



**“New Territory”**  
**Scripture – Genesis 12:1-4**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, March 12, 2017**

Too often the Scriptures seem a bit short on the details that interest me. What I would like to know is precisely how did God call Abraham to pull up his stakes and set out for a new land? Was Abraham sitting on a boulder gazing at the sun as it sank beneath the horizon and God spoke to him in an audible voice like I am speaking to you now?

Was Abraham deep in prayer when God’s voice emerged in his mind? No matter how many times he wiped the thought from his consciousness, it kept resurfacing. If his spiritual connection was dynamic, the internal voice he identified as the Divine may have been the channel through which he heard the command.

Maybe the land around Abraham’s home was no longer lush green pastures as it had been when he settled there. Several years with little rain had left the land parched and he was stewing about how to keep his sheep fed. Staying put was becoming a risky endeavor. He felt the building pressure of his situation pushing him to look for verdant fields and he felt that was God’s way of instructing him to move.

Perhaps God spoke to him in a dream. One night, when he was deep in sleep and his conscious mind was at rest, a powerful dream convinced him that his Maker was wooing him to a place with flowing streams, olive trees, and vineyards that blanketed the hills.

Then again, maybe a stranger passing through had told Abraham that he was heading west where there were better prospects, and the stranger’s words kept echoing in Abraham’s ears. Maybe he discerned the divine summons from the lips of a stranger?

Our passage does not indicate precisely how Abraham heard the call, but deciphering the voice of the Holy One is always a challenge. One reason that makes it difficult is that we simply do not expect to hear God’s voice. We may think that God spoke to people in ancient times, but no longer speaks to people in a postmodern world. Or, we may think that God spoke to a handful of select people – Abraham, Moses, the prophets, Mary, Jesus, Francis of Assisi – but God does not speak to just anyone. If I stood in the pulpit this morning and said, “Oh, by the way, God spoke to me yesterday,” the Personnel Committee would suggest I take some time off and set up an appointment with a psychiatrist!

It is important to keep in mind that God communicates in ways other than an audible voice. God speaks to us through the Scriptures, which clearly spell out that we are to love others and to treat people the way we want to be treated. We are commanded to forgive, to be generous, and to serve people in need. Sometimes it is difficult

to know precisely how God expects us to apply a command to a specific situation and sometimes we simply turn a deaf ear, but we know that one of the primary ways God communicates is through the Scriptures.

As I suggested in the different avenues through which Abraham might have discerned God's voice, God also speaks through prayer, events in our lives, other people, intuitions, and dreams. The question that looms for most of us is: Do we really want to hear God's voice? Perhaps we fear the upheaval in our lives it might create.

For most of their lives, Abraham and Sarah had lived as nomads. They had never stayed in one location for any length of time. As their animals grazed the land, they kept moving from place to place. But, in their later years, when the spring in their step was gone and arthritis had set in, they finally accumulated enough wealth to settle down.

However, today's passage informs us that when Abraham turned 75, after he and Sarah were nestled into their rocking chairs, God said, "Gather your family and pick up your belongings, there is a new path to blaze."

In his younger years, Abraham would have responded, "Terrific! How exciting!" But unless he was desperate, it is hard to imagine that at this stage of his life he embraced the summons with enthusiasm.

If we approach the story of Abraham as a history lesson about an epic figure, we keep the story at arm's length. We have nothing in common with a desert nomad who lived 4,000 years ago in the Middle East. Yet, the story of Abraham is every person's story. Time and again, God calls each of us to yank up our stakes and head for a land we have never visited.

Abraham serves as the prototype of one who leaves security behind and takes the risk of following God to an unknown destination. Remember the day Jesus found Peter, Andrew, James, and John and tossed out the challenge: "Follow me." They threw down their fishing nets and embarked on an amazing new journey.

But, somewhere in our middle and later years, our enthusiasm for a new, unknown chapter, begins to diminish. We become more cautious. Wiser, but more averse to change. Rather than seeing a call to a new land as brimming with exciting possibilities, we imagine potential trouble. However, too much caution drains life of its vitality.

Looking back on your life, can you detect any moments when God was calling you to venture somewhere you had never been? Can you pinpoint a moment when God led you to a new person who changed your life? Or a new opportunity that led you to a place you never imagined?

Are you still open to God's nudges, or have you lost your sense of adventure?

