

Preacher: **Pastor Twyla**

Scripture: **Genesis 12:1-4a**

<sup>1</sup> Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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.”

<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

This week we are at the second Sunday of Lent. Just as we set aside time to spiritually prepare for Christmas Day, it makes sense that we set aside time to prepare for the two most important days of the Christian year, Good Friday and Easter—the death and resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ. Lent is a time that offers us an opportunity to come to terms with the human condition we may spend the rest of the year running from; and it brings our need for a Savior to the forefront. Like Advent, Lent is a time to open the doors of our hearts a little wider and understand our Lord a little deeper, so that when Good Friday and eventually Easter come, it is not just another day at church but an opportunity to receive the overflowing of graces God has to offer.

Many people give something up for Lent, which is a nice practice so long as the purpose for doing it is not for foolish gain, but instead, will serve as a reminder to examine our relationship with God, and in the end draw us closer to God.

A conversation between a father and his 10-year-old son, reported in the newspaper, illustrates the problem in our attitude toward Lent. The father was attempting to explain to his young son the necessity for giving up something for Lent. In fact, the father went beyond the nondirective method of parenting to suggest that the lad give up candy.

Quizzed by the boy about this kind of religiosity and what it would bring, the father replied that “It will improve your character. You’ll be a better person on Easter Sunday if you give up candy. After all, your mother and I have given up liquor for Lent.”

The boy then said: “That’s funny Dad. I saw you and mother having a drink before dinner last night.” The father replied, “That was wine. We gave up hard liquor.”

The lad countered, “Oh, that’s good. I’ll give up hard candy.”

Today’s Lenten scripture takes us back in the Old Testament to the story of Abram’s call from God to leave everything but what was needed and everyone but family behind to go to an unknown place where God would lead him—and Abram did it!

Abram, whom God later called Abraham, emerges on the scene here without introduction and has this encounter with God. We learn in Acts 7:2 that this, however, was not the first time God gave Abram direction in his life. In a speech, the martyr Stephen made to the Sanhedrin, Stephen said, ““Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.”

So, it seems most probable that Abram had two calls—one in Ur in Mesopotamia and the other in Haran. He left Ur at the first call and came to Haran, where he received the second call that we heard read to us this morning. He left Haran at the second call and came into the promised land.

We hear something different in this second call. God included a promise this time. God promised that if Abram honored God’s call he would make of him a great nation and he would

bless Abram and make his name great, so that he would be a blessing. God said he would bless those who blessed Abram, and the one who cursed him God would curse; and in Abram all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

In the simplest terms through this promise, we hear God telling Abram he will have offspring, a home, and protection. God did not include the how, when, and where for the fulfillment of these promises; but the promises, particularly because God made them, were motivation enough to trust God and step out in faith to follow God's call.

We have all experienced the frustration and hurt of broken promises, but with God we will never know that disappointment because God keeps all of his promises. If we experience disappointment, it is because of our misinterpretations of the promise, or our impatience, or our selfish desires and unwillingness to let things go or accept change.

There are many, many promises of God in Scripture. In each promise, God pledges that something will (or will not) be done or given or come to pass. These are not flippant, casual promises such as we often make; these promises of God are rock-solid, unequivocal commitments made by God Himself. Because God is faithful, the recipients of the divine promises can have full assurance that what God has pledged will indeed be realized.

Some examples of God's promises in Scripture are:

God promised that if we search for Him, we will find Him (Deuteronomy 4:29). He is not playing hard-to-get. "Our God is near us whenever we pray to him." (Deuteronomy 4:7).

God promised that His love will never fail (1 Chronicles 16:34). He is faithful in every way.

God promised that all things will work out for good for His children (Romans 8:28). This is the broader picture that keeps us from being dismayed by present circumstances.

God promised new life in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Salvation is the beginning of a brand-new existence.

God promised to finish the work He started in us (Philippians 1:6). God does nothing in half measures. He started the work in us, and He will be sure to complete it.

And, God promised to supply our needs (Matthew 6:33; Philippians 4:19). Not that we get everything we want, but our needs will be taken care of. We are more valuable than the birds, and our Heavenly Father feeds them (Matthew 6:26).

These promises and all of the many other promises of God we find in the scriptures are good for all time and in all circumstances. If we have faith in God, believing he keeps his promises, they become a motivator, a guide for the choices we make in how we live our lives.

Don and I remember very clearly our call to the Westminster congregation. I had always said I would never make a move until our boys were through high school. I also did not want to leave Lancaster County.

The time came when our oldest son, Nick, was in college and our youngest son, Zachary, had just graduated from high school. A few days later, my sister-in-law died of breast cancer at 39 and left my brother with two beautiful little girls. The day after I officiated her funeral, I got a phone call from the assistant district executive of this district asking me to interview at Westminster. I was very surprised because my profile was not in circulation.

My immediate response was no. I didn't feel I could leave my grieving brother so soon, nor did I want to move that far from our beloved hometown, Lititz. Recognizing that the timing of her phone call was not good, she asked me to think and pray about it for a week and she would call me back.

Don and I did talk and pray about it. I talked with my brother, and assistant did call back as promised. We had decided that if we wanted to be true to the calling process and open to God's possible call, we needed to go for the interview. In all honesty, I still was not feeling open to the possibility, but I agreed to the interview anyhow. The interview went well, too well. Don and I knew without question I was being called to serve as their Minister of Christian Nurture. That did not exactly excite us at first. But the call was confirmed with a 100% vote of the congregation after my trial sermon.

I didn't want to leave my family and friends. I didn't want to leave Lancaster County. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. But God is good and true to his promises. God guided me to a place where I could use my gifts to point the way to him. God provided everything Don and I and our boys needed to make the move, including a lovely affordable house. God watched over my brother and even though my brother made some bad choices, God stood by him and helped work out good things for him. God's promises continue to be fulfilled through the call now to HCOB. And, I'm not so far away from our family that we cannot go to visit them.

Yes, when we hold on to the promises of God, according to God's will, we are blessed. There will be those times when we lose sight of the promises of God, and we need to be reminded of them again. It may be difficult to hold on to them when God's timing is not the same as our timing, or when things don't seem to be working out the way we think they should. Sometimes disappointment and pain are so very deep that it's hard to imagine God's promises will do us any good.

Abram needed reminders. There was the time he needed to be reminded of God's promise to provide land and descendants for him. We can read about it in Genesis 13:14-17. It happened after his nephew Lot had chosen the best territory and he was left with the least attractive. He was reminded again of the promise that he would have descendants in Genesis 15:19-21, after he had complained that he and his wife were still childless. And there were other times God had to remind him of the promises he made to Abraham.

The promises of God never go away. We may get impatient and selfish, but, that's on us, not God. If we remain faithful to God, honoring his call and direction on our lives, God's promises are true for us.

Perhaps during this season of Lent, as we consider what gets in our way at times of knowing the joy and blessings of the Lord, we might reflect on God's promises to us, and how open we are to God's will as he is faithful to keeping those promises. Amen.