

Abram Went
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
March 16, 2014
Rev. John Cleghorn

Genesis 12:1-4
Hebrews 11:8-10

Since this is the season of Lent, and because confession is good for the soul in any season, I have a confession to make, something to admit. I am hooked on a television show about the zombie apocalypse. Yes, it's true.

If the session needs to convene an emergency meeting to consider the mental and spiritual health of your senior pastor, then so be it. I am a committed fan of the TV show "The Walking Dead."

Perhaps you know a little about it. It tells a contemporary story of the few who are left after a mass epidemic has transformed the United States into a world where the grid is down, civilization has collapsed and most of those who walk the earth are the undead, who, suffice it to say, are not a friendly bunch.

With my native Georgia as the setting, the survivors have fled zombie-ridden Atlanta and taken to the back woods and back roads, seeking shelter in everything from abandoned prisons to old farm houses.

The character development and story-telling are gripping and it all poses the simple question: Who are we – or who do we become - when there seems to be no reason for hope?

I bring this up today because the current season has some parallels to where we are as people who are seeking God in the wilderness. On "The Walking Dead" this season, the characters, once a large, tight-knit group, have been scattered into twos and threes. Each episode, one or two groups stumble upon a set of old railroad tracks. There signs point to a place down the tracks where some form of community has been reestablished. The place is named Terminus, a word meaning the end of the line.

Group by group, the characters have all made the decision to follow the tracks to Terminus in hopes of reuniting with each other. The hand-written signs to Terminus are calling them to a place they have never been, a place they don't know, yet a place where they are investing perhaps their last and only hope.

Here among the living at Caldwell, last Sunday, the first Sunday in Lent, Evie took us with Jesus into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the tempter. There his identity, purpose and true character were tested and defined. Before launching his public ministry, Jesus went to a place he had never been and drew closer to God there.

It was an appropriate start as we are all invited this Lenten season, these 40 days, to seek our own metamorphosis, our own transfiguration, in the eyes of God as we prepare for Holy Week and Easter. That invitation to transfiguration calls each of us to identify something that separates us from God, something that, when removed, draws us back into our true identity as God's beloved.

Perhaps it is a habit or a pattern of living. Perhaps it is the root of toxicity in a relationship. Perhaps it is an attitude – an air of judgment or condemnation of others, or ourselves - that prevents us from being or seeing ourselves as God's beloved, those for whom Christ went to the cross.

As with so many aspects of the life of faith, the language of journey applies in this season. Whatever it is that separates us from God, removing it may require us to go metaphorically to a place we have never been before, a journey that calls us to leave what we know, what we find comfortable to seek what is holy.

That is what Jesus did in the wilderness and the lectionary gives us a story for today that serves as a good bookend to last week's story.

It is the story of a man named Abram, whom God called to leave all that was familiar. The shortest and, some say, most powerful verse in the Bible is "Jesus wept." This story of Abram might be summarized with the same powerful brevity. Abram went. He just went, asking no questions, putting up no protest. Abram went.

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To understand his decision, we should re-gather what we know about Abram. He became better known as Abraham, which translates to "father of a multitude." As one teacher told me, his Hebrew name translates roughly to "Big Daddy." Late in years, he and his wife Sarai were granted a son. From their family God raised the nation known as Israel. But he is not recognized just as the father of Judaism. From Judaism, of course, sprang Christianity. And by his wife's servant, Hagar, Abraham also fathered Ishmael, who is credited with settling the region where the religion of Islam was born. Therefore Abraham is associated with three of the world's great faiths.

The Book of Genesis tells of many chapters in Abraham's story. But his most enduring quality – and the reason God chose him in the first place – was his unshakeable faith. That quality is so starkly evident in today's story of his call to "go."

"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' "

Let's pause and take in those words, that command, on a personal level. Stop and think about your own "kindred" – your family, at home, nearby or even far off. Then there is your home or apartment. Think of what you have accumulated there. Think of the time you have spent to make it a home, a place of comfort and contentment, security and hospitality. Now think of your geographical home. Maybe you are a native of Charlotte or North Carolina and never really wanted to live anywhere else. Or maybe you have moved here and made Charlotte home, as I did 30 years ago.

Now imagine the Lord saying to you one day. "Leave it all, now. Get up and go with a few close family members but nothing else. Just go and I will get back to you about where you are going and what will happen there. For now, just go."

And, Abram went. Abram went because he trusted the One who called him. Now, we should note that God did make a promise, a big promise. The Lord promised Abram the blessings of a great name and a nation that would be a blessing to the entire world. That's a lot, to be sure. But Abram was leaving everything, everything he had in order to go.

