

**“Leaving Home”**  
**Sermon Series on**  
***A Faithful God for a Fallen People #2***  
**Dr. Peter B. Barnes**  
**June 12, 2016**  
**(Gen. 12:1-9)**

**Introduction**

We’re in the season of graduations, aren’t we? Commencement at Wake Forest University took place last month, and I know graduation ceremonies were happening all across our city with the various high schools this weekend. I went to a high school graduation party yesterday.

I’m not a very big fan of graduation speeches. They are usually full of hollow words and platitudes. However, I did like the commencement address of comedian Stephen Colbert last year at the Wake Forest graduation. In his speech he said, “I want to thank the administration and the trustees for inviting me to speak and for giving me an honorary doctorate of humanities. I’m a big fan of humans. And I have to thank them for this thing around my neck (pointing to his hood). There’s nothing you want more on a chilly day like today than a nice scarf!”

I recently read where John Ortberg has observed that many times when a person graduates from school, people look for a gift to give graduates. And books are a popular choice. He also said that there is one book he sometimes gives to people when they graduate from kindergarten, and also when they graduate from PhD. programs – same book! I’ll read a little bit of it for you. See if you can guess the author.

“Congratulations, today is your day.  
You’re off to great places. You’re off and away.  
You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer  
yourself any direction you choose....  
Oh, the places you’ll go. You’ll be on the way up.  
But when things start to happen, don’t worry. Don’t stew.  
Just go right along. You’ll be happening too.  
So, be your name Buxbaum, or Bixby, or Bray,  
or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O’Shea,  
you’re off to great places. Today is your day!  
Your mountain is waiting so get on your way!”<sup>1</sup>

Anyone know who the author of that book is? It’s Dr. Seuss. I really like Dr. Seuss a lot. I think he’s got some great things to say about life and about how we should look at the world. I think Dr. Seuss is a pretty good theologian, too.

This morning I want to talk to you about all the places you'll go not just when you graduate from school, but whenever you say yes to Jesus with your whole life and respond to God's call. And we'll consider these things in the context of God's call to Abraham which we find recorded in Genesis 12.

### **I. The Call of God to Go.**

Last week we began our study of the life of Abraham, and we discussed the way in which he was born and raised in the city of Ur. It's located near the coast of the Persian Gulf in what is today modern Iraq. While it's not clear here in this passage in Genesis, Acts 7:2 tells us that it was while Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldeans that he first heard the call of God. Sometime after this, Abraham's father Terah took his son Abraham along with Abraham's wife Sarah and Terah's grandson Lot, and they all journeyed as far as Harran, which is in modern day Turkey. But then Terah died in Harran, leaving Abraham the guardian of his nephew. And apparently it was in Harran that God reissued His call to the patriarch.

There are several things I want you to notice about the call of Abraham. *First, it was a call to go.* Out of the blue God says to Abraham, "Congratulations, today is your day. You're off to great places. You're off and away," just like in the Dr. Seuss book. But where are these places Abraham is to go? How will he know when he gets there? Is there a map he's supposed to follow? The Lord didn't answer any of these questions. He just told Abraham to go. The only detail that is given is when God said, "Go to the place I will show you." That's a little vague, don't you think?

Consider what it meant for Abraham to respond to God's call to go. He had to leave his extended family. He had to leave his way of life, the comforts of home, and the culture in which he had been raised. And, as it became even clearer during his journey, Abraham also had to leave behind the practice of idolatry and the pagan culture of his past.

Up until this point in his life, Abraham was a worshiper of idols. In fact, his father manufactured idols. It was the family business. But when the Lord appeared to Abraham, essentially He said, "I'm the only true God of the universe, and I want you to follow Me alone. No more worshipping the idols of your ancestors, or the idols your dad has been making. You've got to make a break with that past. I've got a new future for you."

The city of Ur where Abraham was raised was a center for astrology in the ancient world, and in particular it was known for the worship of the stars and the moon. God wanted the Abraham to make a break from all that. This proved to be not that easy, and we see in Scripture how this problem continued to affect Abraham's family all the way down to the third generation (see Gen. 31:30-34).

Abraham came to a moment of decision. Would he continue to stay where he was in Ur, living his life as he normally did, worshipping Nanna the moon-god? Or was he going to follow Yahweh, the one true God of the universe, and walk with Him? Was he open to leaving home and traveling to the place God wanted him to go? There was a fork in the road, and Abraham couldn't walk both ways because they were going in different directions. He had to choose.

