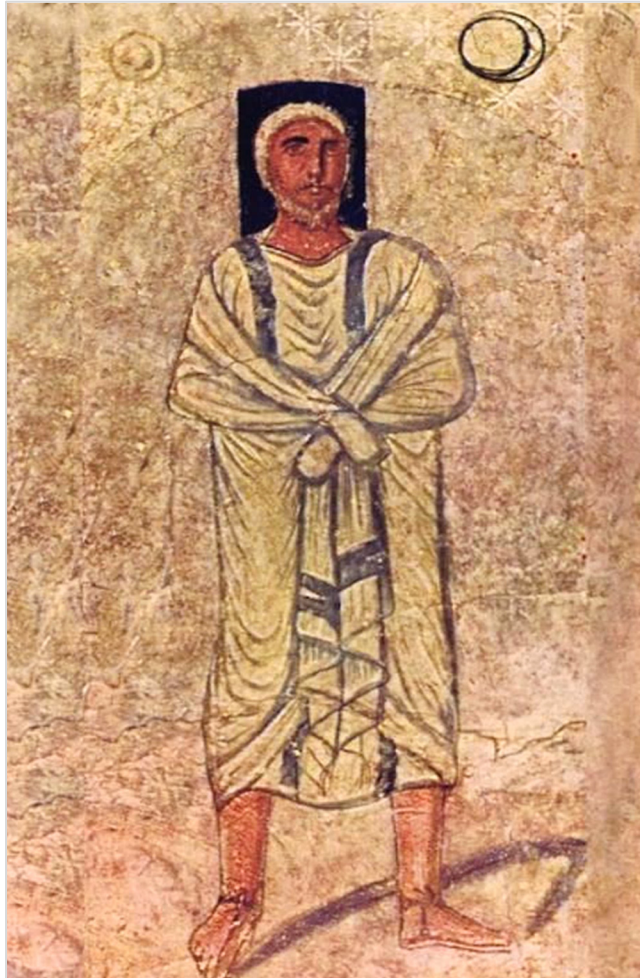


Making Our Way Stage by Stage

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Abraham," Dura Europos Synagogue, Damascus, Syria, 244 A.D.

Prayer of Illumination

God of mercy, you promised
never to break your covenant with us.
In the midst of the multitude of words in our daily lives,
speak your eternal Word to us, that we may hear
and respond to your gracious promises
with faithfulness, service, and love.
Amen.

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-9 (NRSVue)

¹ Now 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. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I 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."^[a]

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot and all the possessions that they had gathered and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran, and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak^[b] of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east, and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – "Making Our Way Stage by Stage"

We're on the cusp of something new again—a new beginning, a new creation out of the utter chaos of the *tohu bohu* we looked at last week.

There was God's Plan A: Adam and Eve. It was good and great...until they ate of the forbidden fruit and were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Then God's Plan B: With Noah, God wiped the slate clean with the flood. But it didn't take long for things to unravel. More *tohu bohu*.

Now we're at God's Plan C: A new, new beginning through Abraham. Through this man, God will seek to reconcile humanity back to God. We have an advantage: we know how things turn out.

Paul tells us in Romans that Abraham is the father of all who believe. Kierkegaard called Father Abraham "the knight of faith." Our passage this morning is one of the most important scenes in all of Scripture. The faith roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all started here with Abraham's

leap of faith. But right now, so much is open-ended and unknown for Abraham. In fact, Abraham himself is pretty much unknown at this point. But this we know: He's a bit of a late-bloomer, seventy-five years old and childless. Abraham is regular—someone we can relate to.

This is the beauty of how God works with us today, too:

- God qualifies the unqualified,
- Empowers the powerless.
- God makes the ordinary, extraordinary.

Unlike Moses, Abraham wasn't a lawgiver or liberator. Unlike the later prophets, Abraham didn't confront kings or speak truth to power. But this is Abraham's giant leap for mankind: He stepped out in faith into the *tohu bohu*, the chaotic unknown, responding to the call of God.

Abraham wasn't perfect. In fact, he makes a number of blunders. But through his failing and fumbling, Abraham keeps the faith. He doesn't give up. Abraham welcomes the stranger and gives them food. He negotiates with God to rescue Lot's family and prays for Sodom. He believes God will give him a son. And he's willing to give up Isaac, after all that waiting for him.

Abraham shows us how to courageously live our regular lives. How to live by faith, even when we're standing alone.

But this call of God upon Abraham had already begun—before even Abraham was aware of it. We read in the previous chapter of Genesis that his father Tera began the journey from Ur in Mesopotamia (*one of the oldest cities ever built*) to Herron, which is today southeastern Turkey. But for some reason the journey to Canaan stalled. They pitched their tents and settled halfway. We don't know why the journey came to a halt, but it did.

But now God was calling Abraham to complete what his father had only begun. Our parents equip us and get us going. But then there comes a time where we pursue what God is calling not our parents to do, but what God wants us to do. A good parent gives that space for the children to spread their wings and fly.

And God, our heavenly Father, gives us that room as well: ***Go forth.***

GO FORTH

GO FORTH. The rabbis over the centuries have had fascinating debates about what this meant for Abraham and for us.

GO FOR YOURSELF

1. The first interpretation is "**Go for yourself.**" In other words, move from being a settler to a pilgrim. Get out of the shire and into the world. Join in the journey of faith and with it will come blessing, adventure. You'll come alive. You see, answering God's call betters us. But to receive this blessing you've got to give up your past to enter into a new future. Taking the leap of faith involves listening to and trusting in the voice of the invisible God.

