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Lesson: Genesis 12:1-9, Romans 4:13-25

¹The Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I 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.” ⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. ⁹And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Other than their years in college, both of my parents had spent their whole lives in the Mid-Ohio Valley region, which has the neighboring cities of Parkersburg, WV and Marietta, OH at its hub. I was eight years old when they sat me and my brother down to say our family was leaving the Mid-Ohio Valley because my dad’s job was being transferred to upstate New York. We made the move in the summer of 1989, just a few weeks before my ninth birthday. That summer, I remember my 10 year old brother taking me to the theater to see that summer’s big movies. It was a cool experience – just me and my brother sitting together in those big seats watching PG13 movies – and I realize now my parents likely allowed that so they could use the time to unpack boxes. If you are questioning my parents’ decision, remember: this was the 80s... it was a wild place.

To this day, I still think of 1989 as the best batch of summer movies. There was Michael Keaton in the original Batman, Harrison Ford in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, and Weird Al Yankovic in the movie UHF. Okay, that last one flopped in the midst of all the competition, but my brother and I loved it and it now is a cult classic. As you ponder that summer’s movies, consider this:

a handful of months ago “Weird” was released, which is the award-winning and truth-bending biopic about the life of Al Yankovic, this very week Michael Keaton will return to the screen as Batman in the Flash movie, and in just a couple weeks Harrison Ford will star in the final installment of the Indiana Jones franchise. 1989... it was a wild place. But none of those movies that I mentioned appealed to everyone in our home. So when my parents joined me and my brother at the theater that summer, we went to watch... Field of Dreams.

There is a scene in Field of Dreams where Kevin Costner’s character – Ray Kinsella – mysteriously encounters Doctor Archie “Moonlight” Graham, played by Burt Lancaster in his final film role. In the scene, the elderly Doc Graham recalls how decades earlier he had spent years playing baseball in the minor leagues when finally he was called up to the majors. Moonlight Graham sat the bench for some games, then he was told to take right field in the final inning of the last game of the season. No action came his way during that half-inning, and then the game... and the season... was over. Days later, he was told he would be transferred back to minors. Not willing to face that again, he hung up his mitt to train to be the physician for his hometown, Chisholm, MN. Although Field of Dreams is fictitious, the story of Moonlight Graham is true. After hearing this tale, Ray asks Doc Graham if he had one wish, what would it be. The doctor answers that he had always wished to go to bat – just once – against a major league pitcher, and just before that pitcher winds up, Moonlight Graham would wink at him to throw him off his game. Ray gives a wry smile, for he knows the magic of the baseball diamond he built in the middle of his cornfield. Ray says he thinks he could make that wish come true if only Doc Graham would leave Chisholm and come with him. The doctor declines the invitation, but Ray is insistent. The elderly Doc Graham takes a moment to look out the window at his hometown – where he was raised and where he has spent his career as a physician – and he says to Ray, “This is my most special place in all the world. Once a place touches you like this, the wind never blows so cold again. You hold it like it’s your child. I can’t leave Chisholm. I was born here, I lived here, I’ll die here. And no regrets.”

I imagine that the man known as Abram could have said the exact same thing about that long ago region called Haran in Mesopotamia. Seventy-five years, we are told, is how old he was when Abram heard a message from God say, “Go... to a land that I will show you.” The lack of a clear destination in that command would give me pause. According to Genesis, the very first experience that Abram has with this deity begins with the word “Go.” Leave. Pack your things. Hit

the road. Exit Chisholm. After seventy-five years living in the same place, a voice says, “Go.” “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

Paul writes in our second lesson today that the relationship that Abram has with God is not based on Abram’s obedience to God’s Law, because that Law hasn’t been given yet. Instead, Paul argues, the relationship is dependent on faith, in order that God’s promises will always rest on the grace that God gives. Paul uses this as a prelude to the role of Jesus in our lives. So Paul commends Abram for his faith, going so far as to say that Abram was “unwavering” in his faith, though the Genesis account itself questions how “unwavering” Abram’s faith was. Which is fine, because Abram was human after all. Paul lifts up Abram as an example of faith to make his point, and I’d like to lift up some other people and their faith to make a point. Namely, Abram’s wife Sarai, their nephew Lot, and the nameless people who served their household. I want to lift them up, because – like Abram – none of them had any previous encounters with this deity, and they didn’t hear the command to “Go.” Apparently, their experience was that the seventy-five year old head of their household suddenly tells them, “I heard a voice today, and it told me we need to pack up everything, leave this place we’ve always known, and march into the desert to make our way to a destination that the voice will someday reveal.”

One of my favorite quotes comes from the author Ann Lamott. She says, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.” I am convinced that Sarai, Lot, and the household had their doubts and concerns, and it is quite alright that they had them. I can only imagine the lump in their throats or the sinking feeling in their stomachs when they made those first steps into an unknown future. “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.”

My parents, my brother, and I packed up everything and left everyone we had always known when we moved from the Mid-Ohio Valley to upstate New York. My dad didn’t have much input on whether his job would be transferred elsewhere, but the rest of us certainly had no say in it at all. Over my years, I’ve come to know numerous people who at one point in time – or at several points – made a move that required some faith. Sometimes a person in the family had a sense of calling to a new place, or it was a command by their employer, or some other circumstance. Whatever it was, quite often there are members of the household who – like Sarai, Lot, and the others – must go along for the ride, all while their views, their concerns, and their interests take a back seat to the main character’s story. The adventure of a move is not always exciting for everyone who is involved.

If that is you – whether recently or even decades ago – I want to speak to you and those emotions that you bore and say that God holds you close.

I spent the last few days in Columbia for the South Carolina Synod Assembly, where ELCA rostered leaders like myself and lay voting members from each Lutheran congregation in the synod did our annual business together. Pastor Ginger, Paul and Linda Albright, and Nancy Appel were also a part of the All Saints delegation, and our own Kara Stewart and Pegi Roberts – who are rostered leaders of the ELCA – were also present. During the assembly, we heard many stories of ministries that are taking place throughout the state, including: the refugee resettlement work that many congregations, including All Saints, do through Lutheran Services Carolinas, the organization Neighbors Together that is working in the Charleston area to help families and individuals break out of the bonds of poverty, the Cristo Rey congregation that is doing extraordinary work with the Latino community in the Midlands area. Cristo Rey recently held their first worship service in their new building that Lutherans from across the state helped fund and construct. The list goes on, but here is my point: in so many ministries within our synod, there are people who – like Sarai, Lot, and the others – don't always have much or any voice in the decisions about the physical moves they've made, and often their story goes unheard by others. As one presenter put it, when the church shows them care and it shows them dignity, the church is embodying God's love for them. One thing I love about Synod Assembly is that it always reminds me that the best work and the best ministry is when it is done together. All Saints contributes ten percent of your offering to the work of the synod. That is money that helps people break out of the cycle of poverty. That is money helps people in their recovery from addiction. It helps refugees, and it helps people who simply need to know that there is a God who cares for them and that there is a place at the table for them even though a lot of this world tells these beloved children of God that they are expendable or that the world would be better off without them.

There are people who are hurting, there are people who are filled with doubts, and there are people who simply desire to exist without their dignity being constantly questioned. There are people who fearfully yet faithfully step into an unknown future and who might have little to say about it, and not all of those people are outside of this room. Whatever it is, the God of grace cares for you, and All Saints strives every day to be a community that boldly proclaims God's unconditional welcome, love, and compassion for you through our words and deeds. Amen.