The same invitation is given to you today? Will you stay where you are, or are you open to respond to God's call to go? The Lord may call you to stay right where you are, or He may call you to move to a new location. The key question is, "Are you ready to *leave and go* – to separate yourself from where you've been in the past and to follow after His call on your life in a new way?" Are you?

## **II. The Call of God to Trust.**

In Genesis 12 we read, "*The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you... So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran'*" (Gen. 12:1,4).

In order to respond to God's call on his life, Abraham had to step out in faith and trust the Lord. He responded to the call of God by believing God and taking Him at His Word. And he didn't just believe in some abstract sense. Rather, he responded in a positive and practical way with obedience. He altered his life and literally walked in a new direction.

James Montgomery Boice says<sup>2</sup> that in some ways faith is the *most natural thing we can do*. Faith is so natural because everyone exercises some kind of faith every single day. In fact, it is impossible to live a normal life without exercising faith. For example, if someone sets up an appointment with you to meet at a certain place at a certain time, you go to that place and at that hour having faith that the individual will meet you there. When you pay your money, you are demonstrating faith in the people who scheduled the game, printed the ticket, and sold it to you. When you're driving your car down 421 at 45 mph (well, some of you drive 45 mph on 421!), you are exercising a great deal of faith that people will stay in their lanes and not swerve over into yours.

The point is that faith is a natural human experience and exercise. However, Boice says that faith in the biblical sense is also one of *the most unnatural things we can do*. When we talk about putting our faith in God and not merely in people, we are talking about faith in One whose nature and ways are beyond our full comprehension. As a result, there are times when God calls us to do something, and it seems contrary to our reason or experience.

Think about how counterintuitive Abraham had to be in responding to God's call to trust. The Lord told the patriarch that he was going to have descendants

who God would build into a great nation. But Abraham was 75-years-old, and his wife Sarah was past child-bearing years. How is this going to be possible?! God also told Abraham that He was going to give the patriarch's descendants the Promised Land, but Abraham didn't even know where he was supposed to go. Abraham had to trust that God was able to do what He said He was going to do – give him heirs, and give them a land.

Whenever God interrupts a person's life and extends a call to them, it never means that life is going to be easy. God never gives people easy jobs, and He asks them to trust. He never says, "I have an assignment for you, but it won't take much time, and it won't be very difficult, and it won't change your life very much." There are no stories in the Bible like that. Whenever God calls a person, the most He promises is, "*I will be with you.*"

Oh, the places you will go! God came to a man named Noah, and He said, "I want you to leave everything that is familiar to you. I want you to face judgment, and ridicule, and the destruction of the world through a flood, and it will be very difficult. But I will go with you, and I'll give you a sign – a rainbow. And Noah said, "I'll go."

Then God came to a man named Abraham, and He said, "I want you to leave your home, and your culture, and your family, and everything familiar. I want you to go to a place you don't even know, and I'll tell you when you get there. But I'll go with you, and I will give you a sign – circumcision." And Abraham responded, "Noah got the rainbow. How about something like that? Couldn't it be like a secret handshake or a code of some kind?"

Whenever you step out in faith and trust God, there is no guarantee that life is going to be easy. And the reason is because God is more concerned about your character and the person you become than He is about the outward circumstances of your life. And He'll use anything and everything to shape you into the character and the image of His Son our Savior Jesus Christ. God's primary goal is not for your comfort or your pleasure. His primary goal is that you grow into the person He created you to be, a person who loves and trusts Him no matter what.

When I headed off to seminary after I graduated from college and after I worked in television for a year, I drove my Toyota Celica packed to the gills 1,000 miles from Atlanta to the north shore of Boston. And when I arrived on the campus of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, I didn't know a soul. I had never lived outside the South before for any extend length of time when I was growing up, and I didn't know quite what to expect when I moved there. But I stepped out in faith that God was calling me to attend school there, and so I went.

When I pulled into the parking lot of the main building, I got out of my car to begin to unload my things, when all of a sudden two black men in African dress came up to me and said, "Can we help you with your bags?" It was Samuel

Aleande and Yousef Touraki. They were students from Nigeria. I thought to myself, “Toto, we’re not in Atlanta anymore.”

