

Becoming a Stranger

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Scripture

Genesis 12:1-9

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. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. 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, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 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. 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. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Matthew 9:9-13, 9:18-26

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

...

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that moment. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread through all of that district.

Sermon

Last month, we finished our adult education program year with a series on walking that I called Solved by Walked, an illusion to an old Latin saying attributed to St. Augustine (354-430). *Solvitur ambulando*. "It is solved by walking." Augustine never said what "it" was or is, which is good, because it speaks to so much that is puzzling and confusing in our lives that could be solved by going for a long walk. Walking, whether physically walking or walking with God as a metaphor for the life of faith, is a theme that runs through the Bible. We looked at many passages from scripture in the series, but there was one that I did not include in the list, probably because the word "walk" is not found in the text. It's the call of Abram/Abraham, who was called by God to go, presumably on foot.

God's people are always on the move. Adam and Eve left the garden and fell into the world. Abram and Sarai were summoned to leave home and venture into new territory. Moses and Miriam led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and then walked for forty years through the wilderness. Mary and Joseph traveled to a new place for Jesus to be born. The so-called Prodigal Son left home and returned (Luke 15). Matthew tells us, "As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew *sitting* at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed" (Mt. 9:9). Jesus walks; Matthew sits. Jesus invites Matthew to "follow," Matthew gets up and follows Jesus *as* he walks. The invitation to follow is an invitation to walk. Come walk with me, Jesus says. Let us walk together. Where? God knows. Just follow, walk with me, be on the way with me, for I am Way (John 14:6).

While putting the adult education series together, I came across something that the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) said about walking. He walked a lot, sometimes eight hours a day, and then he returned home to write down his thought, "Sit as little as possible; do not believe any idea that was not born in the open air and of free movement—in which the muscles do not also revel... Sitting still...is the real sin against the Holy Ghost." [1]

Jesus spent his life on the road with "no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20) and walked through Jerusalem to a cross. Then the same Jesus met his friends on Easter evening—where? On the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). The earliest followers of Jesus were not known as Christians but simply followers of The Way (Acts 9:2). The apostle Paul was summoned to leave Asia and go preach in Europe (Acts 16:9). It's all about the journey. You can understand why the notion of pilgrimage captured the imagination of Christians, who walked to holy sites on Caminos, on "ways" or roads all over Europe. The Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) even wondered, remarkably, "The feeling remains that God is on the journey too." We're invited to walk with God, to become pilgrims. A follower of Jesus is always on a journey.

By journey, we don't mean being a tourist. Seeing our lives as a journey is different because we're essentially talking about a process of change and transformation. Mark Nepo writes in his book *The Exquisite Risk*, "To journey without being changed is to be a nomad. To change without journeying is to be a chameleon. To journey and be transformed by the journey is to be a pilgrim." [2]

But why would one want to be a pilgrim? The Irish priest and philosopher John O'Donohue (1956-2008), who left us much too early, gave one good answer. "Ideally," he said, "a human life should be a constant pilgrimage of discovery. The most exciting discoveries happen at the frontiers. When you come to know something new, you come closer to yourself and to the world. Discovery enlarges and refines your sensibility. When you discover something, you transfigure some of the forsakenness of the world." [3]

And every journey or pilgrimage requires leaving home. The quintessential example of leave-taking is the call to Abram and Sarai and their eventual departure. It doesn't get any clearer than this: "Go." *Go*. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). One word: *Go*. Abram had to leave home to get to that new land, to experience the blessing. The blessing could not be found at home, where he was rooted. He had to pull up his roots and sever his ties to the land, family, and heritage, their ancestors. Latching on to any of these would have held him back, thus hindering his move toward the place of blessing. And it was essential for him and his family—and future descendants—that he go. If you think about it, it was crucial for us, for you and me today—that he went. Think of it, the entire Biblical narrative hinges on Abram and Sarai's decision to go, leave, depart. "So Abram went," scripture says, "as Yahweh had told him" (Genesis 12:4).

Eventually, we, too, need to depart. We have to leave home, both literally and symbolically, and step out into the future. It took Abram three verses to go from summons to departure. He did what he was told. Perhaps this is why later, Abraham was praised for his faith and declared righteous (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3). He knew that Yahweh could be trusted. While Abraham might be a good model for us to emulate, this doesn't mean it's easy because it's not. What's missing in these three verses is *everything* that went through his head and heart, and Sarai's, when he heard the word "Go." How much time elapsed between summons and departure? Did he doubt himself? Was he fearful? Did Sarah say, "What, are you crazy?" Did they fight? *I don't want to go. You go. I'll stay here.* What kind of anguish did they endure?

Eventually, Abram and Sarai, along with Lot, said yes and ventured with all their possessions, we're told. Perhaps the greater significance, though, is not what they brought with them but what they left behind. They would never see their family and clan again. In a tribal society leaving family was like death—at least, that's what it must have felt like. They were sent to a strange and alien landscape. God tells them, effectively, "Abram and Sarai, go and become aliens in that stranger." "Become strangers!" In other words, they become *pilgrims*.

"Journeys are movements from one place to another, often to a place that is unfamiliar, foreign, and strange." [4] The Latin root of the word *pilgrim* means "stranger." That's all it means. So that when you go off on a pilgrimage, you become a stranger, and the world is strange around you because you're entering into a place that is strange. To be a pilgrim is to become a stranger to what is familiar. *And that experience of strangeness is important because it is in service of transformation.* And for the sake of transformation, we are sent out into the unfamiliar, out into the unknown. "A pilgrimage," Christine Painter writes in *The Soul of the Pilgrim*, "is an intentional journey into this experience of unknowing and discomfort for the sake of stripping away preconceived expectations. We grow closer to God beyond our own imagination and ideas." [5] It's venturing out from the familiar into the strange and different.

And if this act of departure, that move from the familiar to the strange, a crossing of a threshold into that liminal space between the known and unknown, if all of that feels scary and unsettling—it is. It's supposed to be. I remember that's how I felt seven years ago before embarking on the Camino across Spain. To be honest, I felt an enormous pull inside of me just to stay home. It would have been a whole lot easier for me to stay home and walk around the block or something. The thought of venturing out on the Camino...all of it. Do I really want to do this? It would be easier just to stay home.

My good friend James Hollis writes beautifully about what is at stake in those moments. Jim is a Jungian analyst who spoke here at CPC just before COVID. Jim says, "Our being inevitably depends upon repeated separations, repeated developmental departures, ever

farther away from the archaic, safe place. Drifting as we do through the gossamer dance of life, we are flooded with *nostalgia*, a word whose Greek origin means 'pain for home.' When the desire to 'go home,' [or stay home] prevails," he says, "we will choose not to choose, rest easy in the saddle, remain amid the familiar and comfortable, even when it is stultifying and soul-denying." Sometimes it's just easier to stay home. Jim reminds us, and he says this often in his writings and talks, "Each morning the twin gremlins of fear and lethargy sit at the foot of our bed and smirk. Fear of further departure, fear of the unknown, fear of the challenge of largeness intimidates us back into our convenient rituals, conventional thinking, and familiar surroundings. To be recurrently intimidated by the tasks of life is a form of spiritual annihilation. On the other front, lethargy seduces us with sibilant whispers: kick back, chill out, [relax,] numb out, take it easy for a while...sometimes for a long while, sometimes a lifetime [of checking], sometimes a spiritual oblivion." [6]

But God summons us to go. Summons us to life! Go, leave, depart, step out, and move into the future, to the "land," to the place of blessing. We can't get there by staying put. And we can't get there if you give in to anxiety, worry, and fear to dictate. Jesus says, "Get up and walk with me. Just walk."

For the call of God is never to security but to growth and development, and transformation. Carl Jung said (1875-1961), "Fear is a challenge and a task because only boldness can deliver [us] from fear. *And if the risk is not taken, the meaning of life is somehow violated.*" [7] If the risk is not taken, the meaning of life is somehow violated. In other words, God summons us to *dare* something, something holy and good for the sake of the kingdom, for the sake of the world. What is God inviting you to risk? What is God inviting you to dare? Where is God inviting you to step out and go?

Can you imagine how history would have been different had Abram and Sarai not risked departure? What if they had just stayed home?



Image: Pilgrim Sculpture, Alto de Perdón (Hill of Forgiveness), Camino de Santiago, Spain.

Sources

- [1] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow" in *Human, All Too Human* (1878).
- [2] Cited in Christine Valters Painter, *The Soul of a Pilgrim: Eight Practices for the Journey Within* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2015), 1.
- [3] John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong* (Harper Perennial, 2000), 20.
- [4] Painter, 1-2.
- [5] Painter, 2.
- [6] James Hollis, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life: How to Finally, Really Grow Up* (New York: Gotham Books, 2006), 38-39.
- [7] C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, Volume 5, *The Collected Works*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), par. 551. Jung writes, "The spirit of evil is fear, negation...the spirit of regression, who threatens us with bondage to the mother..." By "mother" he's not referring to one's literal parent, but what "she" can symbolize, as James Hollis explains, "the safe and sheltering harbor: the old job, the familiar warm arms, and the same unchallenged, and stultifying, value system. Family and heritage and clan can also have this "mothering" role; these are not inherently bad, but to be dominated by their pull "means that we are in service to sleep, not the tasks of life, to security, not development." Hollis, 39.