

“Get Lost!”
Genesis 12:1-9

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The other day, I started my car, only to be greeted by an error message flashing on the dashboard. A little box with a plus sign and a minus sign that told me absolutely nothing. As I pulled out my owner’s manual and tried to guess what to look up in the index, I remembered that the handy button on my dashboard would connect me to help. So I pushed it. A moment later, a disembodied voice said, “Hello, Ms. Pagliarella?”

“Yes?”

“Ms. Pagliarella, I see that you are located on Giddings Street.”

“Yes?”

“And that you are about one block west of Seeley Avenue...located in the 4700 block.”

“Yes!”

Now, none of this was actually relevant to my dilemma, which turned out to be a faulty battery, but I was instantly comforted. I was on the grid. Someone, somewhere, knew where I was – and if I was in need of urgent rescue, they would swoop in and help me.

A Blackberry can tell you precisely where you are located, right down to the longitude and latitude. Even my cat has a kind of “kitty Lo-Jack” system the size of a grain of rice implanted in the scruff of her neck, reducing the likelihood that she would disappear forever.

As technology becomes more readily available, connectivity becomes more common. I have never been anywhere that would be considered completely remote, but I do recall driving down a dirt logging road in rural Chile and seeing satellite dishes on the roof of each and every dilapidated house. And while scuba diving from a national park in Costa Rica, I was astonished to watch the boat’s skipper pull out a portable GPS to locate our dive location while the captain used a line of sight technique passed on by his great-great-grandfather. It is becoming the case that in this world of GPS, MapQuest, and even good old-fashioned Rand McNally, it is possible to never be truly lost!

Episcopal priest and professor Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the “Practice of Getting Lost” as one of a dozen spiritual disciplines, alongside more obvious spiritual activities such as praying and keeping the Sabbath. Taylor, who lives in rural Georgia, watches her cows follow the same path from point A to B,

each and every day (**An Altar in the World**, 70). The cows are single-minded in their determination to reach their favorite clover or watering hole, says Taylor, and she sees the appeal. There is comfort in placing your feet into the same rut, walking a well-worn path across the yard.

But leaving the known path also has its benefits. “You agree to become aware of each step you take,” (71) Taylor says. You encounter the homes of people you might not otherwise know...you see a wild iris growing close to the ground...you experience everything around you, and you are mentally prepared for when you really and truly do lose your way.

Perhaps this is why, in the Biblical world, God calls people to travel far and wide. To realize God’s promises, Abraham and Sarah had to be willing to get lost. Abraham – still known as Abram at this point – is called to leave his country, and his family, and his home, and to go with his wife and nephew in search of God’s promises. God shows him the land fairly quickly – the land where Abraham and Sarah (still known as Sarai) will eventually live – but since the Canaanites live there, our heroes journey on. They make their way from Haran to Canaan to Egypt and beyond, all the while waiting for God to make good on God’s promises.

Theirs is a very different world. Separated from the complex kinship system, a couple travelling on their own are without the protection of their extended family. As an alien in Egypt, Abraham is so fearful of losing his life that he resorts to passing Sarah off as his sister rather than risk being killed by the locals.

Theirs is a very different world. Separating from the land they had grown up on leaves Sarah and Abraham rootless. Land stayed in the family for generations, and the land supported them. In times of famine, people were often forced to leave the land and to live in an alien nation. Years later, when the Israelites are slaves to Pharaoh, we learn that they lost the land God gave them because they traded land to the Egyptians to survive in lean times. A connection to the land is vitally important.

Yes, this is a very different world. So when Abraham and Sarah chose to follow God, they chose to walk away from everything that was familiar, knowing that they might never return, and realizing that they might never see family again. They stepped away from everything safe and comfortable, responding to a very vague promise from God.

“I will make of you a great nation,” God says.

“I will bless you. I will make your name great. I will bless those who bless you. In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Just what does it mean to be blessed? What does a great name look like? Who are these families of the earth who will also be blessed? God doesn’t say. And on this promise alone, Abraham and Sarah are expected to leave all that they

have ever known. And they do. The authors of Genesis would have us believe that the faithful couple left willingly and hopefully.

They just went.

Or did they?

The writers of Genesis don't seem to think it's important to tell us if Abraham and Sarah had the marital dispute to end all disputes about this one. We don't know if Abraham's nephew Lot threw a tantrum, or if Abraham's servants muttered under their breath – I mean, Abraham told them that they had to go too, and God had never made any promises to them!

It is a huge leap of faith! Abraham and Sarah and Lot and the servants and the animals. They all went. And they waited. They waited and they waited for God to follow through on these promises. It is another 24 years before God makes a clear covenant with Abraham, promising that this long-awaited son will be born if they can just wait one more year. This is a lot of uncertainty and waiting for a man who received a powerful call from God!

Genesis doesn't tell us much about what happens in the interim, focusing more on the logistics of the journey than on what was going on in Abraham and Sarah's minds. But since God reiterates the promise several times, I imagine that their journey was mental as well as literal. Their uncertainty must have made the inner journey as difficult as the actual one. And perhaps God knows that, which is why God doesn't call each and every one of us to travel across the middle east, but God does nudge us or in some cases blast us out of our comfort zones.

