

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. Nothing could be less of a surprise to us in all of the Older Testament than this one sentence. So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. Well, of course he did. He's Abram, soon to be Abraham, the patriarch of all patriarchs, the founder of many faiths, so foundational a figure that we even call those faiths "Abrahamic" – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abram is the one, the first person who goes forward to forge a new relationship between God and God's creation. Abram obeyed God's commandment, accepted God's invitation to be a blessing so that through him, all the families of the earth would be blessed. He's Abram, almost-Abraham, so of course he did. Abram went, as the Lord had told him.

Abram's response to God's command doesn't come as any surprise to us, of course; we know him too well to imagine he'd do anything else. We know how he moves his family through the harsh wilderness; we know how he adores his wife, protects her at all costs,

comforts her in her grief as she lives year after year without children. We know of Abram's uniquely intimate relationship with God, how God comes so close to Abram and Abram comes so close to God that Abram knows what God wants him to do. We know Abram's sense of humor, his witty shrewdness as he barter with God about the potential destruction of Sodom. We know story after story about Abram. We know him so well we can see him, looking, in my imagination at least, strangely like Charlton Heston. We see him, lean and bearded, leading Lot away from the pillar of salt that used to be his wife, welcoming three strangers under his tent with kindness and with wonder; laughing until tears roll down his cheeks at the prospect of being a father and then dragging himself up the mountain with his son Isaac and wood for the fire of his own son's sacrifice.

We know Abram so well...but in this passage from Genesis we just don't know him yet. These verses are the first introduction we have to Abram, the very first time we God speaks to him. All we know

about Abram before this passage are the names of his family, that he and his wife Sarai are unhappily childless, that he comes from Ur but lives in Haran, and that his father is dead. This is all we know.

And then, suddenly, out of nowhere, God speaks. There is no preamble to this conversation, no build up to God's commandment. We don't hear that God looked at Abram and loved him, or that Abram was a man of great faith, or that Abram had removed himself into the wilderness to pray. God just jumps into Abram's story: Go to the land that I will show you. And not just go, but go *from* – go from your country and your kindred and your father's house. Go from all of the things that have given you stability and place, leave all of those things that have made you who you are – your land, your people, your heritage. Walk away from your home into an unknown country, where you know no one and nothing. Just go, Abram.

And so Abram went! Do you hear that sentence a little differently now? So Abram went. Amazing! What a miraculous

moment in the story of our faith – that Abram, this nobody, hears a call from God to abandon everything that has made him *him*, and he says yes! This kind of obedience is radical and risky. This isn't like moving from Philadelphia to Chicago into a wonderful job and a Church that you know and a home that is sitting just waiting for you. This is leaving everything solid and secure behind and moving into an absolute void – no home, no country, no people, no common language, no common religion, no assurance of safety. God is commanding Abram to risk absolutely everything. And, in an act of enormous courage, Abram does. So Abram went, in one of the most profoundly brave and faithful acts in all of Holy Scripture, an act that changes history – changes our history – forever.

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. This tale from the way, way back, from the very beginning, when Abram's faith was unknown and untested and when his journey held far more questions than answers, has two important things to tell us about what it looks

like to respond to God's call. First, God does not necessarily call us to do things because we're good at doing them. The ministry and service that God invites us into, the decisions that God nudges us towards, are not necessarily placed there because they're something that we've proven ourselves worthy of or skilled at. In fact, God's calling is almost always going to pull us outside of our comfort zone, invite us to do something new, something we have never tried before, or to use our gifts in a way we ourselves never imagined. Just think about it - if God's calling were limited to our own imaginations, what a dull world this would be! But God has in mind for us more than we can either ask for or imagine. God has in mind for us work that we never thought ourselves capable of, service that we never thought our hearts would run to, ministries that we have never, ever done, not even once. God calls us to new journeys in our faith because God sees all that we can be, what the world needs, and how those two things intersect. God call us not because we are good, but because God is.

The second truth that this story of Abram's call reveals is born of the first. If God's calling is almost always going to be to something new, if God's calling is almost always going to come as a surprise, then God's calling is almost always going to involve risk. We may not all be called to leave everything we have ever known for something we cannot even imagine, but the risks that we are invited to take in faith are nonetheless very real. God's calling will, inevitably, ask us to love more, to give more, than we want to. God's calling will, inevitably, ask us to reveal more of ourselves, to make ourselves more vulnerable, more humble, more malleable in God's hands than we are comfortable with. God's calling will, inevitably, ask us to be braver in preaching the Gospel, serving those in need, caring for the stranger, praying for the enemy, loving our neighbor. God's calling will, inevitably, ask us to grow - as the Church and as individual members of the Body of Christ.

This is living your faith out loud, and it is risky business.

Living your faith out loud means that you risk being ridiculed, dismissed, or ignored. Living your faith out loud means that you risk being rejected, not loved back. Living your faith out loud means that you become bold, that you tell your story, put your own heart on the line, give of your own time and money in service and in love, where you don't always get the luxury of determining the outcome. Living your faith out loud means that sometimes you are going to find yourself at times at odds with the State, and almost always at odds with the status quo. Living your faith out loud means daring greatly, means drawing deep from the well of courage and stepping out on journeys filled with as many questions as there are answers.

Maybe this sounds like too much on this bright and sunny morning. So maybe we start small. Maybe we start by creeping up to Jesus in secret, in the dark. Maybe we start by just taking that one step towards the God who loves us. But no matter how small that step might be, no matter how Nicodemus-like our first forays into a bolder

faith might look, those risks reveal the most remarkable truths about God. Our God is the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist – calls into existence the things that do not exist, like peace, reconciliation, justice; like mercy and compassion, like courage. Our God gave God's only-begotten Son so that we can risk everything for him and still be saved.

You probably showed up today thinking that this was just an ordinary Sunday, but let me tell you – God has been watching you ever since you buckled your shoes and buttoned up your jacket. Suddenly, unexpectedly, God is calling to you – you, my beloved child, go from your place of safety, leave behind all of those things that tell you that you aren't good enough, that your heart isn't big enough, that your faith isn't strong enough – go into the land that I am preparing for you. The world needs you to take a risk, because with this risk I will bless you, and in you, all the families of the nations shall be blessed. So Atonement – go, as the Lord has said.

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