

“So Abram went...”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, March 15, 2020
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Genesis 12:1-4a

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. 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. 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.” **So Abram went**, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Genesis 12:1-4a

Will you pray with me. Challenging God, you called Abram and he followed your lead. You call each of us every day and sometimes we act as if we are deaf to your beckoning. Unplug our ears, take the blinders off our eyes and open our hearts to receive your call this day, O God, for we are in need of a little direction here, most especially now. Amen.

“Ye came from far-off journeyings, O, makers of Maine,
and turned the sod, and shaped with bloodshed, toil and pain,
this wondrous path that we have trod.
Ye set your hands unflinchingly,
to push through virgin soil the plow, the nucleus of the way and how.
To you, O sturdy pioneers, we owe the progress of the years.
We give the credit where it lies --
the mighty power, the dauntless will,
the rugged hands so long since still were yours.
‘tis ye who made today;
‘tis ye who blazed the hard-hewn way;
‘tis ye, O breakers of our sod
through whom we keep our faith in God.”¹

I wish I could say I wrote those eloquent and poetic words about the “Makers of Maine,” but I didn’t. They were written by Frances Wright Turner, poet, fiction writer and artist, who was from Ellsworth, Maine. This poem, “Makers of Maine” is dated November, 1928. Turner lived from 1882-1965.

Today is the 200th anniversary of the State of Maine! Celebrations were to have taken place all over the state today. Unfortunately, another event has super ceded lots of happenings that were to take place this weekend – the coronavirus event.

Somehow it seems fitting to think of the “sturdy pioneers, to whom we owe the progress of the years” on this 200th anniversary of our statehood, and in this time when we are being asked to be “sturdy” and of “dauntless will” as we face a deadly virus in our state, country and around the world.

¹Written by Frances Wright Turner, Ellsworth, ME, November, 1928

It's a momentous time – not in a celebratory way, but in a way to force us to think about the near and distant future and how our lives are being changed because of a virus that has become pandemic. So how do we move forward, not in fear but with courage, not in ignorance but in knowledge growing by the day, not in division but in unity?

Our text from Genesis for today tells us that God instructed Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 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. 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.” **So Abram went**, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.” (Gen 12:1-4a)

So... So what? So how come? So what’s to say? So where shall we eat? So what do you want to do? So how shall we go forward from this chaotic and uncertain day? “So Abram went...” (Gen 12:4a) With a little two letter conjunction that can go in so many different directions, “so,” Abram – who would become Abraham approximately 4,000 years ago – began the journey from his homeland on God’s instruction. This journey would position him to become the sacred father of us all – at least those of us who profess to be Christians, Jews, or Muslims. For all three of these world religions trace their beginnings to this journey of Abram. “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.” (Gen 12:4a)

That’s a lot of power coming after a short two letter conjunction, “so.” I looked up the word “so” in my *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* and discovered five full pages listing the verses in the Bible in which the word “so” is used.

“So God created man in his own image.” (Gen 1:27) “So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth.” (Gen 8:11) “So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea...” (Ex 15:22) “So Jesus had compassion and touched their eyes...” (Matt 20:34) “So they ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets of leftover fragments.” (Mk 8:8) In all of these “so” passages and many more, one action leads to another. One holy reminder of God leads to human movement in one direction or another.

“So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.” (Gen 12:41) Reflecting on these words in the early 1950’s Professor Walter Bowie wrote, “As a small surface of still water can mirror the immensity of the sky, so these few words reflect a truth that overarches all life and time. It is the truth that the great idea must lead to action. Spiritual opportunity is spiritual obligation. Religion must be obedience. [I’ll respond to that thought in a minute.] But though that is true, [we] do not always accept the truth. So it might have been with Abraham. Instead of responding to the voice in his conscience, which he felt to be the voice of God, he might have refused to heed it for various reasons which were so plausible that they well might have been convincing. [Bowie poses these questions:]

How did Abraham know that the disturbing and difficult new urging was the voice of God?

What practical sense was in it?

What proof was there that what it suggested would work out right?

Why would any sensible [person] pay such a price as the breaking up of the whole basis of his life just because of something uncomfortable in his soul?

‘There is no sense in it,’ Abraham might have said, just as many have said.”²

What do you think? How did Abram, who would become known as Abraham, the father of three great world religions, know that “the disturbing and difficult new urging was the voice of God? (get responses)

There’s a line from one of Lilly Tomlin’s skits that I’ve mentioned before. It goes something like this, “Isn’t it funny that when you talk to God it’s called prayer, but when God talks to you it’s called schizophrenia?” God talked to Abram and “so Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.” (Gen 12:4a)

We don’t know what Abram’s wife Sarai said to him upon learning of their unplanned and unexpected trip. But can’t you just imagine her saying to him, “Abe, what, are you crazy? We’re going where, when? Because God told you so? Abe, honey, you’ve had too much wine and too many olives!”

No, we don’t know any more particulars about the calling of Abram by God beyond the words “and Lot went with him.” But then the next few verses do tell us Abram was seventy five years old when he left his homeland and that along with Lot, his nephew, he took Sarai, “and all their possessions which they had gathered, and the persons that they had gotten in Harran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.” (Gen 12:4b-5)

Talk about relocating... because of what? Abram didn’t know what. He just knew he had to up and move because God had told him to do it. In a very small way, I can identify with this, can’t you? Have you had times when “something” just told you you needed to do a particular thing, or go to a particular place, or talk to a particular person?

My journey into ministry was like that. Some of you know the details of that story, but I will say here it was a series of smaller and much larger events that took me to the point of no return – I finally felt as if I *had* to go into ministry, I didn’t have any choice in the matter. God called, and I finally took the hint, got the message, the light bulb went on, daybreak dawned, the holy two by four broke over my head, and I said, “O.K., O.K., I’m yours.” Maybe it was kind of like that with Abram. I can envision in my mind’s eye him looking up into the heavens and saying, “O.K., O.K., I’m yours.”

I said I would come back to Bowie’s thought, “Religion must be obedience.” To many of us, I think that statement rings of the theology we don’t follow so much in this church – the one that ties its believers to certain rituals and mandates of the traditional church from which many of us fled or never wanted to affirm. When we talk about theology, I think it’s important to keep in mind that “doctrine” doesn’t need to mean “something stale or boring,” but instead doctrine means “a teaching or set of teachings regarding a topic or theme.”

²Walter Bowie, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 1, New York/Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952, p. 575-576.

And “dogma” doesn’t need to mean something “oppressive,” but “a system of doctrines or principles arranged coherently.”³ Looked at in these ways, the basic teachings of the Abrahamic faiths – those born out of the journey of Abram and Sarai into a new land – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, give evidence of the power *not of obedience in a harsh and restrictive sense*, but obedience in the form of *faithful devotion to the call of God to be love, to be compassion, to be willing travelers in this journey toward and with God throughout our lives*.

We are being challenged right now with a new direction in our life journeys – how to deal with and live through the coronavirus pandemic. It’s not a direction we would have chosen, but it is one that we must face and deal with patiently and constructively, with sturdiness of body and soul and “dauntless will.”

“So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.” (Gen 12:4a)
The question for us is this: So how shall we go forth into these uncharted days ahead?
Let the people say, “Amen.”

³Anthony B. Robinson, *What’s Theology Got to Do with It?*, Herndon: The Alban Institute, p. 18.