

Summons to Pilgrimage

The story of the call of Abraham has long impressed itself on my mind and heart. Over the years its images have provided me with important clues about what it means, both for individuals and for institutions, to live as people of faith, and communities of faith. Today, I invite the CRCDS community of faith and learning to join me in probing and pondering this ancient tale.

The story begins with what Fred Buechner calls “a summons to pilgrimage.” “Now 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.’” The call is to leave one place and go to another, to forsake the familiar for the unfamiliar, the known for the unknown, safety for insecurity, the life of a settler for that of a pilgrim.

Belonging, as we do, to this highly mobile society, we may not appreciate what a radical decision it was for Abraham – and Sarah – to undertake such a journey. But, as the Old Testament scholar Von Rad observes, at the time it was highly unusual.

“Throughout the entire story,” he writes, “one must always remember that to leave home and to break ancestral bonds was to expect of ancient men (and women) almost the impossible.”

Yet they went out, as the Book of Hebrews says, not knowing where they were to go, the first of a long and unending line of pilgrims. Abraham and Sarah were given no guarantees as they set out from Haran. To be sure, they were promised a blessing. But a promise is all it was, and how could they be sure that the Maker of the promise was trustworthy? They would discover the answer only in the unfolding of their journey.

To respond to the call of God, as Abraham and Sarah did, involves both renunciation and risk. Renunciation because one is letting go of and leaving behind that which is known and cherished. Risk because the journey could well be perilous, and

chances are will be. Moreover, what was thought to be the promise of God could turn out to be wishful thinking. Yet, it is in just such renunciation and risk-taking that the promise will be fulfilled. Or so our narrative would have us believe: “I will bless you, . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” All of which, of course, is echoed in the invitation of Jesus: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will find it.”

We are told that Abraham was 75 years of age when he received the call to leave Haran, which makes his positive response all the more radical. You will understand when I tell you that I have a new found appreciation for that detail of the story, having myself, at my advanced age, been pried out of the comfortable life of retirement a little over a year ago to come and provide leadership for this institution. But I am not the only one. You students are here because, in one way or another, you, too, have responded to a call, or at least to a nudge, to leave where you have been and “go” who knows where?

We are all in this story, in one way or another. Yet the story is not primarily about us. It is not even primarily about Abraham and Sarah. The story has to do with the One who summons us to embark on a journey, to leave where we are and go to a new place.

I have come to believe that right here, in the beginning of the first book of the Bible, we are being given a clue about the nature of God's own self. It's the image of One who is going somewhere and wants the human family to go along. Here we are given a preview of the God who is on the move, who refuses to be confined to a temple built by human hands, and who tells David, who sought to build such a temple, "since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, . . . I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle." Here, in this old story, we get a glimpse of the One who, by way of the prophet Isaiah will declare, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. . . ." The image of God we are given in the 12th chapter of Genesis is not unlike the one Mark gives us

of Jesus, walking ahead of his disciples who, Mark says, were both “amazed” and “afraid.”

Sometimes I fear that the church has not a clue about this One who summons us to pilgrimage, to leave where we are safe and comfortable and venture into vulnerability. Too often we are like those first disciples: Jesus is up ahead, and we are following far in the rear, afraid and anxious about where the Lord might be leading us. We are stuck in the past, and we think God is, too, when so much of the evidence, in Scripture and out, suggests God is moving on and calling all who have faith to come along.

I once had a colleague who was fond of saying, “two-thirds of the word God is ‘go.’” “Go from your father’s country and your kindred . . . to the land that I will show you.” Such, I believe, is the way of life to which God calls us. And not, I want to say, just individually, but institutionally. Despite all that has happened recently to encourage us – and there has been much - this divinity school is facing many challenges. Perhaps the biggest of all is to discern where God wants us to go. What must we relinquish,

renounce, abandon? What risks, what vulnerabilities, are we being summoned to assume? One of our Trustees has said that we have to decide who we want to be and only then determine what we want to do. I want this morning to reframe the question this way: What does God have in mind for us to be? Where is God calling this venerable school to go?

I ponder and pray about these questions. But they are not questions which the President can or should answer alone. When Abraham left Haran he didn't go alone. He "took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and . . . the persons whom they had acquired in Haran. . . ." It was a community pilgrimage. So, too, it must and will be here. The questions before us are ones with which all of us will need to be engaged, the entire community.

This much I know: re-creating the past is not what God is calling us to do. Nostalgia is for people with time on their hands and nothing to do. We have much to do and time is precious. I do not mean to suggest that we can forget our past or neglect our heritage. We should, by all means, be grateful for the Colgate

Rochester, BMTS, and Crozer traditions and build upon them. But today is not yesterday, and tomorrow surely will not be. There are new demands upon us and new opportunities before us.

“Go from your kindred and your country.” Where we are now is not the place God means for us to stay. I believe there is a new place to which God wants to take us. No doubt the journey from here to there will be risky. But, listen! It is always a risky business to hear what God has to say and to do what God summons God’s people to do.

The place to which Abraham and company were led was called Canaan. The reference is not just to that piece of real estate which lies west of the Jordan River. The reference is not just geographical; it is theological. Canaan stands for that part of the world which has not recognized or submitted to the rule of God – which means, most of it. Canaan is our world of intellectual uncertainty and moral ambiguity. Canaan is Enron and World Com. Canaan is Darfur, Bagdad, Gaza, Somalia, and Beirut. Canaan represents our own urban communities where drug traffic

is rampant, and schools are failing, and every morning brings news of yet another victim of gun violence. Canaan is a society where people are rich in things and poor in soul. And, yes, Canaan is where the quarrels within denominations and congregations mock the prayer of Jesus that his followers will all be one. You know what? Canaan has always been and still is the setting for theological education. Canaan is where ministry happens. Canaan will be the setting for your ministries tomorrow.

Canaan is the place to which Abraham and Sarah and all who accompanied them were led. And mark this: Canaan is where they were not only to receive God's blessing. Canaan is where Abraham, Sarah, and company were to "be a blessing."

What I find significant about this part of the narrative is not only what is said – "you will be a blessing" – but when it is said. Right in the beginning, when God is forming a people who be uniquely God's people, the reason for their formation, their purpose in being, is set forth. They are to be a blessing. And, despite all their subsequent failures to live up it, the people of God

are never permitted to forget their calling. Even when they are at a low ebb, they are not permitted to forget their vocation. Thus, the prophet Jeremiah instructs those who have gone into exile to “seek the welfare of the city” where God has sent them. When, generations later, the exiles are about to return home, an unknown prophet reminds them: “you are the light of the world.” And, to his disciples of every age, Jesus says: “You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.”

Whatever the place to which we are being summoned as an institution, wherever God’s call will take you individually, our vocation is clear. When Abraham and Sarah set out from Haran they don’t know where they will end up. It is “to a land that I will show you,” God tells them. Like them those ancient pilgrims we may not know yet where God wants us to “go.” But we can have no doubt what we are to be whatever the place: “be a blessing” the text says. This institution is to be a blessing – in the greater Rochester community, within the church, to our alums, to all who labor on behalf of the school here on the hill, and most of all, to

you, our students. So it is that we say that the mission of this school is to prepare women and men for ministry that is “pastoral, prophetic, and learned.” So it is that we want your time here to be transformative for you. We want you to receive the blessing of transformation. We want you to leave the hill with the spiritual formation that will enable you to reflect, and even embody, the transformative ministry of Jesus Christ. Our hope is that here you will receive the kind blessing that will inspire and empower you to be a blessing in the land of Canaan. With that high calling before us we welcome the beginning of the spring term of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School.