

“Moving On”

Genesis 12:1-7

September 24, 2000

Dr. J. Howard Olds

“I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence
Two roads diverged in a wood and I --
I took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference.

Roads. Everybody is on one. For the last month, I've kept I-65 hot between Louisville and Nashville. The Kentucky State Police honored me with a speed trap between Bowling Green and Kentucky. My wife is grateful to them. It takes me longer to get to Nashville but I'm sure I'm traveling safer.

Some of you are proficient travelers on the Internet highway. I longed for you as I tried to find my way with a new computer to pound out the sermon for today. You know how to travel that road well.

Charles Kuralt used to say you haven't really seen America until you've traveled the back roads and met the people that you find along the back roads of this wonderful land that we call home.

Jesus said there are two roads. There is a broad road and a narrow road and wise are the people who know which one to take. I guess you could say life is a trip. It's a trip we're all taking one way or another and the roads we take on this trip make all the difference.

The Old Testament story of Abraham has embraced me and helped me in these days of transition and so on this first Sunday when

we're trying to get acquainted with one another and beginning this journey together, I want to go back to this Old Testament story of God's call of Abraham to father a new nation.

It all begins in Genesis, Chapter 12. The Lord said to Abraham, "Leave your country, your people, your fathers household and go to the land that I will show you." **The compelling call was to go.**

Now there is nothing new about moving. One out of four Americans move every year and there's nothing particularly odd about people being on the go. After all, we're on the go all the time. Some of you can hardly wait until worship service is over because you've got other places to go today and things to do. You know we sort of wear our business as a badge.

It reminds me of a little cartoon about Martians looking down on humans and one Martian said to another, "What are they doing?" And the senior Martian said, "They're going." "Where are they going?" said the younger Martian. "They don't know, they just go."

Everybody's on the go. The unique thing about this story is not that Abraham gets an itch to move, the unique thing about this story is that God calls him to go. With a profound imperative God speaks to Abraham, "Time to move."

Have you heard God calling lately? Have you heard that voice, the Word of the Lord, calling to you?

Late one evening a professor sat at his desk working on the next day's lecture. Shuffling through the papers in front of him, he came upon a magazine that wasn't even addressed to his house, it got there by accident. Inside of it he found an article about the needs of the Congo and it caught his attention. The professor's name was Albert Schweitzer; the rest is history, as they say.

When God comes calling, it's time to listen.

Linda Clare was a childcare worker. The hours of hard work of taking care of babies all day long left her feeling unfulfilled. Surely God had some other thing in mind for her, some other purpose of life and then one afternoon a father came in to pick up his toddler. He said to Linda, "I just want to thank you for teaching our little girl how to pray. She's so fascinated by it that she insists now in praying at the evening meal at our house every night, and, in fact, it's been so profound that my wife and I are now looking for a church." Linda said it suddenly dawned on me that I was no longer just babysitting. I was shaping lives. God came calling that day.

Have you heard Him knocking? Are you attuned to His voice? You see all of us long for a calling, not just a job. We want significance, not just success. We want our lives to matter in the life of eternity. There is something down in our souls that makes us long for something eternal and however successful we may be or whatever the nature of life, there is that nudge of God down in the human soul.

Somebody asked me in a phone interview a couple of weeks ago, "Are you coming to Brentwood because the Bishop appointed you or God is calling you there?" Now let me make a couple of comments about that. So far as I know, God and Bishops are not on opposite teams. There may be one or two exceptions, I don't know about that, but generally speaking, God and Bishops are not on opposite teams. But let me say something else that I believe with all of my heart. The call is clear --The call is clear.

I deeply believe today it is the will of God for James King to be in Louisville, Kentucky and for Howard Olds to be in Brentwood's pulpit. I believe God is in the midst of all of this movement.

Ignatius used to teach people how to discern God's will by what he called consolations and desolations and I've sought that pattern for many years and I just need to say to you that there's more

consolation about this move than any move that I've ever made in this history of being a United Methodist pastor. I wouldn't be here if it were not for that sense. I left people that I love dearly; that's a whole other story.

There's an interesting simplicity to this story. Verse 6: "So Abram left as the Lord told him." Isn't that profoundly simple? Life is more complex to me than that. I don't know about you but I usually argue with the Lord a long time about those kinds of things. God always wins because God needs to win, but He's patient.

I wonder what went on in Sarah and Abraham's tent that night as they discussed that whole process. What was the nature of the conversation? How much stuff are we really going to move this time to this unknown land? How do we explain it to our neighbors and to our families that we're going some place where we don't even know where we're going, says the text.

