

Abraham's Journey:
just when you thought life was good

Maybe it's because I was an IBM kid and got dragged around the country a lot as a kid, but I've always felt kind of sorry for Abraham, being sent off to wander around the Middle East for 25 years before being allowed to put down roots again. And the thing is, it really didn't seem necessary. If God had consulted with an organizational management person and said that what he was looking to do was start up a brand new kind of nation with a whole new form of government and economy and constitution, and the place he had in mind was on this little strip of land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, I can't imagine that the consultant would come back to him to say that the very first thing God should do is go get an old guy with a lot of livestock and some family baggage and no nation-building experience, and who, by the way, lives hundreds of miles away and bring him over to get the project started. If Abram was the guy God was sure he wanted, fine, but then this new territory should be where Abram is already living, the land he already knows like the back of his hand. OR, if it was the actual land God was dead set on, which, frankly, was no Garden of Eden, then God should pick out one of the people already living there and make him the father of this new nation.

But efficiency clearly wasn't a priority for God, so the fact that he didn't go that route must be important. He must have dragged Abram around for 25 years for a reason.

There's something else I find interesting. God seems to go for maximum discomfort – God picks out a guy who lived a full day's drive away, uproots him and his entire household from everything that is familiar and comfortable and safe, and sends them off – with no map, no time table, not even a destination. *I'll let you know when you get there*, which ends up being a quarter of a century later. God also gives him one little, highly unlikely tidbit of hope to hold on to – *you and your wife will have a son* – and then nothing, for ten, fifteen, eighteen, twenty-five years. It's like God gives him a seemingly impossible mission, a certainly impossible promise, and then leaves him hanging for years.

But... he lets him take all his stuff. ALL his stuff. The writer of Genesis makes a pretty big deal of the fact that Abram was quite well off and had a really good thing going for himself in Haran. He had land, he had a boatload of every imaginable kind of livestock, he had gold, silver, and... a wife who was apparently pretty hot for an old gal, such a looker that he was afraid Pharaoh was going to want her for his very own the minute he laid eyes on her. In Job's big encounter with God he didn't fare so well – God took his health, his children, all his animals. But Abram, he got to keep all that and even take it with him. Again, there must have been a reason, and my guess is that it wasn't just because God was being nice; giving him a consolation prize for having to give everything else up.

Here is what I think. God gave Abram a mission – go be the father of a new nation, a new people, through whom I will bless all the peoples of the world. But God also set Abram adrift, didn't he? Strange that you can be in both places at the same time, isn't it – pursuing a purpose, a mission, and yet stuck? Sent on a journey, but without a map or a motor? But that's where Abram was. For a very, very long time, Abram drifted, unmoored between one life and the other. God cut him loose from most of what gave him comfort and security and peace, from

nearly everything that made him feel safe and grounded. Maybe you've found yourself in a place like that before. No place to call 'home' either literally or metaphorically. Without the security of familiar, old ways, or family. Maybe, like Abram, you've had promises and hopes, hints of a future life, but nothing in concrete. The only thing Abram had in abundance all those years, besides precious metals and livestock, was uncertainty.

But it was a necessary time. Just because he was adrift doesn't mean his wandering was aimless, purposeless. All those years weren't just transit, moving time. This was a time of 'becoming' for him. Abram was becoming Abraham. A new person to become the father of a new nation. A re-formed person. He wasn't just leaving behind his homeland and the ranch and his old familiar haunts. He was leaving behind old ways of being, and believing. He was leaving behind an old identity, one that he had chosen, or maybe one that someone else had chosen for him, and he was taking on the name and the identity God had given him.

And as any of you who have ever been plucked out of a familiar, comfortable, safe place in life and set adrift know, it wasn't an easy time for Abraham.

It was a time of testing (and a lot of failures). God had made a covenant with Abram, a promise: a land and a family; blessing. God's abiding presence with him. Could Abram trust God? Could he trust that God would see him safely to the other side? Could he learn to trust God rather than his own wits and resources? He didn't do so well to begin with, trying to save his own hide with lies and subterfuge, and then taking matters into his own hands when his wife hadn't produced an heir in what he thought was a timely manner. And remember all that stuff God let him keep and take along? The precious metals, the wealth of livestock? I have an idea that it was all a part of the test. Sometimes, when you find yourself bobbing along, adrift, wondering if or when you will make it back to safe, solid ground, you hang on for dear life to the things you think might save you. But eventually, hopefully, it dawns on you that whatever it was you thought was so important wasn't a life jacket, it was a burden, a weight that threatens to drag you down if you don't let go. God lets you bring it along, at least for a while, because it serves a purpose, it makes you ask the hard questions: What is your God? Who is your God? What do you love most? Abram trusted God enough to pick up and leave home. Abraham trusted God enough to do the unimaginable, he trusted God with the life of his son.

It was a time for Abram to learn that God could, in fact, do anything. That nothing was too wonderful or impossible for God. Maybe that was an easier thing to learn back then, before the Age of Reason and enlightenment, I don't know, but I can't see that Abraham had any easier a time believing Sarah would have a baby at 75 or 100 than we have believing that God will get us through the ravages of grief, or that, if we are doing the work of the church that God has given us to do, then the financial resources will be there to accomplish it. We demand miracles to heal our loved ones, but then can't bring ourselves to believe that God can and will keep us from being consumed by the stress and pressure of life. Build an entire nation out of one childless centenarian? Impossible for you, or me, or modern science. But not for God. Give you a sense of purpose and joy in life again? Re-build our WNL program as a community outreach? Nothing is too wonderful or difficult for God.

There was one other thing that happened to Abram during his 25-year journey – he learned compassion; he learned what it was like to be a stranger and sojourner, to be hungry, and need the hospitality of strangers. Seems like a strange thing for him to need to learn, doesn't it? But Abraham wasn't going to be the father of just any nation. God chose him to be the father of a nation that had as its very constitutional basis justice, and hospitality to strangers, a place at the table always set for someone who needed food, or a place to sleep. It had to be a terrible place for him to be sometimes, hungry and uncomfortable and humbled, but those are the times that shape us into God's people, aren't they? Those are the times that prepare us for the work that God has for us later. At the time it feels like you have lost your way on the journey, but later, sometimes years later, when you look back at the path you've been on and you can see God's footprints there with you; it wasn't an easy time, but you were someplace you needed to be to be ready for the work God had given you.

I'm not smart enough to know whether every difficult time in our life is a path that God has put us on, or put us on for a reason, but I do believe that we are more likely to grow when we find ourselves in the crucible, and that there are times when God sends us on a journey of uncertainty and hardship as a way of pruning and re-forming us; God takes away much of what gave us a sense of identity and belonging and security and seems to set us adrift, throws us into the deep end of the pool. Episcopal priest and spiritual director, Martin Smith refers to these times in our journeys as a time when the Holy Spirit is at work in us, stripping away all of the "insulation and barriers that separate us from living in God's reality." The point isn't to turn us into better people. It's to help us become God's people, and to equip us to do God's work.

Every one of us is on a journey, from who we once were, to who God created us to be, and there will be times when the journey isn't one we would have chosen for ourselves. But trust that it is a time when God is at work in you. Offer yourself up to the work of the Spirit, and the faithful hands that promise you blessing and life.