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Our First Families of Faith Stories from the Book of Genesis II. Two Things....

Genesis 12:1-5, 8 From Eugene Peterson's The Message translation 1 God told Abram: "Leave your country, your family, and your father's home for a land that I will show you. 2 I'll make you a great nation and bless you. I'll make you famous; you'll be a blessing. 3 I'll bless those who bless you; those who curse you I'll curse. All the families of the Earth will be blessed through you." 4 So Abram left just as God said, and Lot left with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. 5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot with him, along with all the possessions and people they had gotten in Haran, and set out for the land of Canaan and arrived safe and sound.... 8 He moved on from there to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent between Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. He built an altar there and prayed to God.

It's that time of year again, isn't it? Folks are traveling. College students are coming home. Those who are heading to another locale for college are beginning to think about how they will get there and what stuff they will have to leave behind. I-25 is full of minivans themselves full of children, often with camping gear strapped to the luggage racks. Many here in our own congregation have already begun some summer travels, and others will be taking vacations or journeying to family or high school reunions. It is no wonder that this notion of travel, of going on a journey, has always been a metaphor for life itself. For there is indeed an important sense – or there should be! – in which to live is to travel, to journey. Paul McCartney sang of the “Long and Winding Road.” Nat King Cole sang about life's kicks on Route 66. Even Dr. Seuss has a book entitled “The Places You'll Go.”

And in the language of faith, it is a metaphor that has really come back into prevalence in the last 20 years. Folks often talk about their “walk” with Jesus. There are a number of religious websites and blogs that I know of that use the image of journeying in their titles. There's a popular spiritual renewal program called “Walk to Emmaus,” with the Colorado version simply being called “Emmaus of the Rockies.” As

we continue this week the second of our series on our “first families of faith” from the Book of Genesis, we can also see that this idea of journeying, of traveling pervades these stories. Noah, as we saw last week, was slung about the rain-inundated oceans before that Ark landed. We shall see Issac and Jacob and Essau and Hagar and Ishmael and Joseph and how at crucial points in their lives, each of them undertook a journey, a trip – sometimes voluntarily and sometimes not! And in today’s story, a trip, a journey is at the very heart of things as Abraham and Sarah leave all that they have known to follow God’s leading to a new place and a new life.

The the ubiquity of the book of Genesis’ use of the image of a journey is telling, and while it is a metaphor that can be overused or can become banal, it nonetheless remains a powerful metaphor for you and for me: for indeed, each of us indeed travels a road, day by day, walking the best we know how, by the lights that God gives us, seeking to be faithful. And our journeys always take place amidst what we might call the “two-sidedness” of life,¹ amidst the reality that in life’s journey, birth and death can come on the same day, good and ill mix together, joy and sorrow swirl intermingled, laughter and tears often inhabit the same moment. Two-sidedness indeed. That is the nature of our journey in life, and of all of life’s transitions, and in the midst of the ordinary yet profound changes that come in each of our lives every day, we need a guide, we need a map, to tell us the way to go, to tell us what to look for along the way, to tell us how to behave as sons and daughters of the Living God. For each day that you or I are privileged to have life will bring with it opportunities and transitions that we can use well or we can use poorly, that we can greet with faith and hope or with doubt and despair. So, I think that for all of us who indeed journey through this life, amidst its two-sidedness, amidst its joys and its sorrows, amidst in highs and lows, I believe that

¹The phrase is Edmund Steimle’s, I think, but memory is dim.

this story of Abraham and Sarah themselves setting off on their long journey can indeed provide us with a guide, some directions, a map that we can use for our own travels amidst life's wonders and woes.

How so? Well, let me begin this way: I love to plan trips. I love poring over maps and thinking about the various ways you would go from here to there, and the advantages and disadvantages of each. I suppose I come by this trait honestly; when I was young our family used to take vacations to visit our relatives in Maine and Florida. It's a long way from Texas to Maine, and I loved every minute of those trips in the back of that old blue Chevrolet station wagon surrounded by my maps. Before those trips, I loved getting a packet of maps from Gulf Oil (remember Gulf Oil?); I would eagerly and lovingly unfold those pristine, crisp road maps and I would begin drafting an itinerary for our vacation and I loved it when my father would say during those trips, following MY planning, "We're making good time."

And yet, despite all of my love of maps, and all of my enjoyment of endlessly planning travel, I have to say *that not a single one of the trips that I have ever planned turned out exactly like it had been planned.* Four years ago, the road trip I'd carefully planned for my friends and I was thwarted the first night when one of those friends needed to go to the hospital with kidney stones. This year when I went on my annual desert road trip with my best friend, I found myself misled by Google Maps – which showed a route from just east of El Paso to just south of Alamogordo. It turned out to be 100 miles of gravel road, straight as an arrow, on which we saw no other cars, on which the GPS quit working, and which directed us through an Army Base's live-fire area. Before Barbara, Katie, and I moved to California in 1997, I had carefully planned our trip that would commence once the moving van had come and gone on that twenty degree below zero Indiana January day. But the day before moving day, on Barbara's

birthday (as she won't let me forget!), I fell on the ice and completely tore the MCL ligament in my knee – leading to a very different trip than the one planned and one that Barbara rightfully wishes she could forget because I am the world's grumpiest patient.

