

Sunday, September 20, 2020 – Forward in Freedom
JOURNEYING Forward

Genesis 12: 1-9

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Text/Application Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

As we continue our Forward in Freedom series today our attention turns toward the journey before us. Yes, we plan and we prepare but ultimately the journey before us involves many unknowns.

It's helpful to reflect on other bold journeys in the past, moving into the unknown – Christopher Columbus. Ferdinand Magellan, the first to circumnavigate the world. Lewis & Clark, crossing North America. The Wright brothers. Neil Armstrong and the Apollo astronauts. Perhaps, later in some of our lifetimes, we'll see people travel to Mars. There's lots of planning and lots of preparation but still much that can't be known until you actually set out on the journey itself. The people setting forth are ordinary people, of little to no renown before the journey begins. So what does it mean for us to journey forward? Today we'll learn from the lives of Abram and Sarai, later renamed by God Abraham and Sarah (which is how I'll refer to them in the sermon) as these ordinary people journey with a forward-looking God.

There's nothing remarkable about Abraham and Sarah when God get sets them moving. Abraham is in a pagan land, in a city called Ur, somewhere in modern day Iraq. He's 75, she 65, and they have no children. This is a big deal in the ancient world because to have no heirs means to have no name, no future. God makes a crazy promise to this couple – a promise of a great name, of heirs, of a nation to rise from their line, and of land. There's absolutely nothing about this couple that looks right on paper. Why in the world would God choose to work through a retirement aged couple to build a nation? And yet they get up and go – away from their family to a far away place to which God leads them. There's nothing special about this couple except for one thing – God chooses to make a promise to them and they receive His promise with faith. See it's all about what God is giving and what God is doing – I'll give you a name, a nation, land.

These ordinary people are given extraordinary promises that are all and only from the hand of God. And that's the story we see repeated over and over again in the pages of Scripture – God using the least expected, the least qualified, the most flawed to work out His story in history. God sets ordinary people forward on an extraordinary journey.

It's important to remember that we're ordinary people, blessed by an extraordinary God. Yes, we plan, yes, we prepare, yes, we count the cost, but if all that we do is point to our accomplishments, our possessions, our positions, our reputation, our property and our plans the result will be no more than ordinary.

I like what St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 1: ²⁶*For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.* ²⁷*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;* ²⁸*God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,* ²⁹*so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."*

Like Abraham and Sarah we're ordinary people who move FORWARD by God's grace and help. Like Abraham and Sarah we don't know everything that's going to happen along the journey but we know that God will use us and that He will bless us. In fact, He already has. We're God's chosen people, adopted in baptism, forgiven through His Gifts and sent on His mission to love and disciple others.

But you know, something happens between the bookends of the journey – the starting block where we get up and go and the end where we reach the destination. What happens is that we forget. We ignore. We get impatient. We doubt. We second guess. Ordinary people ignore our forward moving God.

Put yourself in Abraham and Sarah's shoes – here they are well along in years and made this incredible promise. They pick up and go – certainly, these promises must be fulfilled soon, right? I mean, they're not getting any younger. What goes through your mind after two

years? Five years? Ten years? Still no child – so no heirs, no nation, no land. They're not getting any younger. So they contrive their own plan – Abraham ends up impregnating Sarah's servant, Hagar and they have a son, Ishmael. As you might imagine, Sarah comes to regret coming up with this idea borne out of impatience with God's plan coming through – deeply resentful of Hagar and her son, eventually Ishmael and his mother are sent away.

Now you and I may not have direct word from God about picking up and moving to a distant land, but there are promises God has given us. It's never good when we ignore those truths. We see it when we fail to forgive each other, when we refuse to love one another, when we demand my way or the highway... these things always and only lead to pain and suffering. These aren't the journey on which God sends us forward.

We're ordinary people with a faith that looks forward. Just as Abraham and Sarah weren't perfect, neither are we. That's no excuse, but it's also why Jesus came. I like the way the writer to the Hebrews says it in Hebrews 11, *"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."*

Finally at 100 and 90 Abraham and Sarah respectively become parents of Isaac. A lifetime of hopeful expectation finds fulfillment... only to be tested again. When Isaac is 13 Abraham is tested by God – is he willing to sacrifice his son? They go on a long journey, set up a place to make a sacrifice and at the last moment God stays Abraham's hand and shows us

what kind of God He is – “I will provide the sacrifice.” This is the God we have, who prepares the sacrifice for us, who gives us His Son to take away our sin.

And still, there’s also the point that everything is on the table. God comes before all else. What are the things that get in the way for us? Is it our pride? Maybe our fear? Our frustration, wanting and waiting everything to go back to normal? Our apathy? An attitude of defeat? A sense of resignation? Especially then, especially for such a time as this, God call us to journey forward. Our God is still leading. Our God is still sending. Our God’s mission and His utilization of us on it – to love others and make disciples – is as true now as ever. We can only move forward in this way because of our forward moving, sending God.

Of all the remarkable mysteries beyond my pay grade, the one that most grips me is the fact that God knows all things and yet He created us, knowing the ways we would turn from Him, disappoint Him, sin against His perfect will. He created us knowing the journey that would be set in motion from heaven to earth – the second person of the Trinity would take on flesh – first a cell, then two, then four, soon a fetus and then a newborn baby, made flesh to dwell among us. Paul puts it this way to the Galatian churches: *“⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”* People had spent centuries waiting on the Messiah and when He finally came they rejected Him, favoring their own designs and plans over what God intended. Yet Jesus journeyed forward, from heaven to Bethlehem to Egypt and Nazareth throughout Galilee and Samaria and then He set His face toward Jerusalem, forward toward the cross, forward toward hell, forward to an empty tomb – Forward for you and me. Our Forward moving God is moving forward with we, His forward-facing people.

Journeying forward isn’t always easy. There are unknowns. There are risks. There are trials. Stephen was stoned to death. Peter was threatened. Paul faced all kinds of persecution. So too this congregation hasn’t always had it easy in decisions to move forward. Did you know this campus wasn’t the first choice? There was another piece of land a little northeast of here

that fell through. When this sanctuary was built there was some pretty major construction headaches. We had a real rough go through the Great Recession. And yet, we kept moving forward, faithful to God's mission with our forward moving God.

And now again we're boldly looking forward for the sake of God's mission and ministry to this church and this community in the decades to come. You've heard me say it before but I feel like I can't say it enough – this journey forward isn't about a building or a remodel. It's about our call to make disciples. It's about facilitating ministry.

Ours is not a timid God. God pushes us forward, calls us into moving forward – not to be comfortable but to keep moving. And as we move forward, we journey where He takes us. In Jesus' name, Amen.