

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 21, 2016
Second Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 15:1-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:22-35

Each of us, as we journey through life, eventually comes to a place where we are confronted with a colossal decision. For some, it happens more than once in life. The choice that confronts us in these moments is simply this: Do we stay where we are in life, where things are comfortable and relatively secure? Or do we take a risk, make a change, and step out in faith for parts unknown? Do we give up the certainty and safety we already have in order to pursue the potential reward of something greater? Or do we play it safe?

This was the challenge that confronted Abram in our Old Testament lesson from Genesis. God had presented Abram with a choice: leave the security of your land and your family, pack your bags, and head for parts unknown. In return, God promised to bless the world through Abram's descendants.

Abram weighed things out, and opted to launch out in faith for parts unknown. As we pick up the story here in Genesis 15, Abram is having a crisis of faith. He is struggling to see how God's promise to bless the world through him will come about, because his wife Sarah is old and barren, and their chances of having a son are about as good as your odds of surviving a heart attack with the

hospital closed. Part of Abram, I suspect, wants to believe. But the bigger part of him is terrified, because he sees the situation *as it is*, with all the limits and obstacles that confront him.

We can empathize with Abram, because each of us knows what it's like to stand at that place where (in the words of Robert Frost), "two roads diverge into a yellow wood." We know what it's like to ask ourselves that question: Do I stay where I am, where things are familiar and known? Or do I launch out and take the less traveled path where I don't know what awaits me?

We all struggle at times to discern God's leading in our lives. And often when we *do* discern God's guidance and we step out in faith, our faith is soon challenged when all we can see with our human eyes are our limitations, and the obstacles that confront us. Like Abram, it becomes hard for us to trust God for many things, when we are struggling to see the potential for *one*.

Fortunately for Abram, God works the swing shift. He takes Abram by the hand and leads him out into the imposing darkness of the night sky. He says to him, "Abram, look up into the vast expanse of the heavens. Look at all those stars. Count what is countless. Now listen to me. Your descendants will number more than those stars."

What a promise. What a moment. Abram sees the reality of what *is*. But God sees the limitless possibilities of what *can be*. Abram struggles to believe God for a *single* son, when God is ready to provide him a family of millions.

Let me ask you a question this morning: *What do you do when God comes to you and asks you to believe what you know just ain't so?* What do you do when God asks you to step out in faith, to leave your comfort zone, to trust him when you don't have a schematic diagram of how it will all work out? What do you do when God asks you to trust him for big things, and you're not sure how you can trust him for a small thing?

At that point, whether it's us or whether it's Abram, we all stand at the same place. The place of crisis. The place of decision. And yes, the place of opportunity.

I don't know what happened with Abram as he stood under the canopy of that night sky. I don't know how long he lingered there. The text in its brevity only tells us what we need to know, which is this: *Abram believed God.*

He believed God. And the consequences of that one decision subsequently altered the entire course of human history.

Fortunately for us, as well as Abram, God still works the swing shift. As he was faithful to Abram, so he is faithful to us. He confirms his promises to us, and blesses our faith and obedience.

Shortly after Connie and I were married, I was preparing to graduate from college at the ripe old age of 22. We had settled in to married life in suburban Kansas City. We had a wonderful circle of friends. Connie had a good job. We were within easy driving distance to our families. I was preparing to enter seminary, and Nazarene Theological Seminary was not far from where Connie worked. In terms of our future, the decision looked like a no-brainer. Everything added up to one conclusion: stay put. Stay where you are.

But deep in my heart, I felt a tug to launch out, to step out and go to an unknown place and an unknown people. I sensed that God was asking us to move to the bluegrass of Kentucky to attend Asbury Theological Seminary. A place where neither of us had jobs. A place where we knew virtually no one. A place far beyond reach of family. To a school where the cost would be five times greater than it would if we just stayed put.

In spite of the obstacles, we made a decision to move. We launched out in the direction of an unknown world and an uncertain future.

Two weeks into my first semester, I was in crisis. I was second guessing myself and the decision we had made. I questioned whether I belonged at Asbury, and I wondered whether our decision to move had been a giant mistake.

In the midst of this, I cried out to God for help and answers. I was a bundle of insecurities. A few weeks later, I went to class one morning like I always did.

The professor was Dr. Robert Mulholland, and the class was populated primarily by seniors who were finishing their seminary career, and here I was just beginning mine. It was this very class that was the source of much of my doubt and insecurity.

But on this ordinary day, God did something extraordinary for me. God was working the day shift on this particular day. As Dr. Mulholland lectured, something happened. It was like time came to a stop. The presence of God descended on that space. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. In the middle of the day, it was as if God invited me to look up into the night sky and count the stars. In that moment I knew with certainty that Connie and I had done what God had asked of us.

The years that followed provided many challenges and struggles. But when those challenges came, the memory of that classroom encounter sustained me.

As we sit here today on this second Sunday of Lent, it could be that some of you here this morning are at a place where God is calling you to step out and to believe him for something great. But the place where you find yourself right now is a place where you're struggling to believe God for small things, never mind the big ones.

A few years ago I discovered a prayer, although the author is unknown. It's a prayer that could have been written by Abraham, because it reflects many of the

things that Abraham surely must have felt. But if we listen closely, we may also find our names on it as well. The prayer reads as follows:

Lord, snatch me away from the comfort and security of a small and fist-held faith -- for I find myself seeking comfort and security, when I should be seeking Thee...when I should be seeking new and vaster concepts of Thee. My faith is a small and stunted thing. I've kept it safe, and secure -- my size, not your size. I have been unwilling to look beyond the downy nest of my contentedness -- unwilling to risk. I still am, and I'm horrified -- and thrilled -- at the very thought of grappling with a larger faith. Ah, Lord! What do you have in store for me? What heights -- and depths -- of faith lie out ahead? I cannot know until I'm willing to move out from the cozy, into the unknown. So -- tear me away from my security. Thrust me forward into the unknown, for you will be there. And that is all the security that I shall need. Amen.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, Christ is present here with us. The bread and the wine are signs to you this morning, but they also carry with them an invitation. They invite you to look beyond the limitations of your present circumstances. They invite you to look up into the heavens, and to count the stars. And they give you grace -- grace to remember that God's promises are as true for *you* as they were for Abraham.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.