There is an old saying: If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans. And God laughs not because God somehow decides to mess up those plans or ever takes delight in our misfortunes, but simply because God knows better than anyone how a complex creation full of free will can thwart even the best laid plans; God too painfully knows about the two-sidedness of life; after all, God planned a beautiful Garden of Eden and look how that turned out! John Lennon once said *"Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans"*² I suspect that Abraham and Sarah would have been able to heartily agree! For their story today is a very simple story but, at the same time, a terribly profound one that, as I say, has much to teach us. But this morning, I simply want to offer two things that this story offers us, two ways it can be our guide, our map:

First, take a look at that very first line of the story: *"God told Abram: 'Leave your country, your family, and your father's home for a land that I will show you.'"* The first thing to say, I think, is that in your life's journey or mine, God is never going to be as direct with you or me as this story records that he was with Abraham and Sarah. God will not send you a text message. God doesn't have a website or Facebook page, and God never posts on your Facebook page's wall. Writer Anne Lamott says, *"I always think, would it be so much skin off of God's nose to just get back to me in a more obvious way?...if I were God, I would have a different system. I would have email, you would pray and you would get email responses or voicemail responses."*³ But that isn't

²http://thinkexist.com/quotation/life_is_what_happens_to_you_while_you-re_busy/171775.html

³http://www.beliefnet.com/story/192/story_19235_2.html

how it works. And yet the first thing to be said is this: even though God doesn't email you or Facebook you or text you, God is nonetheless powerfully at work in your life. What we know from the face and person of Jesus Christ is that God's power is not coercive. God does not bully. Rather, God's power is persuasive, God's seeks to lure us, nudge us towards the best possibility in every moment. How do you know what that is? Well, while one can never be absolutely certain – that's part of why it's called "faith," after all! – there are some things to look for. One of my mentors in ministry once saw me after a long absence and after the initial greetings said this *"Are you still having fun?"* That brought me up short, because the truth was – I wasn't. That particular ministry had become rote and un-satisfying. And when my mentor used the word *"fun"* he didn't mean it in a trite or shallow way; actually what he was asking was whether my work still gave me **joy**, whether the prospect of what I could do this day brought me awake each morning eager to meet that day. My friends, if your life's journey has too many days over too much time when you can't say that, then I believe that that is God trying to nudge you, lure you, entice you to a life that **is** marked by such joy. So, the first lesson of this story is this: wherever you are on life's journey, that journey is meant to be joyful. Now, that doesn't mean that the journey will be easy or free of pain. It doesn't even mean the journey will always be a happy one on every day. But it can be marked with a deep sense of God-given joy that abides even in the midst of life's two-sidedness

But of course that brings a question: *"Joy in what?"* And that brings me to the second thing I think this story teaches us, the second thing that can guide us on our journey and in the midst of life's transitions. The joy that we are invited to take in life is not the shallow joy of having more stuff, or having the right clothes or gizmos or electronics or goodies; it's not the false and fleeting feelings of fun that can come from

those many things around us that would offer to intoxicate and anesthetize us from life's complexities. Moreover, as I say, joy is not synonymous with "happiness," for sometimes one can take joy in doing the right thing even when it is hardly a happy feeling that is engendered. Joy is not simply "pleasure" either – and while there is nothing wrong with pleasure in and of itself, pleasure always needs to be the sign and index of a deeper joy. We love the *pleasure* that the perfect August peach can bring to our tongues, or that a mountain sunset can bring to our eyes, but the **joy** is in the fact that God has provided a bounteous creation that we are intended to both take delight in and care for.

So what joy is it that the story of Abraham and Sarah's journey identifies as the joy that is to be our guide and goal on our life's journeys? We find the answer in those very simple lines about blessing where God tells Abraham and Sarah this: *"I'll make you a great nation and bless you. ...you'll be a blessing."* My friends, the deepest joy in life comes from being a blessing to others. And yet, that's awfully churchy sounding; what does it mean? Well, think for a moment about those people who have been a part of your life whose presence you go away from knowing that you are a better person for the encounter. Think about those people who call forth your best and never pander to your worst. Think about those people in your lives who love you so much that they do you the honor of telling you when you're messing up but who also make it clear that that doesn't diminish their love for you. Think of the people whom folks want to be around and be like because they are generous and giving and who know that praising others never diminishes them. My friends, I believe that those are the kind of people who are blessings to others. They embody the traits that make for a good world; they try to leave their corner of the world a little better each day than they found it the day before.

In the Old Testament, the word "blessing" is almost always associated with the concept of "fertility." And, of course, the most literal reading of God's words to Abraham

and Sarah is that God is promising them that they will have many, many descendants – they will be fertile, if you will, beyond counting. But throughout the scriptures, blessing and even fertility is never just meant in a biological sense; no, fertility is also a metaphor for growth, for the increase of goodness, for the maximizing of the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, courage. To be a blessing is to live the kind of life that encourages and entices such fruits to grow in other lives. Let me put all this another way: I once read a commencement speech in which the speaker told each and every graduate that one of their jobs in life was to be a good ancestor.⁴ Isn't that striking? And isn't it oh-so-true? For whether your high school experience was five days ago or five years ago or fifty-five years ago, you are never **either** too young **or** too old to try to be a better ancestor. You or I are never too young or old to think about the kind of legacy we will leave and how our actions and our words can be a blessing to the world – or not. In fact, it's a choice that you and I get to make, thanks be to God, every single day. And the plan that God has, the hope that God has, the map that God would offer to you for life's journey is indeed this: to take joy in being a blessing to others, to take delight in your opportunity on every single day to be a good ancestor for those who will count themselves as influenced and shaped by you. For whether you are 85 or 18, that is indeed the opportunity that is set before you every day, every day.

So, two things from this story of one of our “first families in faith”: always seek to take joy in life, and may that joy always be rooted in your relationships – for it is there where you have that marvelous opportunity to be a blessing for others. For whether you have just graduated high school or whether high school is a dim memory, whether you are young or old, whether you have more days yet ahead of you or more days now behind you, that is God's hope, God's promise for us all on our journeys. Amen.

⁴http://www.huffingtonpost.com/samantha-power/message-to-graduates-be-a_b_103886.html