

THE FAITHFUL ACT OF GOING

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Genesis 12:1-2, Psalm 143:7-8
Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 19:21-22

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As you might imagine, moving is on my mind these days. Back on December 29, we signed the papers and took ownership of a house in Canfield. This is our retirement home which is located in the same neighborhood where our daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren live. We've been there every Monday since taking ownership except for a very bad snow day at the end of January when we thought it best not to travel. Every week, we take some boxes, bags and other odds and ends stuff; my middle-of-winter clothes, coats and boots are now at that house. Whereas we've greatly enjoyed living in the church's South Russel parsonage these past 12 years, Peter and I are starting to get excited about moving into our own house. This past week, I even secured a moving company. Yes, it's still a few weeks away, but it is happening! On August 4th, our home address will be Blueberry Hill Drive, Canfield, Ohio.

Have you ever noticed that people in the Bible tend to change their address regularly? It's difficult to find anyone in a serious faith relationship with God who is not on the move. Throughout the Bible, faith is often described as a journey, and it is seen as individuals hear God's call and respond to that call by going someplace and doing something. Biblically, a life of faith is one in which there are always places to go, people to meet, work to be done, and lives to be changed. This movement of heeding God's call and going someplace new, doing something different is rarely experienced as easy and it never happens without change. But the other part of this inevitable and sometimes difficult going and changing associated with a life of faith is the reality of blessing. The outcome of heeding God's call to go leads to an experience of God's blessing – blessing for the one who dares to go in faith and blessing for those whose lives are impacted by that individual's going.

In Genesis, 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*" (Genesis 12:1). The Lord wants Abram to go, so that he will be in the right place for God's promise to come true. "*I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Genesis 12:2-3). God's plan is for Abram to become Abraham as God blessing for him, his family and others is realized in a new land. If we continued to read the entire story about Abram's journey to a new home, we would clearly see that the journey was sometimes difficult and Abram made some big mistakes. And yet, his faithfulness to God continued to be evident. Even amidst harrowing experiences, Abraham never forgot that the One who called and sent him, was also the One who was always with him.

It is this awareness of God presence wherever one goes that makes unfamiliar places and unexpected circumstances opportunities for God's blessing to be experienced. Clearly, God's greatest plan of blessing for all people unfolded

through his Son. We cannot look at the life of Jesus and not see One who was actively going and doing and blessing lives along the way. During his short ministry of about three years, he never stayed in one place for long. His final words to his disciples were, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."* (Matthew 28:19).

Following Jesus always involves going and making disciples, and it happens only as one is willing to leave something behind. Jesus' disciples left behind their careers, homes and families. Others were asked to leave their sin, their wealth, their grief, their comfortable way of life and their old ways of thinking. Jesus' invitation to follow him, to go and be a part of his consequential plan means leaving whatever it is that needs left behind so that our focus can be on Jesus' directives. As today's disciples, Jesus' movement of blessing is realized as followers choose love over hate, grace over judgement, mercy over revenge, hope over despair, joy over cynicism, and encouragement over discouragement. When we are willing to be vehicles of God's transformative Spirit wherever we go that's when God's blessing is unleashed through us.

In the book of Acts, we are first introduced to Paul, who following his dramatic conversion experience took very seriously Jesus' call to go and make disciples. Described throughout Acts are the three significant missionary journeys in which Paul engaged. Our short passage today reflects only a small part of his third and final missionary trip. *"Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go to Jerusalem"* (Acts 19:21). Whenever Paul was engaged in going, there were always additional people who became convinced that Jesus was the Son of God and Savior of the world. Paul's moving around from place to place resulted in people being baptized, new churches being birthed and those already numbered among the faithful being encouraged and strengthened in their faith.

The Lord told Paul to go, to hit the road, not because there was anything wrong with the people or the church where he was currently located, but because for him Jesus' call meant taking the Gospel message of salvation, the blessing of God's love and grace as far as he could and to as many cities and towns as possible. The Lord told Abram to go, to hit the road, not because there was anything wrong with his present land or the people around him, but so that he would be in the right place for God's promise to come true – the promise of blessing for him, his family as well as the broader human family. Whether it is where we live right now or someplace else, people of faith are called to be on the go so that we may personally experience God's blessing while at the same time being God's blessing to others.

