

**Second Sunday of Lent, March 12.17 “Hearing the call, heeding the change” Based on Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17**

*“The Lord said to Abram, leave your country, your relatives, and your father’s home and go to a land that I am going to show you.” (Gen 12: 1 GNT)*

Abram is called by the Lord to ‘go forth’. And he’s not even quite sure of the destination at the outset, just “to a land that I am going to show you” is all God tells him. So Abram goes home and breaks the news to his wife. Can you imagine the conversation at that dinner table? “Hey honey, God told me we need to move, but I’m not quite sure just where we’ll end up.” I’m going to bet she said a lot more than “That’s fine dear, I’ll start packing up the good china.” And so off Abram and Sarai go, literally lock, stock and barrel, and extra relatives, because God told Abram to take his nephew Lot and family too!

An interesting scripture for us today, considering what’s happening in this parish at this time! The irony of it caught me, as I suspect it may for you. Once Abram got around to telling everyone of this new plan, I wonder how long that would have taken for them to accept the whole idea of this major change to their lives? Did Abram balk at the idea; did he ever question this whole proposal of leaving his home behind? After all, Abram is not a young man at this point—he’s 75 years old. (*Gen 25: 7*) We don’t know if Abram questioned God’s call, questioning the wisdom of this huge change in their lives at their age, or whether Sarai was angry at being uprooted, or if Lot looked Abram square in the eye and said “You want me to do what?” Scripture doesn’t give us those details. But what we do know, is that they leave their beloved home, for a very uncertain future, in an uncertain place. So, off they go, Abram and Sarai and Lot with all their accumulated flocks and herds of livestock and all the people—the servants and livestock handlers and all their families that they have gathered in decades of living in Haran.

I wonder how Abram told all the people in those households? Did he call a community meeting to announce it? Was there any discussion among the people about this life altering change? Were there arguments, people upset at the idea of uprooting their lives for an unknown future, to go to a place that not even Abram their leader knew would take them. Did any of the people stay behind, refusing to go along because they didn’t believe in Abram’s call? We can only speculate. So, those who chose to follow Abram’s call, packed it all up, hit the road, destination unknown. And they go on no more than a command from God that only Abram heard; literally going on faith and trust.

It is so very interesting when God calls on us to make major changes to our lives, particularly if that call comes via a secondary source, through someone else—when someone says to you: “God’s calling us to change, to move away from how we’ve been doing things, a change from all that is familiar. And I’m not just sure where it’s going to lead, but it’s time for a new way.”

What would have happened if Abram had said to no to God. Would God have gone elsewhere to find the father of the tribes that become God’s chosen people?

But that didn’t happen, we know how this story ends, we know that the result of Abram and Sarai’s journey was God’s blessing upon them and generations after them. Now, the Lord didn’t say there wouldn’t be challenges along the way. But God did promise to be with them. The scripture is written in the first person, God says “I will show you... I will bless you...I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you...” This is God’s personal commitment to be with them as they fulfill God’s call to them. And so off they all go. The journey was challenging, very difficult at times; there was famine, Sarai was taken from Abraham a couple of times, Abram had to call the men together and go to war. In time, Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah, the ones to whom God covenanted to become the heirs of God’s chosen people. This was truly a journey of faith and trust in God that only happened because they said yes to the

change. One writer I read this week noted: “To leave the comfort of the known for the promise of the unknown realities of God is a form of birth. Every birth is a blessing and every blessing holds the possibility of newness.”<sup>1</sup>

Stepping out to the possibility of newness is how God challenges us to the next step in faith, putting our faith into action, as it were. It is the challenge Jesus presents to Nicodemus. In our gospel story it is evident that Nicodemus knows that Jesus has come from God. But John tells us Nicodemus went to Jesus at night, which could mean 2 things: Nicodemus didn’t want people to know that he was going to Jesus, or it could also be John’s symbolic way of saying that Nicodemus was in the dark as to whom Jesus really was—or possibly both! John’s gospel writing is full of symbolism and imagery. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. For him to go to and seek Jesus out was to put himself at great personal risk. Yet, something in the signs and wonders that Jesus was performing was clearly speaking to Nicodemus, leading him to Jesus, calling him to act on the beginnings of the faith he was feeling as to who Jesus was — otherwise why would Nicodemus take the risk? Jesus performed miracles as a way to point to God, many of the wonders he did were things only God could do. He did so to reinforce to those who had eyes to see that he was the Son of God, their Messiah, the one who came to be their Redeemer. Jesus tries to explain these things to Nicodemus, but he becomes confused at Jesus’ words because he takes them literally: How can these things be, how can one be born again? Nicodemus asks. The writer of John’s Gospel very effectively uses Nicodemus as the straight man in this story, using him this way gives John the opportunity to have Jesus explain that he is the Son of Man, who will be lifted up and return so that we may have eternal life.

Does Nicodemus ever come to understand who Jesus really is? Does he become one of Jesus’ disciples, does he commit to a life in Christ? We see Nicodemus twice more in John’s gospel. When the temple police and the temple leaders are discussing how to handle Jesus because it is evident that he is causing turmoil amongst the people, Nicodemus offers a rather hesitant defense for Jesus. And after Jesus’ death, Nicodemus brings an exorbitant amount of spices for Jesus burial; a 100 lbs! And he helps Joseph of Arimathea place Jesus’ body in the tomb. I take this as evidence that he knew Jesus was special in some way, but whether he accepts Jesus as the Saviour, the Messiah, well, we don’t know.

I think there many who can identify with Nicodemus. They feel the nudges of the Holy Spirit, God’s call to action to faith in Jesus, and are confused or unsure, maybe scared of the unknown future, and so take small steps. Others simply ignore the nudge or outright refuse it, because it will disturb the present way of living in order to fully commit to God’s call for a new way of life. It would be like Abram saying “No, Lord, I don’t think we’ll move. Sarai and I are comfortable here, and we’re 75, we’ve got no children. And we’ve got enough to last us until we die. So, no thanks Lord. We like our lives just the way we are.” Sometimes the call for change comes directly to us like Abram’s call from God, or sometimes via someone else—like Lot heard from Abram.

Like we’re hearing from our Bishop.

Is God calling us to change our Church? Yes, I do think so. That call for change has been coming for many, many years; decades actually. And we Anglicans haven’t been listening too well, comfortably resting on our laurels and traditions, instead of heeding the call to make disciples and bring people to faith in Jesus. Anglicans used to do that, you know, bring new followers to Christ, and after generations of churches filled with adults and baptized babies, we became complacent and concentrated on ministering to our own instead of looking beyond our doors for people who don’t know the love of Jesus in their lives. We stopped hearing the fullness of Jesus’ call to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald P. Olsen in Pastoral Perspective for Genesis 12: 1-4a, Second Sunday in Lent in Feasting on the Word Year 4, Vol 2

Where is that call taking us now? I honestly don't know. Whatever it is, it will be different than what we've quite gotten used to. Is this the end for this parish, this church? I don't know that either, any more than Abram knew where God was leading them. Like Abram and Saria and Lot, we will go forth on faith.

A while back, someone shared with me a really great saying—something that should be made into a huge banner and hung up on the wall of every church: "I don't know what the future holds, but I know God holds the future."

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