

**2 Lent
March 13, 2022**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

Over two and a half million refugees have crossed the Ukrainian border to find safety in neighboring countries while their homeland is under brutal attack from Vladimir Putin's Russian Army. They have left everything they own except what they can fit into a few suitcases or backpacks. Their homes, markets, hospitals, schools and other institutions are being destroyed by bombs, rocket attacks, and mortar shelling.

These refugees have left everything that is familiar to them, and have entered a world of uncertainty. They live in temporary housing, eat food provided them by strangers, and communicate in a language that is foreign to many of them. No one knows how long their journey will be ... or where they will end up.

From news reports many of these refugees are being received with open arms by the people in the surrounding nations. But I can only imagine the fear and anxiety that these people are living with. Most of the refugees are women and children who have left their husbands, and sons, and brothers and uncles behind to defend their country. They are being driven into a new life, but they have little choice. If they remained in Ukraine they risked death, so they leave everything that has represented security for them to seek safety and life in a strange place.

The circumstances are different, but the story of our faith is full of similar journeys ... people are driven or led out of everything that is familiar into a place that is strange. Sometimes it is violence that drives them out of their homeland ... sometimes it is spirit ... but the consequences are similar.

In the first twelve chapters of the Book of Genesis we hear the stories of the Creation; Adam and Eve and the Temptation ... and they are driven out of the Garden of Eden; Sodom and Gomorrah where angels of God destroy their cities and Lot and his family have to flee; Noah and the Ark ... driven into a stormy exile in a flood; and the Tower of Babel among others.

The text in the Book of Genesis then turns away from these mythic tales to the epic story chronicling the beginning of monotheism ... the story of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. The storyline follows Abraham and Sarah, their son Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and then Isaac and Rebekah's son Jacob and his wife Rachel. Jacob had twelve sons, one of whom was Joseph. Joseph was sold by his brothers to slavers and taken to Egypt.

We heard that story just a few weeks ago. The same brothers who sold Joseph as a slave travel to Egypt seeking relief from a famine. Joseph's family became refugees from their homeland and settled in the culturally and religiously different Egypt.

Generations later the tribe of Israelites lived under the oppression of the Pharaoh. Moses sought to negotiate a peacefully exit, but the Pharaoh would not let them. As Moses led his people away from everything they ever knew, they were chased by the Pharaoh's army.

After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness the Israelites settled in a land of "milk and honey" where eventually judges and kings ruled until Jerusalem fell violently to the Assyrians under Solomon, King David's son. The Israelites once more were violently driven out of their homeland and everything familiar ... they were driven into exile the strange land of Babylon.

Several generations after the exile, the Israelites were repatriated to their homeland, yet they never fully recovered and struggled under oppression for centuries by one empire or another. And then Jesus, one of their own ... a descendant of Abraham and Sarah ... began his ministry in a little backwater region of the Promised Land.

In a few short paragraphs that is the saga contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. This morning's first reading fills in the specifics of part of the bigger picture. Why did Abram leave his home in the first place.

About four thousand years ago a family of nomads left Ur of the Chaldeans ... probably in the area today that we know as southeastern Iraq near Nasariyah ... and they settled in Haran ... an area in which is now Turkey. Haran is believed to be near the present day Turkey/Syrian border. A few mountain ranges and the Black Sea is all that separates this area from the devastation in Ukraine.

While living in Haran the family patriarch, Terah, died, and his son Abram ... who later became Abraham ... started hearing voices. As those voices became more persistent Abraham came to the conclusion that they were from God ... and he dared to obey them.

"Leave your country," God told Abraham. "Leave your people and your family. Leave all that you hold dear and familiar. Go to the land I will show you."

And then the text from the Book of Genesis says: "So Abraham left, as the Lord had told him." He couldn't have known it at the time, but in leaving Haran Abraham altered human history forever.

Abraham set out not knowing where he was going, or even why he was going, except that God had commanded him. In doing so Abraham defied both the inner tendencies of human nature and the outer pressures of conforming to the culture that always seem to push us in the opposite direction. Most of us want to journey from the unknown, to the known ... from what we do not have, to what we think we want and need ... from the strange and the unpredictable, to the safe and the secure ... and from mere promises, to human guarantees. Whereas Abraham acted whole-heartedly but without certainty, all too often we demand certainty and act hesitantly.

This story isn't just a bit of history of the father of monotheism ... the story of the ancestors of our faith some four thousand years ago. I believe that God's call upon Abraham's life is a call that's repeated in our world today. It is a call that challenges conventional wisdom, and so it feels counter-intuitive. Yet, God calls us ... and sometimes drives us ... to move beyond several very human, powerful and deep-seated fears ... fear of the unknown that we can't control ... fear of others who are different from us ... and fear of powerlessness in the face of impossibilities.

