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Year A
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O God, full of compassion, we commit and commend ourselves to you. Be the goal of our pilgrimage and our rest by the way. Let our souls take refuge from the crowding turmoil of worldly thought beneath the shadow of your wings. Let our hearts, these seas of restless waves, find peace in you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOW...GO
GENESIS 12:1-9

The impulse is to rush. Is not that what being impulsive is: rushing? Rushing through the story, rushing through the Scriptures to prove that God is merciful and compassionate and just to give glory to a God who fulfills promises so that we may rest comfortably in God's grace. But why rush? Why rush through the Hebrew Scriptures? Why go from "in the beginning" to the Promised Land without surveying the promise or the land? Why go from Adam and Eve sampling fruit in the produce section of the Garden of Eden to Christ being crucified for the forgiveness of sins without listening to the prophets who proclaim God's vision for the world with horror and beauty, with depth and precision? Are we so impatient that God becomes impatient with us? Or is our impatience with God simply a reflection of God's impatience? The story of God's call to Abraham begins with the word "now," and God's first word in the narrative is, "Go."

By now, you may have noticed that we have been following the lectionary readings from Genesis since Trinity Sunday (with only one exception, and we will continue to do so for at least one more Sunday). No, I do not have anything against the Psalms or Jesus or the New Testament; and yes, in the past, such practices have led to being accused of being Jewish (and, of course, as a Christian, especially a Presbyterian, part of me is). In truth, I gravitate toward stories---stories by and about God's covenant people in every place and time---and I am not afraid to drift from the canon within the canon,

because I am confident that there is grace on every page of Scripture (even though sometimes it feels like we have to go on an archeological dig to find it).

Walter Brueggeman, who is an Old Testament professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary (where Lena Prewitt serves on the Board of Trustees), often grumbles about what is excluded from the Revised Common Lectionary, and I agree with him to a point. The Revised Common Lectionary, however, provides a more comprehensive experience of the Hebrew Scriptures than do church curricula or college textbooks. In this lesson, for example, Abraham still is Abram, and Sarah still is Sarai. Church curriculum blurs the distinction (if it acknowledges it all) by going from God's call to Abram in one scene to Abraham's re-naming ceremony in the next. At least the lectionary invites us to pitch a tent between Bethel on the west and Ai on the east and to sit with Abram and Sarai midst the uncertainty of their mission.

I say "uncertainty" as if I know that they are wrestling with doubt for sure; of course, I do not. Since Scripture is written after-the-fact, the story is told with the confidence that punctuates history books (as opposed to the series of awakenings that punctuate travelogues). One of the classic questions about this text is, "How does Abram know that the Lord is speaking to him?" The notion of God speaking audibly is difficult for me to grasp personally, because I have not had this experience. Or if I have, I was oblivious to the miracle. As dense as I am, I think that I would have noticed God opening the clouds to say, "Ron, go from your country and your kindred and your family and your father's house to the land that I will show you (Tuscaloosa)." If God had written me an e-mail or left a message on my cell phone, I think that I would have noticed, because I am enslaved to technology!

God says, "Go," and Abram listens. So do Sarai and Sarai's nephew Lot (at least by extension); and by "listens," I do not mean to suggest that Abram is able to bottle the mystery of faith. In this story, faithfulness is more than an exercise in theological discourse; it involves action. Abram listens actively, and the next thing you know, a 75 year old man is leading a camping expedition through the Middle

East. At one point on the journey, Abram, Sarai and Lot stop at the oak of Moreh. The oak of Moreh, translated “learning” or “instructing,” serves as a visible reminder of another tree, the one of the knowledge of good and evil that tempted Adam and Eve into nakedness and shame. Before we concede this part of the story to anti-intellectual interpretations of faith, which suggest that education is not an asset but a liability, let us acknowledge that the nature of the knowledge in question is fluid. It is active--not static--and that by stopping here, by drinking of the well of learning and instruction, Abram, Sarai and Lot are strengthened for the journey to come. Now this is providence as I have experienced it. God gives us hearts to love, minds to know and voices to sing; and in loving, knowing and singing, the next step becomes obvious; even if it is not, it begins to feel as if it is, and in this feeling, there is grace.

One of the disturbing features of this story is that this grace does not seem available to everyone, as God proclaims to Abram, “I will make of you a great nation (that will compete in the Olympics)...I will bless you, and make your name great (after I change it to Abraham), so that you will be a blessing (something that people say after someone sneezes). I will bless those who bless you (people who agree with you), and the one who curses you, I will curse (people who disagree with you); and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (even those who persecute you).”

Wait a minute! There is a fundamental contradiction in this speech. On the one hand, God says, I will bless *this* group and curse *that* one. On the other hand, God promises that in Abram (and, by extension Sarai, because Abram is not going to “be fruitful and multiply” without her) *all* the families of the earth shall be blessed. This rhetoric is potentially volatile: Is God saying that all the people who are left after God dispenses of the cursed will be blessed? Or is God promising that all the families of the earth shall be blessed whether they deserve to be cursed or not? The first interpretation of this promise invites war. If God is going to curse the one who curses us, why not help? If God is going to judge that nation over there anyway, why not participate in God’s judgment? Because judgment is God’s jurisdiction! The second interpretation of this promise invites sacrifice: life-changing sacrifice that may

result in loss of prestige and/or power. Being blessed sometimes feels like a curse. God's covenant people do not know this at this stage in the Genesis story, but they will soon enough.

Another wrinkle in applying this story is the language of "blessing" and "curse." For some to feel blessed or cursed, they have to be able to judge themselves against a neighbor: "She is blessed, but I am cursed." The standards by which we judge ourselves and others, however, are not necessarily the standards that God has in mind when charging Abram to be a blessing. Notice that Scripture does not note Abram or Sarai's initial response to being told where to go. Hmm...why do you suppose that is? Maybe Abram complained, "God, I am 75 years old." Or Sarai said, "But, God, we do not even have children." Or maybe they fell on their faces in obedience. All that Genesis says is, "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him."

Do you ever feel blessed or cursed? If so, do those feelings ever change? Or are they as constant as God's love for us in the person and work of Jesus Christ? On Friday, we, as a nation, marked the 40th anniversary of Robert Kennedy's assassination, and as we did, it occurred to me that this family has probably felt blessed and cursed; and given the nature of American politics, they have definitely been labeled as blessed and cursed (the primary variable being who is interpreting them). Sirhan Sirhan, the man who murdered Kennedy in Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel, did so based on his objections to Kennedy's pro-Israel policies. Please note that the land that God promises to Abram and Sarai continues to shape the political landscape of the world, and until we begin to understand our neighbors as "blessings" rather than "curses," the violence will persist. God's call is to go now and pursue peace patiently, remembering that life itself is a blessing; to regard it as otherwise is a curse through which all families of the earth will be cursed. Remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: Blessed are the peacemakers; for they will be called children of God. Now to the ruler of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen.