

Our Lot in Life

Genesis 12:1-4a

¹Now 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. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

So Father Abraham. A giant of the faith. The father of the three great Biblical faith traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

He’s an absolute hero in the Hebrew Bible. For good reason. His father Terah had this wild dream to leave Ur where the family had always lived and to head West, to head as far West as they could go to the land of Canaan. Only Terah didn’t make it. The family made it as far as Haran, and Terah just decided it was time to stop. It was time to settle. And Abraham was a dutiful son and supported his father there and lived in Haran until he was in his 70’s. But then, when his father died- Abraham just couldn’t sit still. He sensed God’s claim upon his life, and he followed that absurd dream his grandfather had in the beginning, and Abraham left everything he knew, and he kept going West. It’s an amazing journey.

Do you know people like this? Restless people like this? People who have these incredible dreams, these wild dreams, and they follow them? Instead of just thinking about them, they actually follow them and turn them into a reality?

I've known a few, but one springs to mind. I've told you before about my high school and college friend Jonathan. These days Jonathan fronts a successful highly critically acclaimed band called Shearwater. He travels all over the world. He plays with all kinds of people. He's doing what he's always wanted to do living this wild adventure of a life.

In high school he was incredibly restless and even then was trying to live this dream out. Not satisfied with our band just playing whatever little venues we could, Jonathan organized these massive outdoor concerts at the home of our keyboardist who lived on a few acres right on the edge of the suburb. Jonathan walked the neighborhoods papering them with flyers. We'd wind up with these big crowds. But even though we were on the edge of the suburbs...we were still in the suburbs. And every time we tried this we'd make it through about half of our set when Bedford's finest would show up and shut us down. The second night this happened, Jonathan really pushed it, playing even after they came, and thanks to him I came as close to being arrested as I ever have. Yet.

Jonathan managed to get us a gig at his college in the mountains of Tennessee. We were opening for the psychobilly group The Rev. Horton Heat. And while I tend not to believe in evil incarnate, after I saw The Rev. Horton Heat up close and in person...he left me with doubts. Well, to get out there we were driving all day and through the night. And I was sleeping in the back. And I remember waking up at one point. The car was swerving. Jonathan was at the wheel. And our bass player, Joe, he was laughing his head off. He was letting Jonathan fall asleep just to see how close to running off the road we would get. Needless to say there was no way I was going to sleep after that and relieved Jonathan and made a mental note never to give Joe anything sharper than a butter knife after that.

It was always like that around him. Jonathan was always pushing the edge. To be around someone living out their dream. Willing to go wherever they felt called. It made you feel more alive.

The only thing- sometimes it's made me wonder about me. It's hard not to compare yourself with your friends. I've wondered about the difference between us. Was I just more timid than Jonathan? More frightened? Even though he went into music and I became a pastor- I've sometimes wondered if he isn't really a better example of faith?

See, when you think about faith- it's hard not to think about Abraham, and Abraham's kind of life as a model. This guy who was willing to leave everything he knew and head out into the unknown, into the brave, new world. For a long, long time we have looked to Abraham as a kind of archetype for what it means to be faithful.

Take Paul's letter to the Romans this morning. To Paul Abraham is the epitome of faith, because God tells promises to make a great nation of him, and he just believes this and acts on it. Paul says it didn't even phase Abraham that he already nearly a 100 or that in all their married life he and Sarai never managed to have a baby. I mean a lot of people might have been put off by those two facts- that would bother some people. But not Abraham. He just believed and left everything he knew behind.

And this pattern, being asked to leave everything and follow- this is exactly the same pattern followed by the disciples. There they were Peter and James and John- successful fishermen. They're in the boat with dad- they're casting their nets. And then along comes Jesus

like the pied piper. All he has to say is “Follow me” and they’re telling dad not to overdo it and don’t wait up.

And then there’s a gazillion examples of other faith heroes- like this week we remembered St. Patrick. Patrick grew up in a wealthy Roman family living in Britain. As a boy Patrick was captured by the Irish but managed to escape. This is how he learned their language and learned about their ways. Now most people, having survived what he had- there’s no way they would go back, but years later as a young man he writes that he heard a voice in his sleep telling him to fast for he would be leaving home. And unlike most people, who would have written this off as a weird dream- Patrick actually set off for, of all places, Ireland, where apparently he won them over by bringing them gifts of corned beef, cabbage, Lucky Charms, and barrels and barrels of Guinness.

I mean there’s so much of this, this sense of faith being like an adventure, that it’s fair to wonder about people like me- I mean I don’t even have a passport.

But this week I noticed a line that never caught my attention before- this week I noticed the last line. And though I’m sure I’ve read it, I had never really heard it. The line: “And Lot went with him.”

Now Lot- Lot is an interesting guy. He Abraham’s nephew, but even though they’re family- they’re as different as they can be. It’s true Lot sets out with Abraham, but I’m betting he was regretting it as soon as the journey got going.

First they made their way to Canaan. Now you would think Abraham would be happy, right? I mean he's just made this enormous journey- he's completed the dream that his grandfather had. He fulfilled what God asked- he made it to the promised land. But the funny thing is Abraham doesn't stop. It's like as long as he's traveling why stop. So he winds up taking them all over Canaan setting up altars in different parts. But then, just as Lot and his family are crying "Are we there yet", there's a great famine in the land, and Abraham then takes them all South into Egypt.

They stay there for a little while- long enough for both Abraham and Lot to become wealthy men. They stay long enough for Lot to realize what he's sensed for a long time- that he's really more of a settler than a pioneer. But not Abraham. As soon as everything is going great for them in Egypt, he tells everyone to follow him, that it's time to go back to Canaan. And Lot, grumbling, says fine. Except when they finally make it back, the first thing Abraham wonders is where next, when Lot finally says, "Enough." He just can't take all the traveling any more. And Abraham and Lot agree that it's time to split up- and Lot, seeing a couple of towns in the distance, decides to settle down finally. And Abraham- well Abraham doesn't know how to do that.

Abraham is a traveler. An adventurer. It's who he is.

But not Lot. Lot's a settler. He's meant to have roots. It's the way God made him. And there's room for him in the story, too. Indeed, if it weren't for him and his support- many believe Abraham wouldn't have been able to make it on his own.

It was so much fun hanging around Jonathan and being a part of the band. It was so fun being in Tennessee and opening for an actual rock band on a real stage with professional sound and lights. But I also remember on the long, long drive back, sitting up with Jonathan and talking on the way back. I remember being so, so exhausted. And I was beginning to think of all the things I had to do for school- all of the things I probably should have already done. And Jonathan was still a live wire. He had done what he was supposed to do, and he just wanted more. And I was just so tired. And I remember just knowing as much as I loved the idea of being in a band and running around like that, that in reality? In reality I was really looking forward to being back home and settling into a routine again and getting back to normal. I remember knowing on that drive that Jonathan was doing what he was meant to do- but not what I was meant to do.

And I knew at that moment, although I constantly forget- happiness isn't always an adventure, or doing interesting things and going to glamorous places. Happiness for Lot meant parting ways with Abraham- and putting roots down. No, happiness is living the life YOU are meant to live. And not anyone else. That means discerning what that means, constantly, because we change. It means grieving when this life we're meant for isn't exactly the one we would wish. And sometimes it means being courageous, because sometimes the people around us don't understand how or why God has made us the way we are, and even when they try it's hard for them to support and bless us. So, sometimes it takes courage to stand in our own shoes. No apologies. No regrets.

This week my heart has been in Japan and what's happening there. To be hit by a once in a lifetime earthquake is one thing. Then to be crushed by a tsunami. And now the horror of nuclear disaster. There have been so many amazing stories coming out. Like the Fukushima 50- the fifty or so workers who at risk to their own life keep going back into that nuclear plant when far more sensible thing to do would be to run. Every day they are living an adventure. Every day they are dealing with something no one else in the world has ever experienced. They are heroes every bit as much as Abraham is. No question.

But to me the story that has haunted me even more came from Diane Sawyer's trip to the North to witness the devastation and see how the survivors are coping. The images are startling- cars stacked on houses like a giant toddler came by and was playing with matchbox cars. She visited one of the many shelters providing food and housing for over 500,000 displaced people. 500,000. And she witnessed the most incredible thing. Not only are these people not living in chaos, not looting, not acting like wild animals. But in the shelters they are carrying on with life with their usual routines as if nothing happened. They are even recycling. Recycling- when everything has been destroyed.

Rush Limbaugh mocked them this week- he said it was ridiculous for people to care for the earth when it destroyed them like that. But he completely missed the point. He completely missed the point. They weren't recycling as part of some environmental agenda that frightens him so much. They were recycling because when everything around them had been thrown into chaos- they were getting back to normal. They were getting back to their routines and their ways- they were being the people God made them to be, no matter what. They were being a settled people, in an incredibly unsettled time.

And it shows us a side of faith we couldn't learn from Abraham- but only from his nephew. And that's no small thing. That's...quite a Lot. **Amen.**