Abraham's departure from his home in Haran ... taking with him his wife Sarai ... later to become Sarah ... was more than a mere change of geography. In leaving Haran for Canaan, Abraham left all that was familiar ... all custom and comfort, family and friends, all the regularity and rhythm of his life. The only thing he would retain of Haran was the power of his memories. Abraham journeyed from what he had to what he did not have ... from the known, to the unknown ... from everything that was familiar, to all things strange. And it is happening every day in the world around us.

With his journey into the unknown, Abraham embraced ignorance, relinquished control, and chose to live with confidence in God's promise to bless him in a new and strange place. However, Abraham had to leave not only his geographic home. He had to leave behind his narrow-minded parochial vision ... the tendency in all of us to exclude the stranger and all that was different. Moreover, if Abraham would be obedient to these voices, God would make Abraham ... and his wife Sarah ... the ancestors of the faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. From the reading this morning, "[The Lord] brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.'" Then [the Lord] said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

Our tendency as human beings is to fear the other, to marginalize the stranger, to dismiss all that is different from who we are and what we know. It is our nature to exclude all those who don't agree with our opinions, and in the process we become like a cult. Cults are composed of men and women who reinforce their basic identity by banding together with others who are pursuing similar brands of identity ... liking the same foods, believing in the same idols, playing the same games, despising the same outsiders. A cult is good at getting rid of what does not please them ... getting rid of what offends them ... whether they are ideas or people.

Ironically, in the process of gathering into like-minded groups we construct religious clubs instead of participating in resurrection communities. However, what we are hearing with the call of Abraham, is that God calls us to a universal and inclusive embrace of everyone and "all peoples on earth."

Of course, there was one problem to God's promise of offspring to bless the entire world through a single individual who in obedience had journeyed into the unknown. We know the rest of the story ... Abraham and his wife Sarah were both "of age," and while they might not have enjoyed our knowledge of human biology and modern medicine, they knew that they

were far beyond their childbearing years. Humanly speaking, they faced an impossibility that brought them face to face with their own powerlessness to alter their circumstances. As for bearing a child, barren Sarah and impotent Abraham were "as good as dead."

But Abraham made a counter-intuitive and subversive choice. He believed that God had the power to perform what he had promised. In his faith Abraham and Sarah moved beyond their fears of powerlessness to the place of believing that God could, quite literally, make something out of nothing. And, in due time, Isaac, the son of promise, was born.

When God called Abraham, he challenged conventional wisdom and moved beyond normal and understandable human fears ... ignorance, inclusion, and impotence. Instead of lamenting his ignorance and the loss of control, Abraham embarked upon a journey into the unknown. Instead of fearing inclusion of the stranger and the outsider, he bore God's promise of universal blessings for the whole earth. In the face of his own impotence, he believed that God could do the impossible. In so doing, Abraham became "the father of us all."

The longest and hardest journey is not necessarily the outer, visible, or tangible journey, but rather the inner journey of the spirit and soul. The geography of ancient Mid-East pales in comparison to the complex geography of the human heart. The journeys we make in our lives today ... journeys in our relationships ... journeys with our health ... journeys toward the end of our lives ... are all visible, tangible signs of what real journeys are going on within our spirits and souls.

Lent is our journey of faith over forty days as we prepare for the new life of the Resurrection at Easter. During this time we are called to "self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting a self-denial, and reading and meditating of God's holy word." Our ultimate journey is to move from a heart curved in on itself, to an openness to the love and goodness of God, a love for others, and a love for all of God's world. This is our journey in Lent ... to recapture the goodness with which we were made. We were made in goodness, for goodness, and this Lenten journey is a journey that can last a lifetime.

Remember, this story isn't just a bit of history of Abraham and Sarah ... the story of the ancestors of our faith some four thousand years ago. We can see this story in the headlines every day. And, we can see this story in our own lives ... God's call upon Abraham's life is a call that's repeated to each one of us today. It is a call that challenges conventional wisdom, and yes, it feels counter-intuitive. Yet, God calls us to move beyond our fears ... fear of the unknown that we can't control ... fear of others who are different from us ... and fear of powerlessness in the face of impossibilities. God calls us to trust ... to include the stranger ... and to face with confidence the unknown in our lives.

As we journey through our Lent ... as each of participates in our own Lenten discipline ... I invite you to ponder how God is calling you to live into a life that goes beyond your fears. During this Lent ... in the midst of a tragic crisis that will affect us all ... open your hearts and souls to the stranger who is our neighbor thousands of miles away ... face the fears you have of your own

security so you can provide safety for another ... and seek a faith that believes in the impossible.

In these uncertain times for the people of Ukraine ... and all of us around the world ... I end with a "A Prayer of Unknowing" by Thomas Merton,

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that, if I do this, You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.