The sacrifice is first, but the benefits will follow—trust Me. Go for yourself—believe that God’s promises for you can be actualized. Pursue the promise.

GO WITH YOURSELF

2. The second interpretation is: “**Go with yourself.**” By venturing out to new places, you will extend your influence. Don’t keep to yourself, don’t hold yourself back from others. Be who you are everywhere you go. Don’t be stingy with the gift of your life.

The rabbis used this story to illustrate:

When the Holy One said to Abraham, “Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father’s house...” what did Abraham resemble? He was like a jar of fragrance with a tightly sealed lid. It was hidden away in a corner and so its aroma couldn’t emanate out. But as soon as the jar was moved from its place and opened, its fragrance spread and could be enjoyed by others. So Abraham, in faith, journey from place to place, so that the greatness of your name will go forth in My world.”

Like a perfume, Abraham and Sarah would bring the scent of God’s knowledge and presence wherever they went. It’s the same for us: wherever you go, let the pleasing aroma of your gifts, your message, your way of life, your faith in God waft to everyone you meet.

GO TO YOURSELF

3. The third interpretation is: “**Go to yourself.**” This is a more mystic understanding. Pilgrimage is a journey to the root of the soul. One rabbi put it this way: When I get to heaven, they will not ask me, why were you not Moses? No, they will ask me, “Zushya, why were you not Zushya?” God was calling Abraham to take a long and lonely journey to discover who he truly was. “Go to yourself.” I will show you who you truly are.

GO BY YOURSELF

4. There’s a fourth interpretation: “**Go by yourself.**” Abraham, trust me. Be willing to leave it all behind. Let go of what’s holding you back. Step out in faith—stand alone. Be different. Worship me alone in the midst of idols all around. Don’t be defined by economic forces, biological limitations, or psychological doubts—Listen to and follow the will and word of God. Journey into the unknown with Me. Trust that by going alone, I miraculously will make a great nation of you.

The only things we can pack in our luggage for this journey is faith, hope, and love. Leave all else behind. Go minimalist.

Abraham, you’re packing a suitcase for a place you’ve never been. A place that has to be believed to be seen. “Just go where I direct you, as I direct you. Follow my will. Look to me, not to your circumstances or your resources. Trust that in due time, the unseen will become seen.”

I like how U2 puts it in their song "Walk On":

*All that you fashion
All that you make
All that you build, all that you break
All that you measure, all that you feel
All this you can leave behind.*

By this call, God is making a fresh start for Abraham, for us.
But it's more than an invitation or a request—it's a summoning.
God isn't being polite or subtle here.
Basically, "Get yourself over there Abraham."

It's a move from comfort, to discomfort.
The familiar, to the unfamiliar.
Death, to resurrection.

"If any wish to come after me," says Jesus, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." In leaving it all behind Abraham, you will gain what really matters. It's the blessed life.



So, what does blessing mean?

It's a harmonious, vibrant relationship with God. Shalom.
This peace with God spills over into our spiritual, emotional, psychological, and even material lives.

To be blessed is to be whole, even in the midst of hardship and lack.
God is in the business of restoring blessing. And Abraham will be the instrument God will use to bless the world.

To the landless Abraham, "I will give you a land." An outlandish promise, really.
To the childless seventy-five-year-old Abraham and Sarah, "I will not only give you an heir, but I will make you into a great nation. Through the threats and obstacles that come against this promise of blessing, trust in Me."

We have the same choice. When our way gets rocky will we respond in fear or faith? Belief or unbelief? God is not particularly interested in accomplishing things in the obvious, natural, or easy way. God makes the impossible, possible. God does, not us.

"I I I I" — Over and over God says "I" will bless you. "I will make you great. I will make of you a great nation. I will bless those who bless you."

It's all God. It's all a gift. Why? Because we know it's a miracle. It's all God, not us.

"But it won't be easy. There will be sacrifice and loss. Moments of doubt and confusion, even failure. But I'm going to do the miraculous. Just go... and watch Me."

Abraham obeyed and left his old life behind for a new one.

"I will bless your sandals off. And this isn't just about you. Through My blessing you will be a blessing to others." This is how God works. God takes ahold of a person and a people and blesses others through them. We don't contain or conceal God's blessings, we channel them to others. We're mediators of blessing. The reason God calls and chooses some people rather than others is not to exclude the others, but to include them.

Like Abraham, we're –

- Selected for service.
- Chosen for charity.
- Mobilized for mission.
- Blessed to be a blessing.

God works in ways that draws people into relationship, not only with God, but with one another.

So Abraham leaves his land and goes on a pilgrimage to the holy land that is not yet given to him. God shows Abraham the land that his future descendant Joshua will one day enter. Starting in the North at Shechem and the Oak of Moreh, Abraham continued his journey to the center between Bethel and Ai, and finally to the south he continued to make his way, stage by stage toward the Negeb. All along the way, Abraham sets up altars and calls on God. In faith, he looks to God and God travels with him.

And for us, we need to intentionally live in God's presence as we pursue the promise. Hebrews tells us that faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." Faith is the embrace of God's radical call of relinquishment, surrender, and following Jesus—who is the Way.

It's here the blessing is found. It's the cost of discipleship—following Jesus. Faith is setting out, even if we're unsure of where we're going, because we know God knows, and God is leading us home to our eternal kingdom.

Amen.

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