

Second Sunday in Lent - March 5, 2023

Genesis 12:1-4a

1 The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's home, and go to a land that I am going to show you. 2 I will give you many descendants, and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, But I will curse those who curse you. And through you I will bless all the nations." 4 When Abram was seventy-five years old, he started out from Haran, as the Lord had told him to do.

John 3:1-17

1 There was a Jewish leader named Nicodemus, who belonged to the party of the Pharisees. 2 One night he went to Jesus and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him." 3 Jesus answered, "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again." 4 "How can a grown man be born again?" Nicodemus asked. "He certainly cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time!" 5 "I am telling you the truth," replied Jesus, "that no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. 6 A person is born physically of human parents, but is born spiritually of the Spirit. 7 Do not be surprised because I tell you that you must all be born again. 8 The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 "How can this be?" asked Nicodemus. 10 Jesus answered, "You are a great teacher in Israel, and you don't know this? 11 I am telling you the truth: we speak of what we know and report what we have seen, yet none of you is willing to accept our message. 12 You do not believe me when I tell you about the things of this world; how will you ever believe me, then, when I tell you about the things of heaven? 13 And no one has ever gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from heaven." 14 As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 16 For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour.

Focus: Responding to God's call

Function: To encourage listeners to discern and actively respond to God's call.

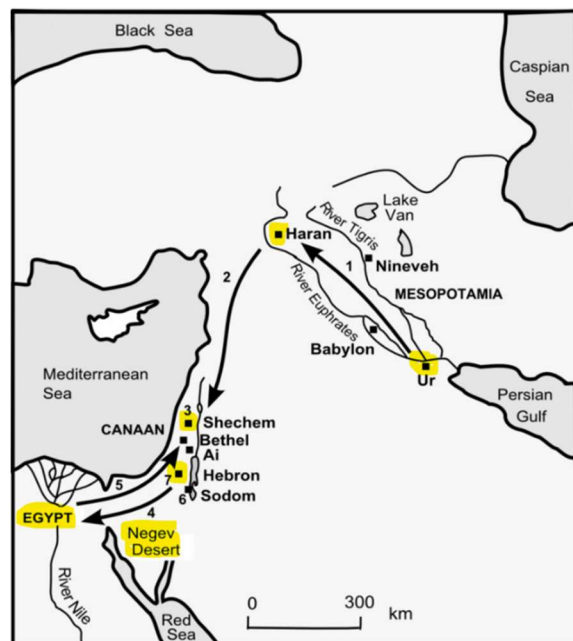
I remember when I was 35 years old, working as a mechanical engineer in Singapore, every work day was busy and stressful, so I told myself that I would like to retire at 45. Strange enough, one day, Alice and I were inspired to migrate to Melbourne, so we did that when I was 38 thinking that I could retire there. It was the time of economic recession in Singapore when our skilled migration visa was approved. Despite both of us having good and secured jobs, we daringly dropped everything and migrated for a fresh start in a strange land. Soon after, God brought us to Gospel Hall Uniting Church in the city, and we started theological studies at Whitley College when I was 45, and I began lay ministry at 47. And now, here I am, starting ordained ministry at 57, and retirement seems to be nowhere in sight.

As we enter the second week of Lent, we continue to journey with Christ, remembering the life and ministry of Jesus and renewing our commitment to him in Christian discipleship. And as I ponder on the lectionary readings chosen for today, the reading on Genesis 12 which tells the story of Abram being called to uproot all that he had and to leave his home for a new place resonated with me. Abram’s journey reminds me of my own, and his conviction encourages me in my current journey. So let us explore and reflect upon what Abram had done.

How much do we know about Abram in the first place?

Chapters 10 and 11 of Genesis list down a long genealogy from Noah’s son, Shem, to Terah, the father of Abram. Abram had two brothers, Nahor (who married Milcah) and Haran, who died young in the city of Ur in Babylonia and survived by a son, Lot. Abram married Sarai, who was barren.

Subsequently, Terah left the city of Ur with Abram, Sarai and Lot to go to the land of Canaan, but somehow they went only as far as the place called Haran and settled there. Years later, Terah died in Haran and was buried there. That’s all that we could know about Abram before God called him. We do not know anything about his life in Haran nor how he built up his wealth, but chapter 12 verse 5 tells us that he and his nephew Lot left Haran with the wealth and servants they had acquired there.



In other words, Abram may be considered doing exceedingly well in Haran by anyone's standard.

Then one day after his father's passing, Abram heard God calling him to leave his country, his relatives and father's house for a place God would show him. Where exactly was not revealed; all he knew was God would show him when he arrived. By our standard, Abram is considered elderly at 75 years old; he should be well in his retirement, enjoying the fruit of his labour at a younger age. And yet, he readily gathered all that he possessed, his wealth of servants and animals, and left Haran with his wife Sarai and nephew Lot.

