

At the beginning of a sermon, I once asked the congregation for a show of hands: “How many of you like to change?” No hands were raised. Not one. So I rephrased the question. “How many of you wish you were still infants? How many of you would like never to have your diapers changed?” A few people snickered. It seems we have a gut reaction to the idea of change, especially in church. We think it’s a negative thing, a scary thing. The idea of change opens up doors that can seem risky. What might happen next? Often, it appears, we’d rather not know.

The story of the call of Abram is about change. Before we get to that, though, a couple things are worth noting. The first is that he is known by the shorter version of his name here—it is not a typo! Second, God does not *ask* Abram to leave, but rather *tells* him to. Not in a negative or angry way, necessarily, but without room for debate.

Go. Leave your country and your home. In those days that was almost exclusively a negative thing. This is long before the days of texting, tweeting, or even a quick phone call to the folks back home—even before “snail mail.” To leave meant, “Go and don’t plan on ever coming back.” The statement has no sense of the casual to it. There is a finality to it all.

It’s as if God said to Abram, I want you to leave everything you know, everything you are familiar with. In other words, it’s about change. It’s about being scared. For this is God saying, I want you to leave your cherished ideas, the things you hold true and self-evident. I want you to set aside your preconceived notions about how the world works. You know that issue you’ve grappled with for an eternity, that you’ve finally figured out? I want you to leave that behind.

In that context, suddenly this is no longer the epic tale of brave souls setting out on a great journey. Rather, it is the story of you, and me, being confronted by life. It’s about daring to step out. Anywhere. Because God tells us to.

Years ago I remember a church that some friends attended where divorce was quite frowned upon. A woman had been speaking at the church and, in the context of her address, she mentioned that she was divorced. A couple—for the sake of argument let’s assume they didn’t really think about what they were saying and were meaning well—approached her afterward. “We don’t believe in divorce,” they bluntly told her. Slightly taken aback, the speaker said, “You know, I didn’t either. But then it happened to me. And I’m still here to tell you about it, so I guess I believe in it now.”

It can be one thing to have various ideas and beliefs, even good ones and strong ones. It is quite another to have them challenged and shattered by something in life. Does that mean we shouldn’t have strong ideas? Of course not. But maybe it means we have to be always open to what God might want to tell us or show us. Maybe it means we should leave the final judgment of things to God.

If we were to take the first four verses of Abram's story in isolation, the story might seem rather innocuous; even heroic. "Go...to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you." Seems harmless enough. Heck, it honestly seems like a great offer. Who wouldn't want to become a great nation, blessed by God?

Except that it is difficult—probably impossible—to read this apart from its wider context. Abram and his wife Sarai are elderly. We're told in the second half of verse 4 that Abram is 75 years old, which, for a Hebrew writer is a way of exaggerating his age, meant to imply that he is so far over the hill he can't even remember there being a hill. Beyond that, they have no children and, at Sarai's age, children are no longer a realistic option.

God's statement in today's Scripture, then, seems little more than a cruel joke. It is as if God were saying: "Hey there, Abram. I want you to do something. Oh yeah, I almost forgot—it's quite impossible." But that's not how God works. God does not put us to those kind of tests, neither in biblical times nor at any time since, that belittle us or mock our situations. In the end, Abram does have children with various women, including Sarai, who was thought to be barren.

However, it is important to take today's reading on its own, focusing on what happens here rather than looking for what might lessen its extraordinary challenge. For in a miniaturized version, God simply says "Go." And Abram goes. It is that basic, and that frightening. God speaks, and Abram walks. Where might that leave all of us?

In those times when we experience God speaking to us, are we inclined to listen, and to act, in simple ways that communicate "Yes, Lord?" Or do we quickly scurry around, looking for an excuse, for an easy out? Do we want written guarantees from God that things will indeed work out? Do we want a contract that spells out the details of the blessings God has promised, including clauses to ensure that everything will happen as stated, and succeed, that the blessings will come, etcetera, etcetera?

Or do we have the faith that Abram models for us? Are we able to say—even timidly—"OK God, I'll go?" To ask it another way: How much value do we place on the promises of God?

The first eleven chapters of Genesis have this sweeping rhythm from grace to sin to judgment. And now, suddenly, in chapter 12 the eon-sweeping history of the first eleven chapters slows to the timetable of the life of just one man—Abram—later called Abraham. In chapter 12 of Genesis, everything begins to change because of God's covenant promises given to Abram.

James White recently shared a story on his *Church and Culture* blog: When I was a freshman in high school, I tried out for the varsity basketball team. On the first day of tryouts, the coach ran a scrimmage, periodically sending players into the game to see how they played. When my turn came, I intercepted a pass on the very first play. Then I took the ball the length of the court, skied over every other player and made the prettiest layup you ever saw.

The coach instantly blew the whistle, stopped the game and called me over to the bench. I was walking 10 feet off the ground. I just knew my shot was so good that he had to stop the game just to tell me. I envisioned that ESPN had called and wanted the footage, and that *Sports Illustrated* had every intention of running a photo of me on the next cover. The shoe deal with Nike was only a matter of time. So I walked—actually, I strutted to the sideline.

My coach said, “White that was a great shot. Your form was great; your intensity was great. Only thing is, you went to the wrong basket! But it was a great shot!” Is there a right and a wrong basket in the realm of faith? The religious landscape of modern American society is bewildering. Cults, sects, movements, philosophies and worldviews swirl around us like the primeval history of Genesis 1-11. But today we have arrived at chapter 12.

When Abram departs the land of Ur to go to Canaan he has great form, great style and confident faith. Abram’s covenant journey takes him from the land of Canaan to the hills east of Bethel, and on to the Negev, continuing to Egypt because of the famine in the land. He decides that his wife is too beautiful for her to journey with him as his wife, so he determines that she should tell the Egyptians that she is his sister. The Egyptians and their Pharaoh are inflicted with serious diseases because of Abram’s deception. So, let’s see. Did Abram just make a layup in the wrong basket? Did Abram run the length of the floor with great form and intensity only to discover that he scored for the other team? Could be.

Martin Luther says that when Abram and Sarai traveled to Egypt Abram let the Word of God get out of his sight. John Calvin says Abram did not rely on the grace of God as he was called to do. The coming chapters of Genesis revolve around the promises of God and how God will fulfill those promises through Abram. But be assured, the fulfillment of these promises does not come easily.

Genesis 12 is essentially another creation story—the creation of a *nation*, by virtue of Abram’s calling and blessing. So here begins the story of a people who are singular in the sight of God, who will bear God’s promise and blessing to, as verse 4 says, “*all peoples on earth*,” including, of course, those “*scattered...over the face of the whole earth*” from the Tower of Babel story in chapter 11.

It is implicit in the call of Abram that he is not called by God for himself alone, nor only for his descendants, but for *all the families of the earth*. Thus, God begins his majestic work of the redemption of the whole world by calling this one man to “*Go...to the land I will show you.*”

Would we be able to trust God if God says “Go...where I will show you” and be satisfied with that small amount of information, even if it meant our world is unfamiliar and strange for a while? I believe that God is saying to all of us in so many ways and at so many unexpected times: “Go.”

This is not the epic tale of a brave soul and his wife setting out on an unknown journey. Rather, this is the story of you, and me, being confronted by life. It’s about daring to step out. To go anywhere, because God tells us to, even if it’s only going next door.

You see, the call of Abram extends to all of us. God is calling us too. Amen.