

Genesis 12:1-5
“No Map, Just Me, Now Go”
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
9-7-14

This morning, we are beginning a new series of messages on a subject that I believe is critical to this community at this very time in our life. This fall, we will look at the subject of faith, and the stories of God’s people that show us what faith looks like. For those of us who are already people who follow Jesus, we will be challenged to go deeper, to know God better, and trust God into new depths of life with him. And for those of us who are unsure or not yet believers, each week there will be a challenge to take some next steps. But all of us will be, in one way or another, challenged to grow together, and take a leap of faith—to hear God’s call and go where God leads.

In this series, we are going to look at how God speaks to ordinary people and invites them to do extraordinary things. People who hear God and trust God enough to take the next step, or to leap even though the outcome is unclear.

I think we know something about that. Not only do we have people in our community who have made great leaps in faith, all of you have taken steps in faith in learning new ways of worshipping God, in stepping forward into a new day for WPC. For those of you who have made this your home for many years, that is a challenging thing. For those of you who are new and who are looking at becoming more involved, you are also taking a leap of faith. You are coming to a church that has a history, a personality, but is moving into a new era in its existence—and we need your creativity, your energy, your skills in becoming the Church Christ envisions for a new day.

So each week, we are going to look at this theme of faith through the lens of ordinary people. We are going to look at stories of how God comes to regular people and invites them to extraordinary acts of trust. Stories where God gives them a clear next step, but steps 2, 3 are unclear, but because they have decided to trust God, they go.

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. And 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 him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan.

Sometime around 2100 B.C., the God of the Universe appeared to a man living in the city of Ur and said, “I want you to trust me. Pull up stakes. Leave where you are, and go to

the land I will show you.” And without even asking where this land was, Abram went off and became a vagabond for God.

Historian Thomas Cahill in his book *The Gifts of the Jews* argues that this encounter between God and Abraham might be the most important moment in the history of civilization, because, he says, in that moment the idea of a future was born. Up to that point in time, the world had been ruled by ancient myths, which said natural catastrophes like floods and famines and earthquakes and droughts happened as fallout from battles among the gods. And so humans, living among those feuding gods and having very little stability, began worshipping the dependable patterns and cycles of nature – the orbits of the sun and moon and the stars, and the seasons of planting and growth and harvest. In fact, Abraham’s own city of Ur was dedicated to the cycles of the moon.

But now, suddenly there appeared on the human scene the very God who created the sun, moon, and stars, who said, “There are no other gods out here, only me. Your life is not locked in a holding pattern; you’re not in a squirrel cage. I’m giving you a future, a calling, a destiny. Life is a journey with me. If you go to the land I show you, I will bless you. I will give you children; I will make your name great.” Cahill says the next phrase in Hebrew, *wayyelekh Avram* – “Abraham went” – are two of the boldest words in all of literature. For in that moment, Abraham defined the nature of faith as leaving where you are and going someplace you’ve never been before.

I don’t think there’s a better metaphor for Abraham than that of a trapeze artist. Swinging through the air, she lets go, does a death-defying tumble in mid air, and then have the faith to know that she’ll be caught by her wrists by the one on the other side.

The Stages of Faith: Letting Go

First, you have to let go and say “so-long” to safety and security. The more you have to hold on to, the harder it is to let go. God said, “Abraham, go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

All without knowing where they were going. We tend to think it’s not a big deal because we think of Abraham as just this old desert rat living under a rock somewhere. Yet the 20th century excavations of the city of Ur showed it to be one of the most sophisticated and powerful cities in the world at that time. Abraham was wealthy. The name of his wife, Sarah, means “princess.” They had a great life which they let go of to set off on a journey to who knows where.

Uncertainty is scary. But uncertainty, when you think about it, is what makes the best things in life possible. Like love, for example.

[Story of asking Amy out on a first date.]

The Stages of Faith: Mid-Air

In the coming weeks or months, could there be forces that pry your fingers loose from the trapeze? Some might be expected: a new job, a marriage, the birth of a child, an empty

nest, or retirement. Some could be unexpected: an illness, loss of a job, a move, a family crisis, a death.

Then suddenly, we're in stage two: in midair. Maybe some of you this morning are between trapezes. What's amazing about Abraham is he chose this. He let go out of love for God.

Time Magazine once said Michael Jordan was the only player in the history of the game who would go up into the air not knowing what he was going to do with the ball until he got there. Say hello to Air Abraham, not holding on to any plan or blueprint or proofs or even reasons. God does not submit to us a proposal outlining the logical reasons why we ought to do what he calls us to do. So what does he give us as we hang in midair?