If you study the Scriptures, it becomes clear that our Creator is discontented with the way things are. God envisions a world where cruelty and poverty are no more; where injustice and strife are no more. Has the security of your routine cemented your feet to the floor? Or is it possible to regain your courage and sense of adventure so you can go where God wants you to go?

Like Abraham, when we are open to the path God has in mind for us, we can be a blessing to others. People who answer the call to become a church officer or a Stephen Minister embark on a new journey. People who respond to the challenge to mentor a child from a neighborhood unlike their own embark on a new journey. People who sit in conversation with a homeless person embark on a new journey. People who help a family of refugees resettle in a safe place embark on a new journey.

The Creator of heaven and earth does not want each of our days to be a copy of the previous one. God encourages us to lean into the future and to move forward with eyes wide open for new discoveries, new people, and new avenues for joy.

Admittedly, some of you have been thrust onto a new journey against your will. Life was rich and fulfilling right where you were. You had no desire to pull up your stakes and venture to a new land, but your loved one died and you had no choice but to begin a new life. You had to learn to do things your mate had always handled. You had to reach decisions without your trusted sounding board. You had to learn how to live alone. It was far from being an exciting adventure. It was more like a forced eviction. Some of you were shoved onto a new path when you went through a divorce or lost your job.

Yet, even when the new road is one that no one would choose, God helps us navigate new territory. God does not direct our every step or control every outcome. We have the freedom to choose what we will do. God whispers in our souls the best possibilities given our circumstances. Are you still so upset by what happened that you will fight the future every step of the way, or are you open to the new land that will slowly come into view?

While the Scriptures tell us of God's activity in the past, we never get the sense that God is trying to either turn the clock back or to freeze time in the present. God is the energy of the universe always propelling life forward.

There is security in staying put, in sticking with your same routines, same job, and same friends. Security is something we need, yet security can also become the chain that holds us back from new ventures.

One of the great frustrations of counselors is when their clients continue to do the same things they have always done, but expect a different outcome. A basic fact of life is that you must let go of where you are if you are to arrive someplace else. You must say good-bye to what is familiar and journey into the unknown in order to reach new territory.

And it is never too late. Peter Mark Roget was forced to retire from the Royal Society in London, a body of some of the world's greatest scientists, shortly before his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. He could have relaxed and rested on his accomplishments. Instead, he wrote the world's first thesaurus.

When he was 75 years old, and after 28 years in prison, Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa.

Beethoven wrote some of his greatest music after he was deaf.

When she was 76, her hands became too crippled by arthritis to hold an embroidery needle, so Grandma Moses took up painting.

Lent is a season on the church calendar when we are encouraged to engage in self-examination. It is a time to ask ourselves: Where in our lives are we failing to live as God wants us to live and to love as God wants us to love? How can we reawaken to God's voice and to recover our sense of adventure?

The summons of God is neither demand nor coercion, but instead promise. It is a challenge to take the risk of faith trusting that a new and hopeful future will reveal itself. Could you be at a pivotal moment in your life? How might God be nudging you to embark on a new adventure?

## Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God in Whom All Life Begins — You promise to keep us wherever we go. Our journeys take us many places ... Whether we are on the mountaintop, basking in your glory; or carving out pathways to hope; or traversing the valley of despair — we take comfort in your promise to be with us.

We know that, at times, it can be hard to trust this promise. Some of us feel we are wandering in a wilderness of fear and uncertainty. Some of us feel that — like Abraham and Sarah — we have been asked to leave behind all we hold dear. Some of us feel overwhelmed by the suffering we see in our homes, our communities, and our world. As we come before you in prayer, we remember all whose lives are shrouded in darkness — those imprisoned by addiction or illness; those weighed down by loneliness or grief; those who know the pangs of hunger or who live in lands torn apart by violence ... Ever-Creating God — whose Spirit once hovered over watery chaos to awaken Creation — sweep over our hurting world, and summon us to new life.

God, you have always been — and will always be — the One who makes all things new. With a word whispered on the desert wind, or spoken into the stillness of dawn on the lakeshore, you called ancestors and apostles to follow. You are still speaking — beckoning us to new possibilities, to new hope, to new life. Grant us the grace to hear your call, and the courage to respond with thanksgiving. Transform and empower us, we pray, that we might be harbingers of your new creation, until the day when justice takes root and peace blossoms abundantly and heaven and earth experience your wholeness.

We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who gave us words to pray ...

**“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be they name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”**