As Evie might say, let's "be real" for a moment. Had it been you or I, we might have asked for a little more detail. Maybe something in writing. A map and a timetable for the journey. A police escort along the way, because the trip would take us across dangerous places. We would want assurances of all the food we would need. Or at least a Visa card with no limit so we could stop at restaurants and comfortable hotels along the way.

And, what about this nation? Maybe we would at least want to have some input on what kind of nation. We would want them to be nice people and good looking. As Garrison Keillor says on the radio show "Prairie Home Companion," we'd want our citizens all to be above average. Hey Lord, we might say, all that isn't too much to ask in return for just getting up and going simply because you said to get up and go, right?

No wonder that, centuries later, the author of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews would place Abraham in what some call "the Faith Hall of Fame," alongside other faith

giants such as Moses and Noah. As we heard read earlier, Hebrews says “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.”¹

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So all of that helps us understand who Abram/Abraham was and what was at stake when he simply went. It’s also worth noting the sequence of how all this happened.

Did Abram go because he was promised great blessing? Did Abram’s famous faith earn God’s blessing? Or did God’s blessing precede all of this? Was that blessing on this man of such faith in place regardless?

Was Abram God’s beloved *because* he got up and went. Or was Abram God’s beloved *before* he ever responded to God’s call?

This is, of course, no small consideration. Nor is it akin to an esoteric but ultimately meaningless debate over whether the chicken or the egg came first. The answer to these questions tells us volumes about our Lord.

Is the Divine One a bargainer, a negotiator? Or is our God one whose grace compels us to give ourselves to the Lord of all, even leaving everything we know and love, if asked to do so in response to God’s love?

Our Reformed tradition holds up what is called “prevenient grace.” It is grace that “comes before” any human response to God’s initiative, God’s acting first. Some strains of Christianity claim that people may choose to be saved in Christ. The idea of prevenient grace, however, conveys Divine love and adoption that transcends any idea of a transaction or deal we can cut with God. Prevenient grace is seen as irresistible. It is what shapes and enables our response to God. It triggers how we bear witness to the unstoppable love of God in the way we live and breathe and have our being.

Prevenient grace is the very heart of grace itself, the sweetest, richest, purest part of God’s adoring adoption.

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What greater encouragement could we ask for than that, as we seek to draw closer to our Creator? But first we may want to get our bearings.

¹ Hebrews 11:8

Scripture tell us that, once called by God to get up and go, Abram set out from an ancient city named Haran. Haran means “highway” or “crossroads.”

In a sense, this story invites us to explore our own crossroads. Where are we in our lives, in our living? How do we understand our habits and patterns, our shortcomings and our strengths? Where are we in our journey with God, our journey with ourselves and self-acceptance? Where are we in our use of our lives toward God’s purposes in service of others, especially those who dwell on the margins – the powerless, the voiceless, the weak and disadvantaged? At the crossroads, all those questions help us find a way forward.

The journey or becoming the beloved asks: What do we need to do to sheer away and scape off any worldly trappings that might cloud our sense of direction toward God? What secular distractions, even idols, might be trying to point us down the wrong path, the one that leads us away from our Father God? What spiritual static do we need to tone down so that the directional signal we hear is that of our loving Mother Lord and hers alone?

God has already chosen a path for us. God has marked the way and gone ahead with signs and demonstrations of grace that comes before anything we say or do. This path is the way back to being fully and truly God’s beloved, as we were first conceived. We may encounter stones that try to trip us up or tangled vines that cover the path and entangle our feet.

Getting back to God sometimes takes effort and sacrifice. Sometimes it is a path that goes through the wilderness and desert places of our lives and our souls. But down that path we discover or re-discover our identity as God’s beloved children.

We should not lose sight of the fact that God promised Abram that he and his nation would be a blessing to the world. In Christ, God has extended that same offer to us. It is there for us to claim.

Some of us are traveling these Lenten weeks by reading and discussing a book titled Life of the Beloved by the gifted spiritual writer and Sherpa Henri Nouwen. I close with his words from his chapter titled “Blessed.”

“I must tell you that claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others. The characteristic of the blessed one is that, wherever they go, they always speak words of blessing. It is a remarkable thing how easy it is to bless others,

to speak good things to and about them, to call forth their beauty and truth, when you yourself are in touch with your own blessedness.

“The blessed one always blesses. And people want to be blessed! This is so apparent wherever you go. No one is brought to life through curses, gossip, accusations or blaming. There is so much of that taking place around us all the time. And it calls forth only darkness, destruction and death. As the ‘blessed ones,’ we can walk through this world and offer blessings. It doesn’t require much effort. It flows naturally from our hearts. When we hear within ourselves the voice calling us by name and blessing us, the darkness no longer distracts us. The voice that calls us the Beloved will give us words to bless others”²

The words of a wise man of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² P. 82-83