

ON THE MOVE

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

Genesis 12:1-9
Matthew 9:35-38

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We Americans are people who are on the move. We travel by land, sea and air about 1.5 trillion miles each year, according to the US Department of Energy. We love to be on the go, to see new sights and to experience new places. Not only do we travel a lot, we Americans also tend to move a lot. Nationally, taking into account both renters and homeowners, the median time people live at one residence is about 5 ½ years. Perhaps that is hard to believe for those of you who have lived in the same home all or most of your life, but this is actually what is going on around you. Of course, while these basic statistics tell us that people are moving a lot, they don't tell us why they are moving so often. What are the underlying reasons? It could be that some are being transferred by their employers, others are upgrading their homes to larger ones, some may be restless and itching for a change of scenery, others may be going through a divorce that necessitates the sale of joint-owned property. Perhaps some of those moving are simply chasing the American Dream, and following new opportunities wherever they may be.

There are those who say that our American tendency to move has led to a sacrificing of our sense of "being grounded," and even contributed to the breakdown of the family over these past several decades. But as much as some might like to connect a whole variety of societal problems to the "on the move" mentality that drives us to hop from one new location to another, from one new job to another, from one new activity to another, from one new relationship to another, this is probably not an accurate assessment. People have actually been on the move ever since the time of Abraham, and somehow the values of home and family have survived throughout the centuries.

In fact, have you ever noticed how often people in the Bible change their address? It's difficult to find anyone in a serious faith relationship with God who is not on the move. Biblically, faith is often seen as a journey – so, there are always places to go, people to meet, work to be done, and lives to be changed. It is faith that compels us to seek and discover God's way, to go and to do God's will. This biblical movement by the faithful was often not easy, and it typically involved difficult circumstances and unwanted changes, and yet the final outcome of the movement was blessing. As we look at the call of Abraham in Genesis 12, we discover what faithful movement looks like.

First of all, we are to go in a new direction, set out for a new place if, and only if, God is the One calling. This message may not come in an audible voice saying, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you," (Gen 12:1) as God spoke to Abram. But word will come in the deep inner sense that it is the right move, and in the expectation that such a move will bring new challenges and new opportunities for blessing. God never calls us to new places only for more money, or greater luxury, or a bigger home, or any other additional acquisitions. Some of these things may happen, but the new place must first and foremost be a place to grow in faith, and a place to serve and honor God. God must be the One calling and leading in order for a move to be the right move.

Secondly, we learn from the story of Abraham that we are to move on to a new land only if that land is "Promised Land" – a land that is clearly part of God's plan.

The Lord wants Abram to hit the road, not because there is anything wrong with his current address or neighbors, but so that he will be in a place where God's promise will come true: "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." (Gen 12:2) God is wanting to do something wonderful with Abram in the new land. Not only will Abram personally experience God's blessing, but he will also be in a place to be God's blessing to others - his family, his neighbors, and to countless others throughout history.

Now if we continued to read the entire story about Abram's journey to a new land, we would see that the journey was not always easy and Abram made some big mistakes. And yet, Abram's faithfulness to God continued to be seen as he built "altars" to the Lord all along the way. You see, despite harrowing experiences, Abram never forgot that the One who had called him and sent him, was also the One who journeyed with him. Abram moved on, but he held onto the belief that God was his true and lasting home no matter where he was on the journey.

Even in the midst of movement and change, we can retain our sense of home as we build visible "altars" to God through our own faithful living, as we take initiative to make God's presence known. By being firmly grounded in faith, new homes in unfamiliar lands can become a House of God. I don't think it's so much our moving lifestyle that has led to the breakdown of home and family in our society, but our lack of centeredness in God. To have faith like Abraham means choosing to be in a place where God can bless us, so that we can as a result be a blessing to others.

Choosing God's place does not always mean that we will need to move away from the specific geographical location we call "home," but God does ask us to accept that people of faith must be engaged in a life-long journey. The movement of this journey is not necessarily a call to a new address, and yet it is often a call to go in a new direction. To be in step with the God of Abraham is to be on the move. When it comes to our faith relationship with God the danger is in becoming too settled, because it then that we stop listening for and seeking God. To grow in faith is a life-long process of discovering God's blessing and embracing our role as blessing.

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 on the move. During his short ministry, he never stayed in one place for long. In fact, 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..." (Matt 28:19) Following Jesus involves the movement of going and doing, and typically this does not happen unless we are 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 habits, and old ways of doing things. Jesus is always on the move, and he invites those who would follow him to leave behind whatever needs left behind so that we may then be on the move with him.

The problem is that some of us really don't want to move. When we are very comfortable with where we are and the way things are, we tend to stop moving. Unfortunately, one who is no longer moving or doing or going or growing may no longer be an actual follower of Christ. The Christian name is not simply instilled on us at baptism and therefore true forever - it is a name that is earned through a life-long journey of faithfulness.

A lack of movement tends to produce stale, uninspiring expressions of faith. However, this lack of movement may actually feel like a blessing to us, because it is familiar - it touches our hearts in ways that the music of own generation moves us and yet does not move those of another generation. The personal blessing we

sometimes feel is more like a false blessing if it is as a result of focusing inward instead of outward. A good sign as to whether we are experiencing God's intended blessing is to look around and see if the making and maturing of disciples of Jesus Christ is happening. Many experts in the field of Church growth would say that it is a lack of embracing God's movement toward blessing that has resulted in so many declining churches, and it is why so many outside the church consider us to be irrelevant. Clearly, the harvest is no less plentiful in our day than it was in Jesus' day.

Most of us here today are probably not being called to change our house address or even job at this time. And that's okay, because with God it is very possible to live in the same home for 5, 20, 50 years and still be on the move. As a congregation, I also don't think God's call to move on means we must leave behind our historic building in the village of Chagrin Falls. With God it is actually possible for a ministry of blessing to thrive within a congregation that began in 1842 and from a building that first opened its doors in 1884. Whether or not you are able to move your body and do what you used to do, doesn't matter because God's call to bear witness in this day and age is meant to be heard and followed. After all, Abraham was the ripe young age of 75 when God called him to "go" in a new direction.

I know that for some of us who grew up in a different time and with a different definition of what church looks like, today's church may feel uncomfortable and even scary. Our tendency might be to hold on to what is familiar, and reject God's call to move on. But both scripturally and historically, the refusal to move on is never the faithful response to God's call, only a disastrous one.

Right now, we as a congregation are being challenged to move in a new direction that is the Healthy Church Initiative. We do not yet know exactly where this HCI process will take us, but we can be certain that engaging in the journey will mean facing unfamiliar terrain and new challenges. It will mean accepting that our new home is not going to look and feel exactly like our old home.

Since February, God has been working through a small group, the HCI leadership team, to initiate movement towards what we hope and pray will be God's blessing of a healthy church. But the movement of a church takes more than a few leaders; it takes a congregation. Now is the time for all church members and active non-member to commit yourself to the process. This means taking the Readiness 360 survey on line before midnight next Sunday. It also means signing up and attending the pre-consultation workshop next Sunday so that you can be better informed and prepared to begin moving in the direction of God's plan.

Like Abraham and the disciples who came before us, we may not always be clear about the going and doing details. We may even dislike some of the details of that going and doing. However, we need to that it is God's desire and practice to lead us to new lands of promise and opportunity, where we are blessed so that we may be a blessing to others. Today, God is challenging each one of us to keep our eyes on Jesus and to move ahead with faith. May it be so to the glory of God! Amen.