

***“On the Road Again”***

***Genesis 12.1–4a***

***The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 17 February 2008***

This story – central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – is kind of weird and wonderful, isn’t it? God tells Abraham to pack up his bags and head to another country with his whole household and tells him “I’ll bless you and your whole family and I’ll even make them a great nation.”

So, imagine yourself as Sarai, Abram’s wife, for just a moment. You’re sleeping and you roll over and notice your husband is not in bed with you, and you hear pots and pans clanking as you stumble out of bed and when you get to the kitchen, there is your husband with a bunch of cardboard boxes, packing material, and tape, and you ask him what in the world he’s doing, and he looks at you and says, “Honey, we’re moving.”

We don’t really know what Sarai thinks about all of this, but we can imagine that perhaps she isn’t pleased. After all moving a household and a family to a foreign country is no small undertaking – with or without Allied Van Lines.

So, what is going through Abram’s head? Do you think he’s second guessing whether it was God who spoke to him? *What if it wasn’t God?* It could have been some bad wine (or too much good wine). We don’t really know what Abram was thinking; we just see him in action. “Abram **went**, as the Lord told him.” Abram doesn’t even say **yes**, he just responds.

In the United Church, we’ve had a saying for the past few years: “God is still speaking.” And if we take that notion seriously – that God didn’t stop communicating with humanity after John of Patmos had his revelation – then it means that God might be speaking to us, too.

God approaches Abram in no uncertain terms, tells him what to do, and makes promises. These are no little things, either. “I will make of you a great nation... I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So, for Abram, the stakes are very high.

This making of promises is one half of a covenant, in the same way that 20 or so people [will enter/have entered] a covenant with Plymouth this morning. They have made the same promised that each member makes to this congregation: 1.) We give ourselves unreservedly to God’s service and take this to be our church. 2.) We promise to walk with one another in faithfulness and Christian love. 3.) We promise to attend the services of this church as far as we are able and to observe its sacraments. 4.) We promise to support the church financially.

Neither God nor Plymouth demands perfection. Abram was not a perfect model of virtue, and not many of us are, either. And I hope that lack of perfection doesn’t stop any of us from listening to God or from trying to respond in faith.



We talk a lot about faith journeys, and whether you know it or not, you are on one. Not all faith journeys are from Haran to Canaan, or from point A to point B. In fact, for most people I know, they go from point A to point W to point E to point M, and so on. The way we travel through life is often anything but linear.

And there are times when we can be intentional about taking a journey or at least one leg of the journey. For many of us, Lent is such a time, when for 40 days, we endeavor to go to a new place spiritually. It isn’t something we can force, but it is something we can provide space for. One of the things I’m trying to do during Lent is

when I come into my office to spend 10 minutes or so in silence before I start into the tasks of the day. For me, spending some intentional time listening for God is one way of saying “Yes.”

Sometimes, we need an occasion – like Lent – to get us moving and to motivate us to get on the road again. If we stand still too long, our spiritual muscles begin to atrophy. We need to be challenged spiritually, just like our body’s muscles need resistance in order to grow. (So, if you need a little shove to get moving, consider yourself pushed.)

One of the words we associate with a spiritual journey is also often associated with the name, Plymouth: **pilgrimage**. Our forbears in the Congregational line of our faith saw themselves very much like Abram and Sarai: responding to God’s call to leave their homeland and find a new land. (Unfortunately, the American Indians were often seen as the Canaanites, whose land was to be possessed...with or without their consent.)

But, coming back to the 21st century, Cintra Pemberton, an Episcopal nun, wrote a wonderful book about Celtic pilgrimage called, *Soulfaring*, a few years back. Here is how she begins: “Deeply religious people are pilgrim people; that is, they are always on the move, on an interior if not a literal journey, always seeking that which will draw them closer to their God, seek that which is Holy. The tradition of pilgrimage is thus as old as humanity and is found among people of all faiths and all belief systems. Studies in anthropology confirm this as they uncover prototypical aspects of sacred journeys common to all humankind.”<sup>1</sup>

It is in our nature to search, to seek, to look, to explore, and to get on the road again as we anticipate an encounter with God. Augustine said, “Truly our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in you,” and sometimes the journey helps us find rest in God.

Some of you have walked a labyrinth, oftentimes one modeled on the great labyrinth in the cathedral at Chartres. Walking the labyrinth is a pilgrimage journey in miniature. For those in medieval France who were not able to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, walking the labyrinth simulated the journey.

One of the great pilgrimage stories of Celtic Christianity involves St. Columba or Columcille, as he is called in Gaelic, and his pilgrimage in 563 AD. He was the scion of the O’Donnell clan in the north of Ireland and a founder of abbeys like the ones at Derry and Durrow. The legend says (and this is the greatly abbreviated form) that a visiting monk had a manuscript that Columcille coveted, so he copied it in his own hand (violating medieval copyright law!). When this was discovered, he was exiled, so he was set adrift in a tiny woodframe-and-hide boat called a coracle. And wherever he landed was where he would dwell. Destiny would have it that Columcille would land on the Isle of Iona off the west coast of Scotland, and from this place, he would introduce successfully introduce Christianity to the Pictish tribes of Scotland. (Historians think it was far more likely that this was an intentional pilgrimage, not an exile, since he had been granted the title to Iona before he left with a cadre of monks to set up an abbey there.)

At any rate, it is on the foundations of Columcille’s abbey that George MacLeod started the Iona Community in the 1930s, and it is the Iona Community that provided us with connections to John Bell, who was in our pulpit three weeks ago, and to Philip Newell, who will be with us on Monday, March 10.

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<sup>1</sup> Cintra Pemberton, OSH, *Soulfaring: Celtic Pilgrimage Then and Now*. (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1999), p. xiii.



So, where are we headed – where are you headed – right now, at this very point of your own personal pilgrimage, your spiritual journey? (There are no right or wrong directions, no up or down, east or west.) Are you in a place of rest? Are you trudging uphill through a muddy trail? Are you on a level plain and walking steadily? Do you feel as though you need companions for the journey? Look around you! Or do you need a good, secure walking stick? (I'm reminded of that wonderful, old hymn "My Faith It Is an Oaken Staff.")

Wherever you are is just fine, because you don't have to stay there. You can get on the road again and explore new dimensions of your faith. What's important is to listen for God, just like Abram did. And to open your heart and your mind as you respond.

May this season offer you a chance to try on some hiking boots and walk the pilgrim's path.

Amen.