

So Abram Went

For some reason what I have been reflecting most about this Lenten season is the idea of choices, the choices made by those in Scripture; the choices made by us. Some of this I believe is related to the consequences of recent choices in our political and governmental sectors because those choices do not seem to me to be those which are in line with my personal understanding of how I am called to be and do in this world according to the scriptural heritage that we have. Many of the choices evident in both Scripture and current events seem to emphasize the broken nature of our world. Last week we read from Genesis about Adam and Eve's encounter with the talking serpent and from Matthew about Jesus' encounter with the Tempter in the desert. Whatever else you may say about these encounters, from our historical vantage point it seems Adam and Eve chose disobedience while Jesus chose obedience. The descriptions were of two extremes of possibilities, yes or no answers, issues seen in black and white. Our reading from Genesis today also involves a choice although we don't often think about the context in which this choice was presented to Abram. We often see this as an amazing act of faith, but spend little time on the events leading up to this invitation given to Abram. Genesis has recorded about many things about humanity's activities since last week's readings in Chapters 2 and 3, and most of it has been bad. Repeated efforts by God to mend the human tendency to wickedness have failed. This story of Abram and his call form a fundamental piece of both Jewish and Christian traditions and beliefs about God and God's relationship to humanity. Up until chapter 11, the story seems to be about all of humanity. With chapter 11 the focus begins to narrow—at least that is our usual understanding of it—it becomes about the descendants of this one man—Abram and the choice he made to answer God's call. The first verse from our passage today was that call: "Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." That sentence usually gets most of our attention—but the context of that sentence is interesting also. After a brief description of the fallout from the building of the Tower of Babel we get a genealogy that begins with a son of Noah. This genealogy follows one son of each generation until it reaches Terah, the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Except for the age of the father at the birth of the first son and the numbers of other children—no other information is provided. When we get to Terah, we find that his home was Ur in the land of the Chaldeans. Although no reason is given for it, Terah actually begins the migration of this family to the land of Caanan but the family stops in Haran. What we are told about Terah is that he has lost one son to death but he takes his grandson Lot, one son Abram and his wife Sari who is barren and leaves Ur. One son is left behind, Nahor, is left behind. This is all the information we have about Abram before the verse which opens our passage. We are told nothing of their character, righteous or otherwise. We are not told anything about their faithfulness—or even whether or not they believed in God. We hear nothing about Abram praying to God or seeking after God. There is no introduction in the story whatsoever between these two characters. There is no indication that this is not the very first encounter. It is as if the Divine walked up to Abram as he went about his daily life, and out of the blue, tapped him on the shoulder and announced, "Have I got a deal for you." The first point that this narrative tells us is that God

doesn't give up on us. Through all of these first chapters of the story of God's interactions with humans—God provides for them—even clothing them as they are evicted from the Garden, protecting Cain with a mark, saving one family from the flood. Yet again and again the people mess things up. At the Tower of Babel what they want is to make a name for themselves so God scatters them and confuses their language. Here in this passage we again have a new beginning offered with the promise of blessings to come. “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land 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.’” Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden; Abram is invited to begin a journey to an unnamed land. The people who built the tower were out to make a name for themselves, here God is promising to make Abram’s name great. A major difference is in this case it is God who initiates the action—God calls Abram to leave not as a punishment, but as a way to receive blessings. There is nothing in the Genesis story which tells us that Abram had a relationship with God before this offer. We are told why Noah and his family were told to build the ark—it was because God saw that Noah was a righteous man. We infer that this meant that Noah lived in a certain way, but since this was long before Mount Sinai and the commandments, we don't know what that said about Noah's way of life—except amidst all the “wickedness” Noah was different. But just as there is not mention of Abram praying or seeking after God, there is no mention in this narrative about Abram's lifestyle being any different from those around him. We are not told why God chose to seek out Abram and offer this deal to him. Like the way God never ceases to be in relationship with humanity, those chosen by God to play crucial roles in the relationship do not seem to be extraordinarily suited for those roles. Abram was an ordinary man; not one who had achieved extraordinary things. As was customary, he lived “in his father’s tent with his wife and traveled with his father and brothers according to his father’s will. There are no descriptions of any outstanding character traits or achievements by Abram; nothing about how smart he is or how good of a guy he is. Frankly, Abram was nobody and anybody at the same time until God chose him. He has not done anything to deserve this blessing that fall so him. And this is the point that Paul is making to those he is writing to in the letter to the Romans. Abram who became the founder and father of the nation of Israel according to the promise made to him by God was not made the father of the nation because of anything that he was...but by the fact the God chose him to offer a blessing. God chose a middle aged couple who had no children to form the nation through which all the world would be blessed. God said, “I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.” God chose to transform the world, to build a great nation that will lead all the nations to God, by starting with this one seemingly insignificant middle aged couple. God chose them before the Law was given. God chose him and he responded in faith, took his barren wife and nephew and all that they had and left all that they knew. The whole history of the nation of Israel hinges on that response given in verse 4...And so he went, as the Lord had told him. The offer first given to Abram was very vague...get up and go to a land I will show you. For whatever reason, Abram trusted God to fulfill that promise. Paul wants all to whom he brings the good news of Christ to appreciate that what is available to them through Christ is a free gift, not something they have earned or deserve. The gift of blessing is a life of meaning and purpose; a life into which love flows and out of which love flows; a life lived at peace with God. There is a disturbing element to this good news: that it is just that--a free gift. We live in a

world that often assumes the life of blessings comes from what is earned, what is deserved, achievements that have been worked for. But Paul tells his Roman readers that they would not find the peace of God in fulfilling any set of rules. He told them they would find it in the same way father Abraham found it—by trust in God. That Abram and Sari's trusting in the promise led them beyond all that they knew. It also led them into a deep and abiding relationship with the divine. The turning point of the entire Hebrew Scriptures is that trust of Abram and Sari in God's promise for their lives and their venturing out beyond what they knew. "So Abram went," are three words that changed the world. Those two ordinary people, perhaps not even all that faithful, began an arc of salvation history with that choice that led all the way to Jesus and to us today. Abram and Sari set out on a journey, not knowing where they were going. Their journey seemed to be full of aimless wandering; full of ups and downs. But through it all, they were not alone; God was with them. They had reminders of God's presence with them along the way. God was their navigation system. Blessing in this story is found in God's presence with them: God's guidance, comfort, wisdom, and strength. Abram and Sari do not bless themselves or cause themselves to be blessed—they find blessings from God in their journey. We get confused about this word blessing because too often we associate it with material wealth and possessions. We refer to our possessions as blessings, the things we obtain through money and achievements. But blessings are not what we provide for ourselves. True blessings come from God and the strength of the Holy Spirit which guides us. To be blessed is to follow God on the journey, trusting in God through the twists and turns that life will take. Blessings are found, discovered, and sought after when things seem unclear and we can't find the way forward on our own. When we allow ourselves to set out beyond what is familiar and comfortable using God as our navigation system we may discover the true blessings of God that surround us and help us find the way into closer relationship with the one who loves us so. That is the choice given to us: to choose to trust in God's promise and gift and live into the people claimed by God. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.