

Proper 5, Year A  
Genesis 12: 1-9  
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Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, CA

Go Forth  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

“Go forth,” the Lord said to Abram. “Go forth.” And Abram left his home, all the landmarks he had come to know, and went forth into the unknown. This is scary stuff. Setting out into the unknown. Heading into uncharted waters. Venturing into new worlds. But the Lord said to Abram, “Lech lecha—go forth” and he went. He left his country, his kindred and his father’s house. The way the story has come down to us, Abram didn’t even raise an eyebrow. He didn’t even twitch. He just packed up and started on his way.

Or was there more to it than simply leaving home? Remember the promise God made Abram. Remember God promised Abram, “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.” Abram yearned for more; Abram trusted the promise of God. Abram trusted God’s promise of blessing. So he let go—he let go of the familiar landscapes, the comfortable ways of doing things, the security that comes from knowing that tomorrow will be pretty much like yesterday. Abram let go of all that as he stepped into the promise of God.

I believe we, as “The Church” and as a church are at a similar juncture in our lives. I believe that God is inviting us into the future, saying to us “lech lecha”—“go forth into the land of the unknown and I will bless you and make of you a blessing.”

You hear a lot of talk these days about “The Church” and about God. Folks are writing and buying books declaring God irrelevant, passé. More and more people are raising their children totally outside church. In our own community—the 95476 zip code—over 45% of the people are not involved in any faith tradition and only 28% are, like you, very involved (Percept, First View, 2005). And yet....

And yet there is great interest in things spiritual. There is deep longing in our culture—not only for connectedness but also for something beyond the self. You have only to look at the latest New Yorker to witness this longing. There were seven articles in this week’s New Yorker focusing on questions of faith and doubt. Seven. In the New Yorker. Think of that. I don’t think I encountered seven articles—even book reviews—grappling with questions of faith and doubt in all the years I read the New Yorker regularly. What a change!

As I read those articles in the New Yorker, I found myself thinking about Abram, wondering just how he heard God’s word to go forth. Do you think it was a stirring in his heart—a feeling he had—maybe a sense of emptiness or deep dissatisfaction or a yearning for more? Was he reading the way things had been going in his life? Did he encounter a series of dead ends and figure God was calling him in a different direction?

Or was it that he no longer felt challenged by life in Haran? Do you think he found himself coasting along in old familiar ways and had the sense that there was more to life? Was it a cluster of things converging? Maybe like the cluster of articles I read this week

“Go forth,” God said to Abram. “Go forth,” God says to us. We live, you and I, in a world where people are struggling with questions of faith and doubt. We live in a world where people are asking hard questions about suffering, about God, about Jesus. We live in a world of seekers. How do we as “the Church,” as a church and as people of faith go forth into such a world?

For one thing—I think we go forth gratefully. Questions are a good thing. They broaden and deepen our understanding of what draws us to God and what it means to follow God. Like a sailor on a choppy sea, we need to turn into the wave—the wave of doubt and faith. For don’t we, too, have moments of doubt in the midst of faith? Don’t we, too, struggle with questions about God and suffering and pain? Being church in today’s world calls us to embrace our doubt along side our faith. Being church calls us to engage the questions

But engaging the questions is not enough; there’s more to being church in this world of ours. We need to walk the walk. At the end of one of the articles I read this week, the author concludes “only three words will come out of me, and they are not even my words. I hear them all the time in this church.... *Feed my sheep.*” Being church today calls us to feed God’s sheep—the hungry, the poor, the cast aside, and those who yearn for God.

In the spring of 2002, I heard the Vicar of St. Paul’s Chapel, the little chapel on Wall Street that provided rest and relief for all the people working to rescue people from the Twin towers, speak. He talked about the old way of being church—build it, offer it and they will come—and the way the church is being called today—reach out and bring God’s love to the world. Like our father Abram, we are called to a new way of being church—a church on the move if you will.

Like our father Abram we called to a journey with God. We are asked to leave the land of our ancestors—the land of the familiar and step into the unknown. But even Abram didn’t leave everything behind. He brought Sarai and Lot; he brought his possessions; and he brought his memory, reason and skill. He brought with him his sense of beauty and his experiences of love. His was a journey fueled by faith and hope. And so is ours.

Like our father Abram, the church—by that I mean “Church in capital letters”—has been called on a journey into the unknown. What do we bring with us? Our rich memories, our experiences of a loving God and of loving our neighbor, our commitment to live out our baptismal vows of seeking and serving Christ and of respecting the dignity of all. We bring with us our willingness to engage the questions and our struggles with faith and doubt. Our recognition that we live in an imperfect world and that we ourselves are not perfect. “Lech lecha,” God calls to us. Let us go forth into the land of questions.