

# THE PROMISE

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Wednesday, August 14, 2019

Scripture: [Genesis 15:1–6](#)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

Today, we'll hear from the early stories of our faith through Abraham in the Book of Genesis. Abraham who we so strongly associate with the people of Israel, who we need to remember was actually from Ur, a place that would probably be in modern day Iraq... He was from Ur, until he wasn't. God told him to grab his wife, Sarah, and hit the road. This is actually a little recap of a reading that passed by in Lent this year... but what happens in this story, this story that you can blink and miss it, is pretty huge. It turns out that pretty much Judaism and Christianity and Islam all trace themselves back to this moment. It is a moment of God's promise, even in uncertainty. And, well, I don't know about you, but I have found this whole "being human" story to be partly about learning to live through uncertainty... so maybe there is something here for each of us this day... listen in.

## SERMON

My wife, Julia, and I just had our first *real* vacation in three years due to the schedules of education and church really not lining up very well for that sort of thing. We went to Northern California, where she is originally from, to see some of the sights of her childhood which I had never seen... and to simply rest together... so, again, **thank you**.

It always powerful to go and see where someone is **from** really. There are little things about a landscape and a climate that become part of who we are. In the way of love, there is always discovery in the other, in the one we love... that's part of what makes love powerful. So I was overcome a few times to see those places that helped Julia become Julia.

It also made me think a little about Abraham and Sarah, our ancestors in faith whose whole story starts with them being separated from their land, their identity... and having to go find a new one. Because Abraham heard this:

*'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'* <sup>[1]</sup>

And so he did: Abraham left his family and his land and his home. And everything was different.

So I found myself standing in the hills and the low brush of California, and in the Pacific Ocean, wondering at the ways of life and the Spirit, and that I get to know Julia and that we have the chance to make this landscape home. So very different, but so very blessed. But I know that there were lots of stories, for her family, for her, of how the roads between the two coasts was not always smooth. But everything was different.

Have you ever found yourself on the precipice like this? Standing somewhere that maybe wasn't wonderful, but it wasn't terrible, and staring out at a landscape of uncertainty... and feeling like you are supposed to step out... but... what if not?

I think this is one of the most amazing and difficult human moments. I know there are people who are less risk averse than I am, but still, that moment of self awareness when you launch out... into the unknown. I find in the week before a big trip, the adrenaline starts to pump a little. Most of us have a lot of comfort and autonomy at home... travel or moving even when it's planned and booked: a consumer product that we purchase... is vulnerable. Our schedules become not our own, we rely on strangers to guide us to those things we need like food and shelter. It's not easy.

So have you ever found yourself right before, or mid travel, maybe even more so ... feeling overwhelmed? Maybe, like Abraham, you found yourself wondering if this was such a good idea. Maybe you wanted to ask some questions of whatever or whoever got you into this mess. (I don't know about you, but that sort of confrontation often involves a mirror in my case.)

Because "Abraham believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness..." he and his wife have wandered far from home in a time when you could not just get on a bus or a plane and go back if things didn't work out. Moving or travel makes me anxious, but it will never ever have the finality of the setting out that Abraham and Sarah do. "...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed..." but they won't know it *really* in their lifetime.

I want to sit back and just relish the beauty of Abraham's acceptance... his belief, which was no simple thing, nor a constant thing... there are lots of times after this story when Abraham checks in with God to kind of say, "How we doing on this promise thing, God? Still waiting." I think that's beautiful and important to remember... belief is not thing that exists in the absence of doubt, of questions, of uncertainty... but it is a fuel for hope that can lead us on, even in uncertain times and paths of life.

One other observation from the road in California: it had been a while since I had been good and truly lost... GPS is almost ubiquitous right? My generation, no matter how many times you send us the directions, are just going to type into our phones. But a few times we were out of range... and to simply follow the road ahead because it is ahead... that is an experience we occasionally need reminding of.

Don't let people turn your belief into a test, a thing that you either have or you don't... let belief stay a road... one where the destination is unclear... but the way has been given to your feet in just such a way that you know it yours.

Over and over, the bible reminds us that Abraham's experience, moving from what is known to what is unknown is the life of faith. The Israelites are told, when they enter the promised land to recite along with an offering of first fruits... "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor..."

“Abraham believed the Lord...” is such a fundamental part of our story, that the Apostle Paul will build his whole theology of Jesus on it. Paul uses Abraham as the symbol for what it means to trust in God, and to be transformed by that trust... he should know, he follows Jesus who walked out of comfort, out of home, who called fishermen on the roads of life... and who walked into death itself trusting the power of God. Trusting that even in death, God was showing the path of life.

I hope we are all brave in these ways, that we walk to those places where we feel called, even if it is an uncomfortable journey... That we are on the path of discovery in our own lives and collectively. Even more, I hope we embrace the chance to be a gift to the lives of those who travel these roads: belief, hope, new life. That we realize that the life of faith is always transforming and inviting us to new places and relationship with God, and with others. I heard a speaker, Darnell Moore, who is part of the Movement for Black Lives say recently, "Americans travel so quickly to the edges of our love."

Here's maybe a reminder of our better selves:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”<sup>[2]</sup>

Thanks be to God for Abraham and Sarah, the people from away who would come to define for so many what it meant to be “from God.” Those who sought God’s light and path and left home to find it. Thanks be to God that God’s promises live on, that hospitality pours out of strangers, that new paths lead us into new life.

Just so, our collective compassion should be called out of us when we see our new neighbors who have come so very far seeking promise, seeking an answer to a faith in a life beyond what was. We should see it as righteousness, that boldness. We should seek chances to step out boldly in our lives, and we should meet those who have risked all for new life as if they are our chance to live out the mercy and compassion of God... because they are. What if we believed that the outrageous paths we are called to step out on will lead us to a more whole sense of who we are? Who God is? How we are blessed, and called to be a blessing? And then everything would be different.

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1. Genesis 12:1–3 ↩

2. *The New Colossus* - Emma Lazarus ↩