Putting myself in his shoes (or his sandals), I can't help but wonder why Abram had actively responded to God's call to migrate. Undoubtedly, if Abram were moving into a retirement village that we have here in Melbourne, with good recreation facilities and activities and community, that would be delightful. Or perhaps, like most nowadays Aussies who desire a sea change or tree change such that they would migrate to be near the coast or more inland, was Abram looking for a wilderness change?

In reading the rest of Genesis 12 and 13, Abram's journey wasn't straightforwardly easy. After leaving Haran with his household, servants and animals, he eventually reached Shechem in Canaan. There and then, God revealed to him, saying, "This is the country that I am going to give to your descendants." However, it was occupied by hostile Canaanites, not yet the destination for him to settle down, so southward he went. He moved from place to place in the southern part of Canaan, which is a vast wilderness. Just imagine Abram doing that, bringing his family, servants and animals, he moved around in the wilderness. Then a famine broke out, and he was compelled to escape to Egypt. He returned to the land of Canaan after a significant period of living in Egypt and finally settled down at Hebron. What a journey he had taken!

So what was Abram's motivation to migrate, I wonder? Perhaps like me, he was looking for a fresh start but doing that at 75, he must have had tremendous confidence. But I am convinced that Abram migrated with the hope that God would bless him with many descendants, and they would become a great nation, and all nations would be blessed through him.

Considering that Abram was already 75 years old when he left Haran, so if you were also called at this prime age to start afresh somewhere, or take up a new role in the church or the community, how would you have responded? Would you readily say YES? What would be your motivations, I wonder?

What character traits has Abram exhibited that could be encouragements for us to do the same in responding to God's call, I wonder?

Firstly, Abram's prompt response to God's call struck me. His immediate response upon hearing God's message reveals to me that his relationship with God is close, and God's voice is familiar and distinctive to him such that his discernment of God's will is straightforward.

In addition, after knowing God's will, Abram responded in full obedience. Without knowing the destination, Abram followed God's call to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's home, and go – keep moving until he arrived at the land where God would show him. And he was ready to step out of his comfort zone and sense of security to face any challenges as he answered this call to leave Haran for the unknown, surely with lots of uncertainty.

Truly, Abram's trust is not in himself or his abilities but in God. Surely, God knows what is the best! When he reached Shechem and heard God promising him that this land would be given to his descendants, he could have immediately jumped to the conclusion to settle down there. Moreover, in those days, Canaan was known to be a land flowing with milk and honey, hence making it the perfect place to settle down in. Nevertheless, there was no indication from God for him to do so, so after building an altar to worship God, he carried on the journey southward, towards the wilderness (the Negev).

Abram's willingness to listen to God is obvious. All that God said, he held as true, and he held God's will way higher than his own, and he was willing to follow God wherever He would lead him to. Furthermore, Abram's courage and determination are remarkable. He didn't plan to go alone and try it out first, and when all were settled down, he would then come back for his wife, servants and animals. But instead, he packed everything he owned – things, animals and servants, and along with Sarai and Lot, he left Haran for the unknown. He didn't reserve a plan B for turning back!

Can we say the same about ourselves?

Is our relationship with God close so we know God well enough to recognise his voice when he speaks to us? Through Jesus, we are privileged to have God's Spirit dwelling in us. And the Spirit speaks to our hearts, prompting and guiding us to know and walk God's way. But when we keep focussing on ourselves, our priority will always be on our life's matters that we value as important. God and God's matter will take 2nd or 3rd place, or even no place.

Do we have Abram's faith to simply take God at his word and believe in God's promises? Let us take a short detour to today's Gospel reading. Being a Pharisee, Nicodemus came to Jesus secretly in the night seeking the truth. However, he struggled to comprehend what Jesus taught about the need to be born again, to be born of the Spirit in order to see and enter God's kingdom.

"How could it be? How could a grown person be born again?"

Nicodemus let his intellect govern his mind, and hence, unable to understand the spiritual rebirth that Jesus was pointing out to him. So his faith was choked, and his heart became shut to the truth.

In contrast, Abram's faith in God has shown us that our confidence in actively responding to God's call should not be dependent on our confidence and comfort level with the task we are called to, but believing that God has handpicked us for the task and God will equip us for the role. We just need to have the courage to step out of our comfort zone, to trust God completely in each step we make.

We have many members among us who are well above the age of 75 and have served God and people their whole life. You may or may have retired from active service or ministry to enjoy retirement life, but at the least, you still can respond to God's call to care for people by being with them, listening to them, and praying with them.

Abram's story reminds us today that we are never too old, or too young, and our life can never be too busy, to give God our priority in life, to build a close relationship with God so that we can easily recognise God's voice, heed God's call, and respond in faith, with willingness, obedience and trust.

Abram did it, and with God's help, so can we! Amen.

Benediction:

Just as God's Word was sent into the world
to heal and redeem,
so God sends you into the world this day
to be light and love, healing and hope.
Go now to be light for the world!
And may the grace and peace of God the Creator,
the Redeemer, and the Sustainer
come upon you this day
and remain with you always. Amen.