In E.L. Doctrow's story, **Ragtime**, there is a character known only as Father who joins an expedition to the North Pole, while his wife, called Mother, remains in her protected upper class home in New Rochelle, New York. In a Broadway musical based on this story, Mother sings her goodbye to her husband. While her husband has places to discover, she says she will be there at the window, waiting.

Mother *sounds* content. But it quickly becomes clear that simply "waiting" isn't enough. Mother asks:

"But what of the people

Planted like flowers

I know some of those people

Have hearts that would rather

Go Journeying..."

Who stay where they're put?

with roots underfoot.

She does not remain seated at the window for long. When strangers are thrust into her path, Mother breaks down the boundaries that constrain her. She reaches out to a hopeless woman – a single African-American mother who sees no alternative other than to abandon her newborn son. When Mother encounters this,

on the spur of the moment she invites the woman and her child into her home to live. When the baby's father comes calling, Mother realizes how foolish it is to maintain racist barriers, and she offers him lemonade in the parlor, an act of hospitality that validates the dignity of this African-American musician, and invites him to not only share lemonade with her, but share his music and a little something of his life.

As Mother comes to know people unlike herself, she envisions a world that is radically different from the segregated America of the early 1900s. Ironically, her husband goes to the North Pole and back -- unchanged. He is hard-hearted and cold, unable to see the humanity in anyone unlike himself. He is uninterested in change; he fears the changes happening in his society and has no interest in self-evaluation.

And that is the difference between Father and Mother. As Mother sits at the window, she sings a sort of prayer:

Tell me how to be someone	
Whose heart can explore	While still staying here.
Let this be the year	We both travel...

(“Goodbye My Love” by Lynn Ahrens, from **Ragtime**)

In the words of the song, Mother has a heart that is willing to journey. She never goes farther than Atlantic City, yet she travels far from the comfortable world, all because her heart is willing. At the same time, she maintains all that is good about her own life. She is a devoted mother to her little boy...she nurtures and supports a confused and aimless younger brother...*and* she looks after the family business while her husband is away. She finds purpose in all these things, and yet she knows that God is asking more of her. In order to figure out just what it is, she has to be willing to get lost.

Again and again, God says to the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Bible, “leave your family and your home and follow me.” God is saying, “I will protect you. I will be your God and you will be my people. All you have to do is walk away from everything that is safe and comfortable, because that is the only way that you can really trust me completely.”

Jesus' message is the same. Put down your nets. Follow me (Mat 4:19). Stop collecting taxes. Follow me (Mat 9:9). Take up the cross. Follow me (Mat 10:38). God continues to urge us to follow, even when it means leaving the familiar path.

We don't have to get physically lost...but we do have to lose some of the things that make life easy and comfortable to discover the promises that God has in

store for us. We have to get out of our comfort zone, go to an emotional or spiritual place that is new or unfamiliar if we are to learn how to trust God.

Sometimes God *does* call us to travel. I think of people in this congregation like Liz Bradner volunteering in Costa Rica, or our own Claire Curran going to Jamaica next month. Claire has travelled to Miami...and with Heifer International...and now to Jamaica in response to God's call. Our youth – every summer there is plenty of work to be done in their back yards, and yet they leave Chicago for Iowa or New Orleans or Appalachia or someplace they can go for a week to begin to learn not just how to serve others but so that they can come to know and appreciate the “other.”

Travel can be a powerful, transformative way to learn, but it isn't the only way. Sometimes God asks us to wait at the window. Not passively, but to watch. To see what is happening in our own backyards, and to pray that God shows us what we are supposed to do right here and now; how to be a blessing here and now, in Lake Forest or Lake Bluff, or in our own community.

It is possible to live our entire lives in Chicago and never venture south of the Loop...or in Lake Forest, and never visit Waukegan. It is even possible to support many non-profit organizations and yet never actually encounter the people they serve. People who volunteer at PADS or the soup kitchen will tell you how much they appreciate meeting and talking with the people who come there to eat. Someone who tutors with Reading Power or the Boys and Girls Club will tell you how much *they* learn from the children who come to them for lessons.

Sometimes, if you are in one of those situations, you might find yourself taking an even bigger risk. Perhaps that means sitting down next to someone at the soup kitchen or at PADS to have a cup of coffee with them and ask them how their day is going. To invite conversation with someone you might not otherwise have the chance to learn from, and to hear their story and to realize that you do it not because you are better than them or more blessed than they are, but because you know that they have the opportunity to be a blessing to you, just as you seek to be a blessing to them.

For everyone whom God calls to leave her country and kindred, there are others to whom God says: “Stay right where you are. Take care of your family. Do your job joyfully, do it well. But keep your eyes open. Keep your heart open. Because, I have work in store for you. Get lost now and then! Wait and see who I will put in your path. Be open to what they have to teach you...and think of how you can serve them. Lose yourself. Only I know who you really are and where, when you will find yourself. I have so much in store for you, but all you have to do – is trust me. Amen.