

Promises! Promises!©
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Genesis 13:14-18

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Last week, we began with Abram's initial call from God to step out from all that he knows and to begin this journey into a land that God will lead him to. Abram is 75 years old when he hears and obeys this voice of Yahweh. He takes his wife, Sarai (who is 65) and his nephew, Lot, and they start out with what servants and livestock he has.

They leave all their kinfolk behind, and their home, all that was familiar, to make this journey based on a beckoning call from God ... a call that promises many blessings for Abraham and his descendants. Problem is – he has no descendants. Did I mention he was 75 years old? And his wife was 65? That could be a problem! Promises! Promises! Can this be real?

But now, God repeats and adds to the promise, in chapter 13, after there has already been some incidents along that way – things like a detour into Egypt because of famine. Abram tells his wife, Sarai to tell Pharaoh that she is Abram's sister instead of his wife. That way, Pharaoh takes "stunningly beautiful" Sarai into his palace to be his own wife and Abram prospers. This is the first time he takes God's plan into his own hands and it won't be the last.

But God isn't pleased with this turn of events and he causes all kinds of bad things to start happening in Egypt until Pharaoh finds out the truth and casts them both out. But Abram left with more riches – donkeys and camels, sheep and cattle, men and women servants – and – he was still alive!

So now he has lot's more livestock and more wealth – maybe a fancier tent? (Maybe a nice motor home?) And they get back on track and continue the journey through Canaan and the land where God had led him in the first place.

But because he, and Lot, now have more livestock, they need to separate so they can feed their animals. The Canaanites and the Perizzites were also living there with their own animals. So, Abram gave his nephew, Lot, his pick of the land and Lot chose what looked like the best.

The Scripture says: *Abram settled in Canaan; Lot settled in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent near Sodom.* (Little did he know that choosing land that included sinful, evil Sodom and Gomorrah would end up bringing him to ruin.)

But after Lot and his family and possessions moved on, we read:

God said to Abram, "Open your eyes, look around. Look north, south, east, and west. Everything you see, the whole land spread out before you, I will give to you and your children forever.

Wait. What? Abram surely was thinking "is this a joke? I'm 75 and I have no children. Promises! Promises!"

But God said, I'll make your descendants like dust—counting your descendants will be as impossible as counting the dust of the Earth. (Counting Dust might have been a good sermon title!)

And then God said, "Get up and get moving! Walk through the country, its length and breadth; because I'm giving it all to you." (The Message)

¹⁸ Abram then packed up this tent and moved. And when he was settled by the Oaks of Mamre in Hebron, he built an altar to God.

Throughout these stories we learn that these faithful – though very human people – did not forget to worship God wherever they were.

Today, we begin the adventure through the stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of Genesis – the first book of the Bible. These people, although they lived in a very different time and culture, are still very much like us.

They had family history, relationships that were full of drama. They fell in love, they had children. They have a family tree. They were people of faith in the one true God; they obediently stepped out into unknown territory because they heard God’s beckoning voice.

But, they were also prone to rebellion and disobedience and sin. Sometimes reading these stories almost seems like reading about a soap opera.

Like I said, they were a lot like us.

I know you know these stories. They are pretty familiar, and you might be thinking that it’s not going to be that much of an adventure. You’ve already been there. But I believe that God always has something new and fresh for us to see and learn every time we study the Scripture. It is never exactly the same. I believe God is calling us to explore these stories with open minds and ears, being completely willing to hear something different that might transform us as individuals and as a church.

I’ve been reading a book about Christian leadership in today’s very different culture. The book is written by Tom Bolsinger who is a Presbyterian pastor and professor at Fuller Seminary in California. It’s titled *Canoeing the Mountains*.¹

Bolsinger tells the story of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Here is part of the letter that was written by Thomas Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis about the expedition the president was commissioning him to do:

To Captain Meriwether Lewis.

The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River, & such principal stream of it, as by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean ... may offer the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce.

Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Meriwether Lewis

In other words, the mission was to find a water route that would connect the Pacific Ocean to the Mississippi River. Everyone was sure it was there. Somewhere. If Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery could find this cherished water route it would ensure the young nation’s prosperity. It was about trade and commerce. Discovering and claiming this water route would

¹ Bolsinger, Tom, *Canoeing the Mountains*, ©2015, InterVarsity Press

put America ahead because we would own the trade route and we would have control of the resources of this great continent. (p. 25)

They set out on this expedition feeling confident that they knew fairly well what to expect. Part of the mission was to meet and develop good relationships with the Native Americans on the way – something they were successful with except for one incident.

They knew there would be grizzly bears and other wild animals to contend with, as well as all types of weather, including of course winter and snow.

The Native Americans told them there would be mountains as well. But, they weren't too worried. They knew what mountains were like – they had experienced traveling over and through the Appalachian Mountains. While it was rough, they knew they could do it and that's what they expected would be ahead of them.

Here is a quote from Bolsingers book:

Lewis and a small scouting party ... had followed a small trail up a creek and now were at the spring itself. This little trickle was the source of the mighty Missouri River. This water would flow all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. They had found what no person of European descent had, before them. And the most challenging obstacle on their journey from what was then the United States to the Pacific Ocean was now behind them. (P. 25)

At least that was what he thought! He was sure he would walk up the hill from that little stream, look down a gentle slope that would take his men a half day to cross with their canoes on their backs, and then they would see the Columbia River. After 15 months of going upstream they looked forward to letting the current swiftly whisk them to the Pacific Ocean. They would crest the hill, find the stream, and coast to the finish line. P. 25-26)

But – what they saw proved that all their expectations and all the maps they had were wrong. What they saw was not some rolling, gentle slope or mountains like they had known.

Instead, they encountered the great, intimidating and overwhelming Rocky Mountains – unknown territory for sure!

One of the men in their group said about the Rockies “*they were the most terrible mountains I ever beheld.*”

Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery were about to go off the map and into uncharted territory. They would have to change plans, give up expectations, even reframe their entire mission. What lay before them was nothing like what was behind them. There were no experts, no maps, no “best practices” and no sure guides who could lead them safely and successfully.

*The true adventure – the real discovery – was just beginning.
(p. 27)*

And so it is very similar to us – the church. We are starting an adventure, and it feels something like standing there looking out at the Rocky Mountains. Except the mountains for us is our

culture, is the extreme change in our society and our way of thinking – about life and about church and religion. Everything looks and feels different. But, the good news is that – like Abram - we do have a sure guide.

The same God who wooed Abram and Sarai from their place of comfort and familiarity is the same God who has called the church into being and is leading us and guiding us along the journey – even though it looks different now from how it looked in the past, and will continue to look different in the future.

Lewis and Clark did not turn back to where they had been and did not keep trying to do the same things that had worked for them in the past. Those familiar things were not going to work anymore. They did not get stuck and just put up camp and sit there until they froze to death either.

They did what Abram did. They got up and went into the unknown – probably with some fear and trepidation. I’m still terrified today when I drive through those Rocky Mountains. But they went and while the entire mission changed and looked different, they did finally reach their destination. They trusted each other completely; they worked together; they stuck together and they made it.

What an adventure! What amazing things they saw and experienced and accomplished – it wasn’t quite what they had planned but it was something new and exciting. And still they were successful, even though it was a different success.

Even though God is a God who never changes – God does lead us into exciting, if not somewhat intimidating changes.

Listen to this word of the Lord from Isaiah 43:19-21. I’m reading from The Message translation:

This is what God says, the God who builds a road right through the ocean, who carves a path through pounding waves, The God who summons horses and chariots and armies— they lie down and then can’t get up; they’re snuffed out like so many candles:

*“Forget about what’s happened; don’t keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I’m about to do something brand-**new**. It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it? There it is! I’m making a road through the desert, rivers in the badlands. Wild animals will say ‘Thank you!’ —the coyotes and the buzzards— Because I provided water in the desert, rivers through the sunbaked earth, drinking water for the people I chose, the people I made especially for myself, a people custom-made to praise me.*

We have a very competent guide on this adventure. His promises may seem outlandish and impossible but nothing is impossible for God. He is leading you in your life and he is guiding us, the church, to accomplish the mission we are called for. Let us trust and go with enthusiasm and joy. We have each other and we have God.

And let us always remember, where ever he leads, to worship him with all our hearts; with thanksgiving and praise.

Amen.