

THE FAR SIDE OF DOUBT¹
Genesis 12: 1-9
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to a land that I will show you.”

Presumably, God could have created human beings without the ability to make choices. God could have made a world in which the Creator decrees and the creatures simply do as they are told. But God chose to take a gamble, to create human beings with the capacity to make choices, and with the possibility of flouting the will of the Creator. So whenever we make choices about the future, we are in the place of Abram, who, according to a New Testament text, *set out, not knowing where he was going.*²

I

So Abram is not unique. Graduates at commencement, scientists in their labs, teachers in their classrooms, couples making vows of commitment, theologians and philosophers in their thinking, physicians in their examination rooms, lawyers in their arguments– all of them, in one sense, are taking a journey into the unknown. And what about new

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, June 8, 2008.

² Hebrews 11: 8.

parents? There is no way to brief new parents on what the next few decades will be like! We are all explorers of one kind or another, and the destination of our exploration of life is yet to be revealed. All along the way, there will be surprises, and that is especially true for those who teach.

I'll never forget the story Will Willimon told about teaching a summer school class at Duke Divinity School. The class was full of students who were already serving churches as pastor. The topic for the day was effective liturgical leadership, and Willimon was lecturing away on the subject when a burly fellow from West Virginia raised his hand.

–Doc...I had something happen the Sunday before I come down here...I was at the prayer time and so I asked the church, 'Do you have any special prayer needs?'

–A woman raised her hand and said, 'Yeah, I got one. I want you to pray that Mary Jones will stop leading my husband into adultery.' With that, Mary Jones jumped up screaming...and the two of them locked in a fight, pulling and jerking each other all over the church. Their husbands got into it too, one ramming the head of the other into the backside of a pew."

Willimon said that all he could do was to stand frozen at the lectern with his mouth gaping open! The students, to his surprise, sat there taking notes as if nothing bizarre or ecclesiastically odd had been said! Then the burly fellow continued:

–So I came down out of the pulpit, pulled the two women apart, and said, ‘Stop it! Sit yourselves back down. Now, I’m gonna ask one more time. Are there any prayer requests? And I’m gonna see if you can do it right this time. And if you people don’t settle down and act like Christians, I’m gonna bust some heads....They quieted down and we went on with the service. Now Doc, my question is, ‘Would you call that good liturgical leadership?’³

A teacher never knows what questions will arise in a classroom! And the teachers we recognize today are the kind of people who not only expect surprising questions; they relish them! They love inquisitive minds and difficult questions and ideas that stretch the imagination. They are not wedded to one simple answer for every theological issue. They like to grapple with the big questions that are always raised in our classrooms.

II

In the biblical story, Abram was a mature and successful man...75 years old...long past retirement age! He had already established himself as a minor patriarch in what is today Iraq. And God spoke: *Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.*

³ William H. Willimon, ‘Lecture Interrupted,’ *The Christian Century*, February 13-20, 2002, p. 18.

Most of us know something of what that is like. Sever ties that have bound you in home and work and church, call the moving company, pack those boxes, and say goodbye to that living space where you spent all those years. All the memories come flooding back, and you drive down the road with tears streaming down your face even though you are still convinced that you made the right decision. It happens every day!

But the great twist in the story of Abram is that he did all of this, not for purely economic reasons, but because he believed that he heard the voice of God. Furthermore, he believed that God had promised him that from his thus far childless union with his wife Sarai, there would eventually grow a great nation that would bless the whole world. This is where the story gets a little spooky for our contemporary tastes!

We hesitate to think seriously about hearing the voice of God. If we were to hear a voice, we would likely seek psychiatric help. Yet the Bible is always talking about God speaking to people...directly and verbally, as I am speaking to you now. We constantly encounter the phrase, *God said to Abraham...God said to Moses....* God is always speaking to people in the Bible.

Was that just for Bible times? Did God speak to one generation and not to ours? Does God speak to our children in Sunday School? To our teachers as they teach? In other words, does the God of the universe...the

God of Creation...the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...the God of Jesus...still speak to or even care about individuals like us?

This is certainly not an easy question to ask or to answer. We cannot use a tape recorder to record the voice of God. We don't receive email from God (although we do receive some strange and unexpected emails). But at the same time, hosts of people with impeccable integrity, even people who are trained in the scientific method and believe in its validity, will testify that if God has not spoken directly to them, God certainly has led them to make decisions in their lives.

Whatever else we can say about exactly how God speaks, one thing is clear: all those scripture references indicating God speaking are in the past tense! Why is that important? Because most of those who heard God speak did not know it at the time. Only when they looked back in retrospect were they able to say that God spoke. When Abram left Haran, it could have been for any number of reasons. There may have been a drought; the economy could have gone bust; he could have had a new job offer in Canaan that he just couldn't refuse; maybe he never could get along with his neighbors and finally got fed up. Or maybe he just had a wanderlust that could only be fulfilled by moving.

But sometime later he could look back and say, "God spoke to me." And who's to say God didn't? Maybe God spoke in that gut feeling he had

that he should move. Maybe God spoke in that new job offer, or that relationship gone sour, or that drought. People move for any number of reasons and go off into the unknown future. To look back and say that God was somehow in it is not fanaticism; it is a calm evaluation of what has happened in your life. You find a peace, and you conclude that God somehow was in it. In other words, God spoke!

And you come to that conclusion on the far side of doubt! On this side of doubt, you wonder. On this side of doubt, you consider all the alternatives. On this side of doubt, you aren't even sure if there is a God! But on the far side of doubt, you can say, "Yes, God was in it all along."

III

What a gift it is to take this journey together! What a gift it is for children to have teachers to walk with them along the way, teachers willing and eager to listen to their lives and hear their questions! What a privilege it is to believe that, as the psalm says, *The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time forth and forevermore.*⁴

⁴ Psalm 121: 8.