I will tell you: promises. God makes promise after promise after promise to Abraham. Seven times, God says, "Abraham, I will. I will." "I will give you a child." "I will make you a great nation." "I will bless you." "I will make your name great." "I will bless those who bless you." "Whoever curses you I will curse." "I will give your children the land." "Not only will I bless you, Abraham, but through you I am going to bless the whole world, if you go, if you trust me."

Does Abraham do that? Well, yes and no. Along the way, we discover a creepy side to Abraham. Apparently, Sarah was a real stunner, and passing through Egypt she caught Pharaoh's eye. Abraham thought, "There's no telling what this guy might do to me." So he said, "Sarah, for now let's just say you and I are sister and brother, just to be on the safe side, so Pharaoh doesn't kill me to have you in his harem." Then when Pharaoh showed up, Abraham said, "Take her; she's yours." This was not husband-of-the-year material. Later Pharaoh found out just in time and he was appalled by what a sleazebag Abraham was.

Then later, after years of waiting and waiting, finally in despair Sarah said, "Abraham, I don't think it's going to happen in any other way. Why don't you get together with my servant girl Hagar and have a child with her?" Abraham was very compliant with that request.

Caught by God

Yet we read that, however imperfectly, Abraham "believed God." In fits and starts, day by day, he discovered God's plan by going, not knowing.

So even if you have crashed again and again, as we all have, this morning you're throwing your whole self into thin air, trusting that God's timing is perfect and his hands are sure and in the final moment of that crazy mid-air journey, he will catch you, just as he did Jesus when on the cross: "breathing his last, he prayed, 'Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.'"

Our spirit lands in God's hands when we trust Jesus. Now, can we prove beyond the shadow of any doubt that Jesus rose from the dead and is now Lord of all? There's no

footage of the stone rolling back Easter morning that we can freeze and rewind and stop and examine. Proof is not available.

Oswald Chambers wrote, “Certainty is the mark of the commonsense life. *Gracious uncertainty* is the mark of the spiritual life. To be certain of God means that we are uncertain in all our ways, not knowing what tomorrow may bring. We are uncertain of the next step, but we are certain of God. As soon as we abandon ourselves to God and do the task he has placed closest to us, He begins to fill our lives with surprises. We are not uncertain of God, just uncertain of what He is going to do next. Leave everything to Him and it will be gloriously and graciously uncertain how He will come in but you can be certain that He will come.”

Abraham is the father of faith. What is faith? As a boy in a Sunday School was heard to say, FAITH—Forsaking ALL I Trust Him. Someone once defined faith as “paranoia in reverse” – crazy, irrational trust, a total commitment based on limited information.

So what are we going to do with the information we have in front of us? Jesus called Matthew, a union tax collector with benefits and a 401k, to come and follow him. Why did he call him? Because Jesus’ followers would be responsible for bringing others to this man, the God of the universe, who alone could give their lives meaning, and who alone holds claim over their lives and ours. Jesus is inviting you and me, even today, not to respectable civility, not to live nice polite middle-class lives. Jesus calls his followers to lay it all on the line for the sake of the lost, the lonely, and the brokenhearted. There is a world right here in Wabash that is utterly lost, wandering around aimlessly in the dark, and you, Jesus said, are salt and light. This church has the capacity to transform culture, to shape a community, but it means stepping out from our safe places and choosing to trust.

In just a few minutes, we are going to sit down for lunch and eat some really wonderful food. But church services and pot lucks are not why we’re planted here as a community. I want to give you an assignment while you’re eating. At your table with those whom you’re eating, I want you to answer this question: How is Jesus inviting WPC to step away from our safe place to love God daringly?

Do not waste your life waiting around for proof, or milling around with the questions. For in the end, life will have passed you by—as it does so many people. What you’re really looking for is trust wisely placed in the person of Jesus Christ. That’s what our world is looking for whether it knows it or not.

God’s story is in front of us; the invitation is there. You have heard what God will do, you have heard what God has done. But it is so easy for us walk about through our lives, in the safety of the sidelines, never fully realizing the dream God has for this church. The time has come, the moment is now before us, and the decision is ours, Wabash Pres. God has said, “I will.” I will make you great, I will increase you, I will overflow your storehouses. I will. The question now is, will you? The time of watching from the sidelines has come and gone, the time has come for you step forward in faith into what

God is doing. Wabash Presbyterian, awake and stand, and become the community of God and the force of nature that is Christ's Church. Wabash Presbyterian Church, I ask, will you stand and become great? Will you stand? If so stand with me and sing the chorus of "The Stand" with me again.