

“The Amazing Journey”
Genesis 12:1-4 & John 3:1-7

Sermon by Jan Edmiston
2nd Sunday of Lent - February 20, 2005

Long ago, when I was young and foolish, I traveled on an overnight train from Brindisi, Italy headed for Lucerne, Switzerland. We had spent the previous night on the floor of the *commissariato di polizia* (the police station). My traveling companions and I had arrived in Brindisi hoping to sail to Greece. But circumstances landed us in the police station instead, with a bunch of drunken Italians who sang “Deep Purple” songs to us through the night. And so we took a detour, traveling on the night train, headed north to the heart of Switzerland where the lake is clear and the air is fresh. We literally kissed the ground when we arrived.

This journey was not merely about seeing the sites. This was the journey that eventually led me to seminary. On those trains, in hostels late into the night, on city streets by day - my friends and I talked about our future and our past. What was the meaning of life, anyway? What were we supposed to do next? Was it possible that God was leading us in a certain direction? Did we even *believe* in God?

Some of you have traveled the world and some have not, but that doesn’t really matter in the big scheme of things. Everyone here has made (and continues to follow) a *spiritual* journey and this is the most amazing journey in all of life.

The spiritual journey – that meandering, bumpy trip that finds us in wind tunnels where the winds blow as they choose, or in chasms where we aren’t sure how we’ll ever climb out, or in the middle of deserts where the sands sting and the throat burns and our eyes tear up – *that* journey determines how contented we are, how calm we are, how grateful we are with the life we’ve led.

What’s the most amazing journey you’ve ever taken? I hope it’s that path from excruciating pain to peace, from debilitating guilt to grace, from emptiness to a profound richness that colors and flavors your life.

One of the gutsiest women I’ve ever known was Frances Partridge. Some of you may remember Frances. She led a very rich life.

She was 75 years old and life-long Missourian. She had lived in the same house her entire marriage – for over 50 years. She cooked dinner in a kitchen that her husband had literally crafted by his own hand. Her friends were there. Her grown daughter was there. Her grandchildren were there. Her church was there. She buried her husband there.

But one day, her old friend Bob called her from Virginia and asked what *we* might consider to be an outlandish question: Would she like to move halfway across the country and marry him? He had lost his spouse too. And Frances said, “Sure.”

Now what would possess a person to pick up and move from everything familiar and easy to go to a place where everything would be foreign – from the terrain to the accents to the way people make barbeque? It’s one thing to venture out in your 20s or 30s. It’s quite another to venture out in the later years of life when “staying put” would be so much simpler.

Abram was also 75 years old – a married man with no children – according to today’s lesson. He grew up in “Ur of the Chaldeans” which today we call South Central Iraq. When you see pictures on television about Nasiriya, take a closer look – Nasiriya is very near the place where Abram was born.

Ur was the principal center of worship for the Sumerian and Babylonian moon gods, which we can assume Abram’s family worshipped.

He left Ur with his father, wife, and nephew to settle in Haran - a merchant outpost of Ur (which today is Southern Turkey near the Syrian border). And although Haran was known to be a flat, dry wasteland, Abram’s father made a successful business there. Later verses in Genesis tell us that Abram himself was a very wealthy man – rich in gold, silver, and cattle.¹

But at the age of 75, 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.*

In other words: leave all that is familiar and comfortable and I will lead you to a new place.

We don’t know *how* the LORD said this to Abram. Was it a vision? A dream? A voice in the night? Scripture doesn’t say. But it does say that: *Abram went as the LORD told him.*

One of the common questions pastors are asked is, “How do I know where God is leading me?” and there are a number of answers to that question. There is the gut feeling. There is the voice in the night. Literal voices. Dreamed voices.

I know a former missionary to Chad who lived with his wife and children through plagues, civil wars and extreme poverty – circumstances that would terrify most of us.

¹ Genesis 13:2.

When I asked him how he knew it was time to come home, he said that **God** told him. “How exactly did that work?” I asked him.

And he said, “God made me scared. I had never been scared before, but a day came when suddenly I was scared for my family, and I knew it was time to go home. I’m sure God used my fear to move me.”

We don’t know how *God moved Abram*. But we do know that Abram took a chance on God. And as with any spiritual journey, the road would not be easy. If you continue reading about Abram’s amazing journey, you’ll see that this trip involved heartbreak, misunderstandings, lies, threats of child sacrifice, inspiration, and enormous faith. Abram and Sarai would find that eventually both their hearts and their names would be changed. God would take this childless couple and bless them with a “great nation” of descendants.

