

**“On the Road Again”**  
**Genesis 12:1-9**  
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I love going on road trips. Hopping in the car and heading out for days on end. My parents did too. When I was a kid, that's how we would travel. I never flew on a plane until I was 14. And then I don't think I was on another one until I was 21. We always drove. If we were going somewhere as a family, we drove. When we came back to Michigan to see relatives, we drove. When we went to Saskatchewan to see my mother's parents, we drove. When we went on summer vacations, we would go camping, and we drove. I learned to love road trips and as an adult I have looked forward to trips that Erin and I have taken, back to New York, or out to Colorado or Oregon. The longer the better. The kids would occasionally get annoyed with me, because from about 24 hours before the trip until we drove out of the driveway, I would start humming or singing that old song by Willie Nelson, “On the Road Again.” “On the road again, just can't wait to be on the road again, the life I love is making music with my friends, and I can't wait to be on the road again.” I could always count on three sets of rolling eyes as soon as the song started.

I wonder if Abram's family felt that way? His was a family that always seemed to be on the move, on the road again. Abram, who will be renamed Abraham, is a pivotal character in the Bible. Actually, he might be described as a pivotal character in the history of the world. A majority of people in the entire world can claim him as the ancestor of their faith. To the earth's 2.2 billion Christians, the 1.6 billion Muslims and the 14 million Jews, Abram is the forefather of their faith, and it all begins here in Genesis 12. Although 55% of the world's population belongs to Abrahamic faiths, there is an amazingly small amount we know about Abram. According to most traditions, he was born in Ur, which is in the southern part of the Tigris-Euphrates valley in what is now Iraq. Those of you who remember your middle school history lessons know that the first great civilizations of the world grew up in river valleys, the Yellow and Yangze in China, the Ganges and Indus in India, the Nile in Egypt,

and here in the Tigris-Euphrates valley in what is known as the Fertile Crescent. It was in these river valleys that human beings first developed agriculture and so they began to settle down, stay in one place, build permanent settlements, learn to live together, create governments and religions, and eventually create systems for recording things by writing them down. And although written language developed in Abram's area of Mesopotamia a thousand years before Abram and Sarai lived, there is no record of them that goes back that far. Even the Bible begins its record of them when Abram is supposed to be 75 years old. And there are no extra-biblical record of his existence until about 800 years after he had lived. He's a mysterious figure in history, but one whom all these people claim as the father of their faith.

While much of the world was learning to live together in settled places, some of the population kept to what had been a nomadic lifestyle, moving from place to place with their herds of sheep or goats, living there for a while and then moving on. This seems to have been the habit of Abram and his family.

Sometime after Abram's marriage to Sarai, Abram's father Terah begins to move the family from Ur to Canaan. Ur is only a couple of hundred miles to the east of Canaan, what is now Israel. But they didn't go directly there. If you can imagine Abram's family living in West Virginia and suddenly God calls them to go live in Chicago, but Ohio and Indiana are deserts with no water and no roads. So one might travel northwest instead of directly west, stopping for a while in Lansing or Kalamazoo. That's what Terah's family does. They travel northwest to a town called Haran and settle there. That is where Abram's father Terah dies. And that's when God speaks to Abram and tells him that he has been chosen to continue this journey to Canaan.

God says to him that he is to leave his home, his father's house, his family, his country and go someplace new. To a new place that God will give him. And he goes. That's what's amazing about Abram, he goes. To a place he's never been before, never to go back home, just on the word of this God that suddenly speaks to him. He goes. And who is this one who speaks to him? Does God speak to him out of the blue? Has God ever spoken to him before? How does Abram even know who this

God is? We know that the people of his time were mainly polytheistic. There were gods for the family, for the city, different gods for the weather, for the mountains, for the desert, for the water, for the trees. Which God speaks to him? He doesn't even ask, he just goes. He has an amazing faith, to go someplace new. Maybe that's why after this when God speaks to Isaac, or to Jacob or to Moses, he begins by saying "I am the God of your father Abraham." But Abram doesn't know him, does he? God doesn't identify himself as the God of his father Terah, or as the God who controls the world or the creator of the universe or even as the God of his tribe or his family. God just speaks, and Abram listens and then obeys.

