

**“From a Known Home: Following a Call”**  
**Sermon from Genesis 12:1-6**  
**Given Sunday, June 13, 2021**  
**for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville**  
**Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor**

*God said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people, and the home of your parents, and go to a place I will show you. I will make of you a great people. I will bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings. I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you. And all the people on the face of the earth will be blessed through you.”*

*Abram, who was 75 years old when he left Haran, began the journey as YHWH had instructed, and his nephew Lot went with them. Abram took Sarai his spouse, Lot, all their possessions, and all the dependents they acquired in Haran, and set out for Canaan.*

*When they arrived in Canaan, Abram and his family traveled through the land until they arrived at the sacred place at Shechem and came to the oak grove of Moreh. The Canaanites occupied the land at that time.*

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Literature professors might tell you there are two stories in the world: a stranger comes to town, or someone goes on a journey. Dorothy goes on a journey. E.T. comes to town. Forest Gump goes on a journey. Bilbo Baggins goes on a journey. There are arguments that the whole Pokemon universe is just a series of stories of strangers coming to town. Jesus comes to town.

Maybe even the stories of our own lives can be understood in this way. We go on journeys: We move across town or across the country. We begin new careers. We question the faith we were raised in. We hike and get lost and caught in rainstorms and have revelations. And strangers come to town: We meet our neighbors, make friends. We fall in love. We have babies. David Ebenbach, who wrote *The Artist's Torah*, says this story about Abram is the ultimate story, because it combines both plot lines: God, a stranger, comes to town with this call. Abram, who hears it, goes on a journey.

Our graduates are about to live both stories, depending on perspective. They are about to each go on a journey - to Syracuse, to Spokane, to Corvallis, to San Francisco. They will be strangers, coming to those towns. Something is calling them there.

God says go.

It reads pretty straightforwardly, in all our translations. Go. Get out of here, Abram. Leave your country, your people, and the home of your parents. Leave everything you know. To go where? Oh, not telling. I mean, I'll tell you when you get there. And it'll be good. For now: just go, already, what are you waiting for?

Hebrew scholars say it's a little more complicated than that. Lekh L'kah, the first two words of the command, the beginning of what God calls Abram to. They could be read as "go, go," Like an emphatic instruction. But the way the vowels appear point us in a different direction. God says something like "go... for yourself." Maybe "go... to yourself." The words imply that this journey Abram is being asked to make is only partly about the ground he will cover. More than that, it's about the movement of his soul, the lands his heart will cross, the stretch of his spirit.

"Go *for yourself*" is the interpretation of Rashi, an 11th century Torah scholar, who says that all that talk about blessing - even if much of it will only be known after Abram's lifetime - makes it clear that this is a journey Abram is to undertake for his own good, for his own fulfillment.

And then it's a Kabbalistic approach - a Jewish mystical approach - that suggests a reading of "*go to yourself*" - travel inward as you make your way through the world. The name change that happens here - from Abram to Abraham - suggests that saying yes to this journey is the way this man becomes his truer self.

Ostriker writes, "The voice instructs him to leave home, along with his wife, to travel to a place which it will show him. Go, it says. Your seed will be as numerous as the dust of the earth. And I will bless you. And to all nations you will be a blessing. The young man Abram inquires the meaning of this blessing. It

*means that a living being is singled out to become more and more itself, more and more alive. To ferment with aliveness. To grow like bread rising.”*

Bread rising. Is that a smell from your home? Or is it wafting from the place that beckons you? Or both?

To go without knowing, Ebenback writes, “feels deeply Jewish. We are told by God much more often to do things than we are told to feel things or to understand them. As a result, we’ve been following the commandments since they were first uttered, while the emotion and comprehension have only developed over time, in the millennia of Jewish life and study that have followed the Torah’s writing. And so, as with any commandment we are asked to observe, it is even more important for Abram to just get started than it is to immediately and deeply appreciate the journey on all the many levels contained in this rich command.”