Now I don't want to completely ignore the importance of "coming" with this sermon that is focused on "going," because "coming" definitely has its place in the church and among people of faith. After all, Jesus invited hurting people to come to him, *"Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11:28). Sometimes, we are hurting, and it's all we can do to come – come to our Lord to find rest, peace, hope and renewal. The Bible contains over 1700 invitations to come. We have a very human need

to come and to know the Lord's presence, but that comforting place is not where we are meant to stay. We are never fed and comforted, nurtured and healed simply for the purpose of feeling better, but so that we may then go and live out God's kingdom purpose in the world. In the Gospel accounts we see Jesus extending the invitation to "*Come, follow me*" a number of times, but those calls to "come" always resulted in "going." The Bible contains over 3,000 present and past tense references to going – that's about double the invitations to "come." Whereas I love and find great comfort as I'm sure you also do in the Biblical focus of coming, I can't help but wonder if our general focus as church members might too often be on coming and receiving and not enough on going and doing.

At this time in which moving and changing is not only my reality, but also your new pastor's reality as well as this church's reality, I think it's a good time to reflect on what it means that God calls us to go. How might God be challenging you today to consider more seriously the purpose of your going – a purpose that is always bigger and broader than yourself? I am not talking about the vacation getaways many of us are planning and looking forward to this summer. When we plan such getaways our personal needs and desires are typically our primary focus – that's normal for a vacation. But the kind of going we do in Christ's name is not a vacation, it's a mindset, a daily focus, a way of life that is a life of faith.

We are at that time of the year when high school and college graduations are taking place. In fact, Chagrin Falls graduation is today. This is an exciting time for graduates as they prepare to step into something new which typically involves some kind of movement on their part. I fully believe God has plans to bless the lives of these young people, so that they may be a blessing to others. With that in mind, I hope they will be careful about how and where they go in the months and years ahead. Unfortunately, it's not that unusual for young people to sometimes end up in places where God did not intend them to go – places where God's call is rejected and the movement of God's intended blessing for their life is ignored. So, I pray that they might make wise and faithful choices about the type of going and the amount of going that will define their lives in both their near and more distant futures.

Of course, such choices are not only graduate choices, they are ones that all of us adults make, not at one particular time in our lives, but throughout our lives. The danger is not only that of making bad choices when it comes to the movement of our lives, but it's also that of becoming too comfortable with staying put. When we start focusing only on ourselves, our desires and personal comfort, we can fall into a trap that prevents us from going when God calls us to go and doing what God calls us to do. But then it is also true that getting caught up in movement for the sake of movement is a common trap. In this age of seemingly endless options, countless activity choices, instant gratification and technology's constant distractions it is so easy to get caught in an endless cycle of purposeless movement. Not all going is good going; not all going is blessed going.

Like Abraham and Paul and so many others who have journeyed before us, God's call to go in faith continues to be extended to the faithful of our day and we

are encouraged to hear, heed it and be blessed by it. This call is a lifetime one, however, where we are called to go and what we are called to do tends to change throughout our lifetime. But what doesn't change is God's Spirit within us compelling us to go and to make a difference, to go and change the world, to go and be a blessing to others.

This choosing to go for God does not always mean moving from one geographical location to another, but it does mean accepting the fact that faith is a life-long journey that engages us in blessed movement for as long as we are physically and mentally capable. It means our going does not always involve a new address, but God's call always involves movement for the purpose of experiencing God's blessing and being God's blessing. When it comes to a life of faith, often the greatest danger is not so much in the unknown that lies ahead, but in our becoming too settled. When we are too settled, too comfortable with our lives the way they are, then it's not unusual for us to ignore a life of faith that would have us going and doing.

For all us who are being called to leave the comfort of what we have known for the promise and possibilities of the unknown, let us choose to do so in the strength of faith. No matter our age or current situation in life, let us prayerfully and purposefully consider what it would take to make our going in Christ's name a priority. Where might you go, what might you do in the weeks ahead? How might you overcome the hesitancy you feel, and the excuses that are already coming to mind? Dare to hear God's call to go and by the power of God's Spirit in your life be the change, the hope, and the blessing you are meant to be!

Let us pray, Teach us, O God, teach each one of us the way we should go, for to you we lift up our soul (Psalm 143:8) as we seek to do your will and be your blessing in this world. Amen.