In a way, we can view the stories in the Bible as sort of a progressive revelation of God. When God spoke to Abram and then to Isaac and Jacob, they viewed him as the god of their family, someone who watched over them. Other families had their own gods. When Jacob's family grows and he fathers twelve sons and they have families, they begin to see God as the god of their tribe, but of course other tribes have their own gods. When the tribe of Jacob grows into the nation of Israel when they are in Egypt, God reveals himself to Moses as the God of that nation. But of course, Egypt has its own gods as do the Philistines, the Greeks, the Moabites, the Elamites, and all the other nations. If an Israelite were to travel to one of those countries, it would only be common courtesy to pay homage to that nation's god while one was there. But then on Mount Sinai, God gives commandments to the nation of Israel, and the first one is: "You shall have no other gods except me." Notice he doesn't say, there are no other gods, he just commands that there will be no other gods for the people of Israel, that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the only god they should worship. We sometimes think of the Jews as the first real monotheists, those who believe in only one god, but at the time of Moses they are not monotheists yet. There is another term called "monolatry" which means that a group worships only one god, while not denying the existence of other gods. It is not until hundreds of years later that the Israelites begin to realize that the god they worship is the only god. That the god they worship is the creator of all the nations, not just them. But that progression of belief about god takes a thousand

years. But it has to start somewhere and God decides to choose Abram.

But why does God choose Abram? Because of his great faith? Because he was a semi-nomadic herder and it would be easier to get him to move? Because he was the only one listening at the time? Why does God choose Abram? Why this one man, who is the only person in the Bible who is described as “the friend of God.” Why him? We don’t know, but with this call to Abram begins the legacy of the Chosen People. God chooses one family, one tribe, one nation to be his chosen people, to speak to, to begin to create the Bible, to teach the rest of the world about one God. Why does God do it this way? Why doesn’t he choose the Chinese, or the Arapaho, or the Zulu, or the Celts? Why does he choose the nation of Israel? That’s always bothered me, that God should choose one people, one nation and not others. And why does he start with Abram? Out of all the people in the world, why does he begin with Abram?

Well, maybe he doesn’t. I mean he does choose Abram, but maybe he doesn’t choose only Abram. Maybe Abram is not just the father of the Jews and the Arabs. We’ve said that Abram is sort of a shadowy historical figure but maybe he’s supposed to represent all of us. God calls Abram to take this journey in faith but doesn’t he also call each one of us? Abram is called to take a leap of faith, to believe the words of this God that he doesn’t really know, to take his family to someplace new that he’s never seen before, all because God called him to do it. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever taken a leap of faith, a journey that you weren’t sure where it was going to go?? Have you ever stepped into something new not sure whether it would really work out? You have if you’ve ever been married, or if you’ve ever moved away for college or a job, if you’ve ever had a child. All those require faith, a leap of faith. There may be good reasons to think that this is the way to go, but it may have been far more comfortable to say the way you were. Stay at home, stay single, stay childless—you knew what those things were like. No one knows what marriage is like unless you get married. No one knows what parenthood is like until you become a parent. You can’t know what that new school, new job or new home is going to be like until you actually move and do it. We all take these uncertain journeys.

We're all called to go out on the road to head for a new place. Be a friend. Join a church. Give to charity. Forgive a wrong. Say you're sorry. It's always easier to not go there, isn't it? To just stay home, to keep things the way they are? But the voice of God is always calling to us: follow me, I want to show you someplace new, let's get moving.

As God's people, as Christ's church we are always on a journey to the unknown. We are always looking for direction from God and he calls us to leap in faith. As a community of faith, where is God leading us? The call to Abram reminds us that God will bless those who take that leap of faith, but remember that it also tells us that we are blessed so that we may be a blessing. We have many blessings as a church; our building with such a rich history, our financial resources, our people who have so many gifts. But God calls us to someplace new, to use all those things so that the world may be blessed through us. Where is God leading us today? What do you think we should do with our mission money? How should our building be used faithfully? How should we relate to the community around us? This last week you helped to send 20 youth to West Virginia. They weren't all "members" of our church, their parents weren't all officially members of our church. They didn't all live in Richland or Plainwell. They weren't all the same race or same economic condition or ethnicity. But we sent them all, in a leap of faith, on that journey because they are all our kids. We, in faith, sent them so that they could be of service to people we will never know. And we sent them so that their journey to an unknown place might be one where they learn that all their lives God will be calling them to new and strange places, but will be with them all along the way. And some of the kids we might not see again. But that's ok. We've been blessed to be a blessing. And we do these things in faith. Abram trusted that God would lead him and Sarai. So do we. We trust that God will take what we do in faith and make something new, and bless someone new. Because in the end, this is not just the story Abram's journey to an unknown land, it's ours. We're all on the road again.