Christianity is like riding a tandem bicycle. At first you invite God to get on the back seat. You really need to have God there. When you get lost, God gives a direction with His ultimate compass – this is the way you need to go. It's really helpful. When you come to those steep hills and you're peddling as hard as you can, you can look back and say, "Hey, God, do you mind peddling a little harder, it's steep here." You're grateful to God's response at those times. You're glad to have God pat you on the back about your plans, your destiny and what you want to do. You're grateful to have God's approval, like a good parent but then something happens in your Christian life. You turn from Christianity to discipleship as I call it and you invite God to get in the front seat and take over the handlebars. Wow, what a ride! Up hills, through valleys and across scenery that you never dreamed possible in your own life when you dare to let God in the front seat of the bicycle built for two.

You see, faith is the assurance that God wills our best. I don't know what your heritage was like but to talk about God's will where I grew up in the country of Kentucky was a foreboding kind of thing. People would look over a casket of a teenager who had been killed in an accident and say something about God's will and I grew to hate the thought of it. Foreboding kind of thoughts. Don't look for God's will in the tragedies of your life. God's plans for you are positive, powerful and meaningful. Listen to the text, "I will bless you and you'll be a blessing," or "You ain't seen nothing yet," is kind of a free interpretation of that text.

Jesus said it even more profoundly. "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more would God want to give the best to you." The will of God is the best potential that you possibly have for your future. That's what I want to say to you today.

A man checked into a hotel room, he's not familiar with and immediately called the front desk and said, "I can't get out of here." The clerk at the front desk says, "What do you mean you can't get out of here?" and he says, "I can't get out of this place. There are three doors here. I opened one, it went to the bathroom then I opened another and it went into a closet and then I looked at the third door. It had a *do not disturb* sign on it. (You'll get this after a while; some of my stories are even worse than this one.)

I don't know what you've done in your life but sometimes I've been in these little boxes and I've felt all cramped by them. I would think, "Oh, this is the end, I'll make my life in this little room" when all along God was waiting for the right time and the right place to open the door to a bright and wonderful future that I could not have even dreamed of the earlier days of my life.

So Abraham followed. Do you trust God enough to follow God with your life?

There's one more thing in this story. I never really caught it before as many times as I read it. So they land in the promise land. Here they are – Canaanites on every side, hiding behind every bush, there behind every rock and what does Abraham do? The first thing he does is build an altar to the Lord and bows and worships. Have you thought about that?

In my very first staff meeting here in Brentwood Church, I asked the staff of this great congregation, "What do you need from a senior pastor?" and one of them said, "We need a senior pastor who can walk on water and resurrect the dead." Not much to ask, of course.

I need to say on this very first Sunday of our time together that's some things about me that you need to know. I'm scared to death of water. My mother put such a fear of drowning in me that I didn't learn to swim until I was an adult and I still feel a little shaky around it at the wrong time and places. As for this business of resurrecting the dead, I share with you some advice that I took seriously when I was a twenty-six year old pastor fresh out of seminary in my first congregation. I thought I was having a heart attack so I went up to the country doc that was there. He took me in a back room and said, "Preacher, let me give you a little advice. You don't have any heart problems. You're problem is you think you're Jesus and you're going to live longer and you're going to serve better if you get over that notion in a hurry 'cause you're not Jesus and this congregation is going to be around long after you're gone." I've never forgotten that.

What I'm trying to say is my feet are clay, my faith is feeble, my patience is limited, my small mind has not even begun to comprehend what God might have in mind for this trip we're about to take together. Who knows what God might choose to do. You see, you would think that Abraham faced with Canaanites on every side would have called a meeting of the faithful, organized a long range plan of attack and rallied the troops to attack at the right time and at the right way. All of that is important but the first thing he

did was build an altar and bowed to worship. The most important thing you and I can do in this community of faith as we begin this journey together is to get on our knees before God Almighty and to search, to seek and discover God's will for our time together.

Henri Nouwen said in his little book, "In the Name of Jesus" it's not enough for priests and ministers to be well-trained people eager to help their fellow humans, able to respond to the burning issues of the day. Leaders of the future must be men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to touch God's beauty, and to rest in God's infinite goodness.

It's not enough for lay people to be sincere do-gooders for the causes of earth. We must be spiritually centered, Christ-focused, citizens of the kingdom of God who dare to believe that God's kingdom could come on earth as it is in heaven; why else would we pray it if we don't believe it. So that we could anticipate that tomorrow in your little corner of the earth, a little bit of heaven would be there and tomorrow in somebody's else's corner of the earth, a little bit of heaven would be there. Somehow together we could get a glimpse of what it might be if things were right with the world.

Jesus never said it would be an easy road. Nobody implied that we could do it alone. The people of faith have always been in over their heads, believing the unbelievable, attempting the impossible, blazing trails of service for others to follow. That, my friends, has made all the difference.

Amen.