We are those descendants along with our Jewish and Muslim neighbors. All of us call Abram the “father of our faith.”

And remember, too, that Abram left not only his homeland; he left the religion of his upbringing – a faith of multiple gods represented by statues and totems. Abram moved from *inherited religion* to *personal faith*.

Nicodemus made this same spiritual journey, but the details are all very different. As a child and throughout most of his adulthood, Nicodemus was a faithful Jew who rose in the ranks and became a leader among the Pharisees. But his faith made an enormous leap one momentous night when Nicodemus *journeyed* from his home in Jerusalem to the place where Jesus was staying.

He had heard Jesus speaking in the temple by day. And – perhaps afraid he would be seen – traveled by night to hear more. He was moved by Jesus’ teaching. He was moved by Jesus’ presence. Eventually, he would be moved by Jesus’ sacrifice. But this process would be slow and steady.

When Jesus started talking about being “born from above” Nicodemus was not so sure he could buy it. *How can anyone be born after having grown old?*

Jesus explained himself with words about water and spirit and the wind. And Nicodemus left that night with another question:

How can these things be?

Nicodemus did not immediately believe. But being born again is a process. It’s a journey.

Just last Friday, my husband was in a bank in Middleburg when he and the teller – woman from India – began to chat. When she learned that he was a Christian minister, she lit up and said, “Oh Pastor, tell me your faith story!”

Fred – aware that there were others in line also wanting service – gave a Cliff Notes version of his conversion story – a rather ordinary chronicle – and hoped to keep the line moving. But the teller then proceeded to tell *her* faith story:

It was March 17, 1978 at 2:00 in the morning. I was lying in a hospital bed in Delhi, deathly ill. And I asked for help. I was calling for a nurse, but it was an angel who helped me. I felt a hand on my shoulder but no one was visibly there. And I began to believe in a different kind of God – a god who could heal me. And I lived.

Maybe you know people like this bank teller who can name the date and time they were “born again.” But in truth, even this teller’s faith has been *a journey*, not just a day.

She has traveled *literally* from Delhi to Middleburg. And she has traveled *spiritually* from Hindu to Christian, and even within Christianity from Baptist to Methodist. She has been moving, moving, seeking the road where faith is found. She has journeyed from inherited *religion* to a personal *faith*. It is the most amazing journey in life. It is also *our* journey.

I believe we are hard-wired for faith in something bigger than ourselves. We come to a place where we realize that we need some divine assistance, some guidance beyond a map. We might find that there’s been a detour in life – we made plans to go in a certain direction, to seek a certain destination but *broken promises* or *broken hearts* or *broken bodies* have forced us to change our course. And so we’ve come here, perhaps, to get back on track, to take the road where faith is found.

Nicodemus left Jesus on this day with a question, but it would not be their last encounter. Later in John’s gospel, Nicodemus found himself defending Jesus in front of his Pharisee friends. They wanted Jesus arrested. They called him a liar. But Nicodemus called for a fair hearing for Jesus.²

And they would have a *third* encounter. At the end of John’s gospel, we can read that Nicodemus paid another visit to Jesus, but this time it was not at night. It was a Friday afternoon. Along with Jesus’ friend Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus took Jesus’ body down from the cross and laid it in a tomb in a garden.³ At long last, he had become a servant of Jesus. He had moved from *inherited religion* to *personal faith*.

Some of us have come through many denominations and traditions. Some of us have come from a place of no religious faith at all. Some of us have remained in one tradition all our lives. But the journey of faith becomes *amazing* when we find ourselves

² John 7:45-52.

³ John 19:38-42.

less interested in the traditions and the rituals of our religion. And we become *more* interested in a personal relationship with this God who leads us. I close with these moving words by Sylvia Dunstan from our second hymn:

*Bless now, O God, the journey that all your people make,
The path through noise and silence, the way of give and take.
The train is found in desert and winds the mountain 'round,
Then leads beside still waters, the road where faith is found.*

May we find our way *back* on the road to faith, through Jesus Christ who calls us in the night, in the morning, on the scariest of afternoons. He calls us, and all he wants us to do is *follow his lead*.

Let us pray: O Lord, everything is not right in or around us. We need a connection to you. We need a little guidance. Speak to us now however you might, and make us adventurous followers. Amen.