridiculous, there is no god of everything. There is a god of the night and a god of the day, a god of the mountains and a god of the valleys, a god of the forests and a god of the deserts. If you ask me, you are a little late. Everything already has a god, and there is no god of everything. Maybe if you look hard, you can find something that doesn't already have a god. As a matter of fact, I think there is no god of frogs at the moment. Why don't you go check that out and then we can talk, because there just is no god of everything."

But Eber and God never talked again.

The next person God called was Peleg. God said, "'Peleg, leave your country and your neighbors and your family and go to a land I will show to you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing; all who bless you will be blessed and all who curse you will be cursed and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

And Peleg said, "Who are you?" And God said, "God." And Peleg said, "Where are you?" And God said, "I am everywhere." And Peleg said, "If you are everywhere where do they put your statue so that people can bow down to you?" And God said, "I am invisible and no one may make a statue of me." Peleg rolled on the ground with laughter. "Now let me get this straight! You are the invisible god of everything with no state, and you want me to leave my home and follow you to a place you will show me? Do you think I am crazy? Now look, why don't you go to a good idol maker and have a nice sculpture made of your image, and then we can find a nice place to put it down where people can bow to it, and then we can talk."

But God and Peleg never talked again.

Then God went to Serug and said, "Serug, leave your country and your neighbors and your family and go to a land I will show to you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing; all who bless you will be blessed and all who curse you will be cursed and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

And Serug said, "Who are you?" And God said, "God." And Serug said, "What will you give me?" And God said, "I just told you." And Serug said, "You don't understand. I am not interested in moving anywhere or doing anything just so that my great-great-great-grandchildren will be a great nation. I want to know what is in this deal for me right now. Maybe if you showered me with some of those blessings up front I might be convinced. How about giving me all the money in the world and the kingship of the lands? What do you say?"

But God said nothing. Then Serug said, "All right, let's be reasonable. I will go wherever you want for most of the money in the world and the kingship of the five largest countries. How about that?" But God said nothing.

That was the last time Serug ever heard from God.

By that time, God was not sure about finding the right man. But God went to Abram and said, "Abram, leave your country and your neighbors and your family and go to a land I will show to you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing; all who bless you will be blessed and all who curse you will be cursed and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

And Abram said, "I will go, but there is just one thing I want." God asked what that one thing was, and Abram answered, "I want to take my family with me." God asked him, "that's it? You just want your family to come with you? Don't you want to see me?" And Abram said, "no." And God asked, "Don't you want to bow to a statue of me?" And Abram said, "No." And God asked, "Abram, don't you want anything for yourself?" And Abram said, "No."

Right then God decided not to ask any more questions, and God let Abram gather his family and pack their things for the journey to the place that God would show them. Right then God knew that the right man was going to the right place at the right time for the right reasons. God also knew that such things hardly ever happen."

(Gellman, Rabbi Marc. Does God Have a Big Toe. Harper Collins, 1989, pages 47 – 51).

Yesterday, Birt Etienne, Gabe Meisel, Pat McIlvenna and I travelled to Tawas in order to attend the annual district conference. A lot of things are happening in our district. Congregations were invited to display something that expressed one our best ministries. Our church council decided that would be the "Make-n-Take" ministry begun by Tina Karnath, an event that reaches out to our community and invites them to come and provide an opportunity to make gifts for their family and take them home. The last two years the building has been filled mostly with people we don't know which is great because it gives us an opportunity to build relationships with those outside the building, outside our congregation.

At one point in the conference people were invited to stand up and share something their congregations were doing to be a blessing to their respective communities, and Gabe stood up on our behalf and did a great job expressing the way in which "Make-n-Take" is a way to connect with those in our community we don't know. In some ways I see it as a way to journey with Abraham and Sarah to bless people we don't know .

At the end of the conference, we were to all gather in designated spaces with churches that are assigned to what are now being called "Disciple Zones" or "DZones". We used to be

called “Clusters”. And in these “DZones” we were given instructions to “The Amazing gRace”, a play on the TV show “The Amazing Race”. It’s a contest, a friendly contest amongst churches. The instructions reminded me of God’s instructions to Abram. They remind me of God’s instructions to Abraham because the first phase of this contest is to go! Every congregation is asked to identify 12 people, a nice biblical number, to be organized in teams of 3. Four teams of three people each. One team is assigned the area north of the church, one south, one east and one west. Each team is to go and knock on 10 doors in their respective area, take a simple gift of their choosing for each home—a loaf of bread, a pie, something from the church—and ask people several questions chosen by the team from a list suggested by the gRace organizers. Questions like...

...Do you know where our church is located?
...Do you know the name of our pastor?
...What is the most important thing this community needs right now?
...and so on

Each team reports their experiences and responses to those questions and report it to the “DZone” leader who then reports to the district leader who then gives the next challenge and the “DZone” works to accomplish that challenge. There are three challenges and they all need to be completed by December 13th. The winning “DZone” receives \$7,000 to be divided equally among the churches in that zone and that award is to be used to send youth on the Mission Trip to Pittsburgh in 2018.

Maybe I’m pushing this too far but I wonder—I wonder—if this isn’t a new twist on an old call. I wonder if this isn’t akin to Abram’s call:

“Go from your [church] ... to the [houses] that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great [congregation], and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the [community] shall be blessed.”

I wonder if this is a fresh invitation to be a blessing to people around us by leaving our comfort zones and knocking on doors not to push people to conversion, not to preach or coerce but simply to be a blessing to them, to serve them, to live out Christ’s love for them. I wonder...

If the Spirit is speaking to you this morning as you hear this challenge to go and be a blessing to people we don’t know in places we don’t know—if you sense God nudging you to say “yes, I want you to be a part of this particular faith journey”--and you want to say “yes” to be part of the 12, please speak with me. It doesn’t matter the age. Abram was not a young man when God called and Jeremiah was a young man when God called and Mary just a young woman when God called. What matters is a desire to respond to that call and trust that God will provide what is needed.