But God blessed my decision to step out in faith, and those three years at Gordon-Conwell were three of the happiest and most formative years of my life. It was there I learned about theology and biblical studies and pastoral ministry. It was there I made life-long friendships that continue to this day. And it was there I met and married Lorie, the love of my life. God will always reward you whenever you respond to His call to go and trust Him.

### **III. The Call of God to Bless.**

In His promise to Abraham, God said, “*I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing....And all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you*” (Gen. 12:2,3).

The first time we see the word “bless” in the Bible, it doesn’t involve human beings at all. It’s in Genesis 1, and there we’re told that God created all the creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems, and He blessed them and said, “*Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas*” (Gen. 1:21,22). Then God made human beings, and He also blessed them and gave them the same charge. What we see here is that part of the *mission Dei*, the mission of God, is to bless.

However, what we see in Genesis 12 in the call of Abraham is a new twist to that whole idea in that not only is it the mission of God to bless, but now it is also the mission of humanity to do so. In other words, we are blessed to be a blessing. This was hinted at in Genesis 1 when God issued to our first parents what theologians call the *cultural mandate*. Our original job description included the charge to exercise dominion over the world, but to do so in responsible ways as stewards. In other words, we were blessed in order to be a blessing even back then.

Here in Genesis 12, what is implied in the first chapter of Genesis is spelled out in detail in the call to Abraham. God specifically says, “*I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you...so that all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*”

At the end of the day, it’s really not about you. That’s how Rick Warren begins his best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*.<sup>3</sup> He says that the purpose of your life isn’t really about you. It’s far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, it was because God wanted to bless you so you could be a blessing to others.

Let me give you an example of what this looks like in real life. I recently read a front page article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about a metro transit operator named Linda Wilson-Allen.<sup>4</sup> She drives a bus. There's a front page article about this woman because she loves the people on her bus, and the world is always amazed anytime someone does something with love and joy that blesses other people. This is what Linda does. She knows the regulars on her bus, and she knows them by name. If they're late, she'll actually stop and wait for them and then make up the time on her route.

One day a woman name Elsie who is in her eighties was struggling with some groceries, and she needed to take the bus. Linda stopped the bus, got out of her driver seat, went out and carried the groceries for her. Today, Elsie lets other busses pass her by at the bus stop, and she waits so she can ride with Linda.

Linda saw a woman named Tanya in a bus shelter. She looked a little lost and it was almost Thanksgiving, so Linda stopped the bus, leaned out and yelled, "Hey, are you all by yourself? It's almost Thanksgiving. Why don't you come over to my place and kick it with me and the kids." Now she and Tanya are friends.

The reporter who wrote this article rides on Linda's bus every day himself. He said, "Linda has built such a community on her bus that passengers offer Linda the use of their vacation homes. They bring her potted plants and floral bouquets. When people found out that Linda likes to wear scarves to accessorize her uniform, they started giving her scarves as presents. One passenger upgraded her gift to a rabbit fur collar!" The article says Linda may be the most beloved bus driver since Ralph Kramden of *The Honeymooners*. (Does anybody remember Ralph Kramden? I still do. Jackie Gleason's character.)

Think about what an unglamorous, non-prestigious, thankless job it is to drive a bus—not much money, traffic jams, cranky passengers, engines that break down, gum on the seats, spills on the floor. How does she do it with an attitude like this? I'll tell you how. It's in the article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The journalist writes, "Her mood is always set at 2:30AM when she gets down on her knees to pray for thirty minutes. 'There is always a lot to talk about with the Lord', said Wilson-Allen, who is a member of Glad Tidings Church in Hayward. When Linda gets to the end of her line she will always say, 'That's all. I love you. Take care.'"

Linda Wilson-Allen knows she's been blessed to be a blessing. Do you?

## **Conclusion**

Let me close by asking you some questions. How is God calling you to step out in faith and trust Him today? What do you need to do to overcome your reluctance to take that first step and go? How do you need to break with your past and follow God in a way of life which you know is more honoring to Him? And in what ways does God want you to be a blessing to someone in the coming week?

“Oh, the places you will go,” wrote Dr. Seuss. That’s something God could have said to Abraham. The patriarch couldn’t have imagined all that would happen in his life or to his physical and spiritual descendants who would come after him and carry on down to this very day 4,100 years later. It represents the commitment of a faithful God for a fallen people. Listen for His call.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Place You’ll Go*.

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Vol. 2*, pp. 458-459.

<sup>3</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Sam Whiting, “Muni Driver Will Make New Friends, Keep Old,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 8, 2013.