Go before you know. The reasons for your going might be different by the time you arrive, because you will be different by the time you arrive. Your new home is for the person you will be when you get there. There are things you cannot know about yourself until you step away from what you have known. This is true in big and small ways, right? It is true of Abram, Abraham, who leaves everything he knows and takes everything he has and sets out with only a promise, not even a destination. And it is true of each of us, as we consider what it means to step out

again into community, into relationship, into the expression of ourselves that is only possible when it is shared.

Have you been stepping out? To somewhere other than the grocery store? Are you comfortable with that, yet?

It's a strange new world, and an old familiar one, at the same time. The Mom's Group met last Sunday at one mom's home, when I arrived I was holding my mask in my hand, visible, making gestures that I hoped would indicate, "I'm willing to put this on if anyone here wants that." Everyone else was unmasked, shared their vaccination dates, so we remained that way. But each mom who arrived after me went through the same drill - they each came wearing a mask, saw that the rest of us weren't, asked questions about timeline, anyone vulnerable at home, any symptoms. We all asked about hugging. "Are you hugging? Are we hugging?" And we did, though we probably turned our faces at more of an angle than maybe we would've in the past. There's a new routine now - except not quite a routine, because rules at the tire shop are different from the rules at the book store and different from a friend's home, and we can't really be sure of what to expect when we step out. But we know to be careful with each other, which maybe should've been part of the routine all along.

But listen - we had our first in-person board meeting this past Wednesday. This June meeting was the first time this iteration of

the board - who was elected last June - met together around the same table to discuss the work of the church. And we always schedule a two-hour meeting. Which is a long time, especially on zoom, but it's just once a month and there's a lot to do and sometimes we let out early. This past week, in person, we stayed an extra hour. We had some complicated things to talk about, especially figuring out where we fall between the tire shop and the book store, in figuring out our guidelines for in-person gathering, and we'd think we'd made a decision only to have more questions arise a moment later. We stayed an extra hour, and it was so much fun. We did the work, but we talked and we laughed and nobody seemed in a hurry to leave and I think it's because there was something familiar we wanted to rest in and something new, some new energy, some new will, generated by our being together.

I know that's a risky story to tell given that we are, right now, actively recruiting for people to fill open positions on the church board, and I don't in any way think a three-hour meeting will be part of a new normal. There were plenty of times, pre-pandemic, when we met in person and if we were five minutes over we said, no, we're done, we have to go home, this is enough. I just tell this story to say we're in a very particular moment, maybe, where we are more keenly aware of the gift it is to be together, in small groups, with those we love, with those we're connected to, with those we share a commitment with. Together is the home we come from and the new world to which we are journeying now.

But not only together. There are things we have learned, each of us, by this time we have spent on our own, in our homes. There are ways we have come to know our own selves, the needs of our own souls, better. We have been forced to not move our feet very far and so our journeys have been of another sort.

What did you not know about yourself before you were forced to spend so much time by yourself? There are things we have learned collectively, things about the “old normal” that we’ve said we don’t want to return to - injustices that were easy for some of us to ignore, abuses that were allowed to remain hidden, truths in the wider world and truths in our own spirits that we were not attentive to - how have you journeyed with those realities during this time? How have you become a stranger to yourself, gotten reacquainted with yourself, on this journey?

Those answers will be different for all of us. But for all of us, in the strangeness and the journey, there is God’s invitation: go, to yourself; go, for yourself. And come to know that the going you do to yourself, for yourself, will also open you, to and for each other, and to and for the world.

The story says that Abram’s name will be used in blessings, so I’ve written one for us, to share this morning, for this moment in our own reemergence, whatever that might look like for each of us:

May the God of Abram, Abraham -  
the God of Sarai, Sarah -  
the God of all those who accompanied them,  
whose names were not recorded  
but whose footsteps are remembered -  
May you hear that God calling your name also,  
also beckoning you to go, go.  
May you honor what has been.  
May you take each step in gratitude, and with courage.  
May your journey open up new landscapes of your soul,  
so that you might always be becoming more fully, more deeply,  
more assuredly, more proudly, who you are.  
May you know the God who sends you  
also with you along the way,  
unfolding before you each day  
the simple beauty, the exquisite wonder, of your own life. Amen.