

Epiphany 5C: Genesis 12:1-10
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The Call of Adventure

Abram was missing something. What it was wasn't clear. To everyone else it looked like he had it all. The eldest son of a prosperous landowner, with a retinue of slaves, Abram wanted for nothing. He had lived in unearned comfort in his parents' house for more than seven decades—a rather serious case of “failure to launch”! And since his parents were dead and his wife childless, Abram had no responsibilities, either to the past or the future. He was carefree, enjoying the maximum of pleasure and comfort.

Then God shows up, in a surprising way, as the voice of inspired adventure: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And 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 him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Up to now, Abram had been, if not content, then comfortable. He had all his needs and wants attended to. So why would he consider leaving it behind?

We often think—and are seduced into believing, especially on the political front—that if only our needs were reliably met, if our wishes were easily gratified, we would be happy, we would need nothing more. But that's not actually true. When faced with unending satisfaction and gratification, we're as likely to kick it over as anything else, just to see what happens, to provoke an interesting response.

Why is that? Why are we not satisfied with satisfaction? Simply put, it's because we are not infants. Infants are passive recipients, dependent on others to quell their distress and provide them with the necessities of life. And when all their desires are met, what do infants do? They sleep, they fall into unconsciousness. We are made for more than that. We're made to be awake, and to spend our waking hours putting ourselves towards something, giving ourselves to something larger than us, a mission, *an adventure*, risking it all to achieve what is most important.

Is that not what is portrayed in every drama of romantic adventure, every movie about a secret agent or superhero: when chaos and evil threaten, the hero emerges, the man every man wants to be, to face the challenges, make the sacrifices, and put it all on the line for the highest possible return. It's an old story, a re-instantiation of the brave knight who battles the dragon to rescue the princess. The reason such stories have proliferated and endured is because they express something true about human nature, about how God made us.

John Eldridge in his book *Wild at Heart* says that every man longs for three things: a battle to fight, a beauty to love, and an adventure to live. And every woman, he suggests, longs not just to

be the beauty, but to share in an adventure, to have an irreplaceable part in it. Now, I can't speak for women, to say whether that is true or not. But I do think Eldridge is right about our longing for adventure. It's part of how we are made, a clue to what God made us for. There is *something in us* that longs to take our place in the great drama, to take on the world and wrestle it into heavenly order.

And what the story of Abram suggests is that "something in us" is God. It is the voice of God that invites us, stirs us, excites us with adventure, with the chance to take up the task and challenge of life, to accept responsibility, to build something new, to seek out, to establish a legacy, and work for the good of family, community and society. When we are in danger of being lulled into unconsciousness by pleasures and distractions, it is God's spirit that eternally says, even to the unwilling, "You must leave the comfort of your tents—your home and your family—and journey into the terrible world." God compels us forward, beyond security, beyond ease, into the unknown, into the wilds, towards a better future.

Abram has the peculiar benefit of being told what that future holds. He will have the opportunity to found something of lasting worth ("make you a great nation"); to earn an outstanding reputation (a "great name," in fact, a new name—Abraham); and while doing so he will be a source of inspiration, encouragement, and genuine provision to others ("be a blessing"). It is difficult to imagine a better offer than this!

And yet even with these promised rewards, there is no guarantee that the journey will be easy or without cost. (Indeed, it wouldn't be an adventure if it was!) And in fact, once Abram accepts the invitation, he will be exposed to the full gamut of human sin and cruelty—in the abominations of the Canaanites and the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah—and he will have to reckon with those threats while staying true to the voice that calls him forward.

Why is this necessary? Why the struggle? Because the world is fallen. Because death and evil are ever-present dangers. And because if they are not reckoned with, fought against, there is no impetus upward, no growth, no development. As Abram continues to open himself to the call, he will encounter a never-ending vista of expanding opportunities, but they will present themselves in the form of one challenging escapade after another. Each of these new ventures will bring advancement, a new stage of growth. And each will require sacrifice, not just of animals, but of comfort, of prior commitments, of expectations, even identity—everything that is no longer needed for the challenge at hand. This is the way that the promises God made to Abram will be realized—by his becoming worthy of them.

At this point, though, Abram has not yet begun that adventure. God's call has been issued. The choice is before him: continue reclining in the lap of luxury or head out into the unknown, stay in deadening and stagnating stasis of spirit or take the sacrificial road to an ever-expanding horizon, play it safe or pursue the life of adventure.

