

Lenten Journey

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist on the Second Sunday of Lent, 5 March 2023

The readings were: Genesis 12:1-4a (4b-9); Psalm 121; (Romans 4:1-5, 13-17); John 3:1-17



Going on a journey is always significant. When we set out somewhere, we usually know where we're going. We like to plan the details carefully, whether we're just travelling locally, or further afield, or embarking on an adventurous holiday. How exactly we get to our destination, the relevant timetables and connections we may need and, above all, where we're going to stay – we like to have a firm grasp of these things before we set out from home. Google Maps and Street View are indispensable tools for many of us these days. Journeys are daunting if the travel arrangements aren't crystal-clear before we set out.

For innumerable people, however, journeys are unexpected and life-changing events that are beyond careful planning, embarked upon in great uncertainty at times of crisis. We are faced with such stories daily on our news bulletins.

The story of Abraham's journey at God's prompting is familiar to us, so much so that we forget what a monumental event it was for the people involved. Well, we might think, these Biblical people were nomads, and so weren't they used to a life of uncertain wandering? Uncertainty seems so often to be the norm in the Old Testament: the wilderness wanderings following the Exodus; and in the Gospels, the peripatetic ministry of Jesus, who had "nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). We forget that nomadism isn't a lifestyle that comes naturally; most people long for a settled home, a place they can call their own where they'll be safe and secure and where they can begin to prosper; put down roots, enjoy the fruits of their labours and eventually pass on a little wealth and security to their children. And that was as true in Abram's time as it is today in the lives of innumerable refugees and asylum seekers and people who need to find somewhere new and safe to live, whatever the reason.

Genesis 12 tells us that about four thousand years ago a large family left a place in the Middle East called Ur, in the southeast corner of modern Iraq, and settled in Haran, in modern Turkey, on the border with Syria. In Haran, the head of the family died, and his son Abram began to feel very unsettled and to hear voices. Abram believed that God was calling him to move on, and he had no option but to obey. "Leave your country," God told Abraham. "Leave your people and your family. Leave all that you hold dear and familiar. Go to the land I will show you."





So Abram obeyed and discovered that the God whose voice he had heard had unimaginably rich rewards in store for him. Abram set out in faith, defying that inner propensity of human nature to settle down, to work and establish himself and his family where he was; and defying, too, a cultural need for the familiar, simply because he knew deep within himself that his future lay in an *unfamiliar* place where God had promised him a future. Many of us can identify with that feeling of being called to serve God and our neighbours in unfamiliar places.

A call to unknown territory can be exciting; it can also cause anxiety. As Christians we should be prepared for that call to be repeated to each one of us in one form or another. It's a call that begins at baptism. It's a call we heed in faith, knowing that the God of Jesus Christ who calls us into communion and fellowship will never desert us, wherever we decide to go in answer to that call. For the early church, Abraham was the great exemplar of faith. He believed in God's promises and the presence of that God with him on his journey into the unknown, for this was the God who, in Paul's description of the God of Abraham, "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." (Romans 4:17). God gave him an heir when he was as good as dead, making him the father of all who share his faith.

Abram headed into the unknown, relinquished control and chose to live with confidence in God's promise to bless him in a new and strange place. Nicodemus, too, responded to an inner prompting of the Spirit, although this meant breaking with the familiar – and he did so with some trepidation, for he went to see Jesus under cover of darkness. He and certain others (for he uses the plural "we")

were certain of one thing: that Jesus was "a teacher who had come from God"; all the signs proclaimed that certainty. But Nicodemus needed courage to venture into the unknown and hear the message about being born again in the Holy Spirit and the water of baptism. The life of Nicodemus was changed by his encounter with Jesus; he evidently became a disciple, for after one other brief appearance in John 7 to argue against the chief priests and Pharisees in defence of Jesus' right to a fair trial, he reappears in the gospel on the day of the crucifixion, to assist Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39–42). Our journeys of faith transform us, leading us to discover a much bigger, broader vision of that universal community of God's people that exists way beyond the immediately familiar.

The popular spiritual writer Henri Nouwen wrote a book called *Reaching Out* in which he described the inner journey from a place of lonely self-sufficiency to a place where we acknowledge our self as loved by God and where we can be more open to others and welcome them into our lives in the spirit of Christ. So many people live in an oppressive loneliness today, unable to reach out to others, except perhaps from the distant safety of a computer keyboard, although it also takes courage and determination to venture into the uncertain territory of social media where we can feel very vulnerable. As we have grown as Christians, we have come to see that we are each part of a community that values us as individuals, that strengthens and affirms us, and we have become less afraid of the unknown and can reach out to others in greater confidence. Our reaching out to God in prayer will take place within our community of faith, and





God's call to us will always be within the wider church in which we are rooted. Because of this rootedness in faith, we'll never really be called into the unknown, if by the unknown we mean a place where God is absent or we're no longer following Jesus. Wherever we go, we go in faith that the Lord is with us.

So, during Lent, let us think about those risky journeys of Abraham and Nicodemus and of Jesus himself, and about what journeying might mean to each of us. What are the comforts you would need to think about renouncing, if you believed God was calling you to take a step into the unknown? These might be material things such as home comforts; or they might be favourite plans that don't necessarily include God; or they might be attitudes of mind that put self before discipleship. Whichever category *your* sacrifice comes under, it won't be comfortable, but you *will* be listening for a call to a greater purpose beyond that sacrifice. The present may be darkness, but faith keeps us steady and teaches us patience. And the future holds promises beyond our imaginings.

So, as we make our personal journey of discipleship through Lent, let us empty our hearts and minds of all that distracts us, so that we can, in the words of Henri Nouwen, "prepare in the centre of our innermost being the home for the God who wants to dwell in us. Then we can say with St Paul, 'I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20)."¹ And in this we'll have a safe home while we are still on the way. Amen.

Our picture by Aram Sabah is a slightly cropped version of the one made available on the Unsplash platform at <https://tinyurl.com/4d52n79y>

¹ H. Nouwen (1998). *Reaching Out*, p.114