Put that way, the choice seems clear. Unfortunately, the choices we face are not always straightforward: stay in a lucrative position or try for a more challenging job, continue a dating relationship or look for someone who's willing to commit, offer "good enough" work or pursue competence, go with the flow or speak the truth and risk status and reputation, approach

retirement as a time to recline or devote one's latter years to living out a passion. Whenever we make the upward-aiming choice, the choice for the greater good, we do so trusting that it will lead to the best possible future. But we are given no guarantee.

Worse, the willingness to make that leap, to trust in the one who calls us forward is becoming more rare, as adventure itself is losing its appeal in our society. There was a time when childhood was a rehearsal for challenges faced later in life, its days marked by treasure hunts and tree-house forts and testing of mettle in pretend conflicts, by endless roving of neighborhoods on bicycles and dreams of turning 16 and the expanded boundaries that come with a license. This was an age of possibility, of aspiration, of yearning to journey into space, to explore the depths of the ocean, to uncover the secrets of the atom or DNA or a lost Amazonian tribe.

Now, we are content to explore the world "virtually." We watch videos of others' adventures, we examine digitized images of artwork rather than visit museums, we watch epic battles waged in movies or play at them with video games, rather than risk ourselves in the real world. And even when someone does go someplace interesting, they are never really absent from home (just a video chat away!) or really present where they are. For wherever they go, they are onlookers, voyeurs, digitally documenting their experience, rather than living it themselves.

This retreating from the world is bad enough for society, but it's worse for the church. Believe it or not, the term "Christian" used to mean something revolutionary and challenging. It meant wider horizons, a larger heart, minds set free. It described people who were courageous and brave, who challenged traditions and crossed boundaries, who journeyed to foreign lands and hostile peoples, who stood up to tyrants and embraced plague-victims, with no fear of death.

Nowadays "Christian" sounds pinched, squeezed, narrow. When "Christian" appears in a headline, the story will probably be about lines drawn, not about boundaries expanded. Christians used to be known for their curiosity, imagination, boldness, and adventurous spirit. But today, the highest compliment for a Christian is to be called "nice," and being "welcoming" is more important than being "passionate." It strikes me that something essential has been lost.

Eldridge tells of a judge in his sixties, a real southern gentleman with a pinstriped suit and an elegant manner of speech, who pulled him aside at a conference they attended. Quietly, almost apologetically, he spoke of his love for sailing, for the open sea, and how he and a buddy eventually built their own boat. Then came a twinkle in his eye. "We were sailing off the coast of Bermuda a few years ago, when we were hit by a nor'easter. Really, it came up out of nowhere. Twenty-foot swells in a thirty-foot homemade boat. I thought we were all going to die." He paused for dramatic effect, and then he confessed, "It was the best time in my life."

Compare *that* to watching a movie, or playing a video game, or to how a lot of people, including many Christians, approach God. Fact is, much of what we do as Christians, our worship and our traditions, are ways not of encountering God, but of managing Him, distancing ourselves, protecting ourselves from the Holy One. This is understandable, as the God we worship is not a safe God. Our God not only created the world but drowned it in the flood. He saved the Israelites from the Egyptians but disciplined them in the desert. He sent kings to lead them, conquerors to

humble them, and prophets whose message they could not understand. Finally, he sent his own Son, knowing we would kill him. Our God is incomprehensible, wild, and untamable.

As Annie Dillard remarks in "Teaching a Stone to Talk,":

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear 'ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

If we really reckoned with this God, we would not be so careless about invoking his name nor so timid in answering his call. For this is the God who conquered the Roman Empire with a handful of backwoods Jews, who subdued the warring tribes of northern Europe with a bunch of monks, who inspired the construction of Christendom and spread the faith throughout the New World, and who is on his way right now to claiming China and Africa next.

If we truly believed this God and trusted in his call, we would approach mission the way John Wesley did. When Wesley was refused access to an Anglican pulpit by a bishop who deemed Wesley's preaching dangerous, Wesley stood on his father's tomb and preached to a group gathered in the cemetery. "I don't need permission to preach in this parish," scoffed Wesley, "the world is my parish." The world is my parish. Wesley's nerve is characteristic of a person who has been captured by a mission, a vision, a hunger.

And if churches today want to defy the trend of retreat and decline among churches in the West, they are going to need to rediscover this adventurousness. We are going to need to see ourselves not as a church but as part of a movement, going to need to trust that our best days lay ahead of us, and to believe that there are rewards yet to be found if we are willing to leave the security of our pews and venture out into the deep, into the unknown.

God's voice, the voice of inspired adventure, still calls us. It doesn't matter whether we are 7 or 75, as it was in Abram's case. The call to adventure does not end with age. Opportunities and possibilities of growth do not cease when you're on the "back nine" of life. Indeed, that may be just the time for a new adventure!