



FROM THE BEGINNING: CALLED TO TRUST

October 14, 2018, Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 12:1-5a; 18:1-15

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Genesis 12:1: God said to Abram: “Leave your land, your birthplace and your father’s house and go to the land I will show you.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says that these words “are among the most consequential in the history of [hu]mankind. With them a new faith was born that has lasted two-thirds of the course of civilization and remains young and vigorous today. Not only did Abraham give rise to what is now known as Judaism, he was also the inspiration of two other religions.” Sacks continues: “Christianity and Islam both trace their descent, biological or spiritual, to him and now number more than half the six billion people on the face of the earth among their adherents.”ⁱ

Such monumental consequences began with this abrupt call, a sudden command from God. Its abruptness heightened by the staccato sound of it in Hebrew: *lek leka...literally, you go.*ⁱⁱ

Prior to Genesis 12:1, the first eleven chapters are referred to as the “prehistory.” As I mentioned last week, those chapters recount the creation of the world, followed by human sin erupting here and there until it spread to catastrophic proportions, resulting in a flood and the survival of Noah’s family. This prehistory culminates or ‘turns’ with the story we read last week, the tower of Babel, as God scatters, disperses people across the face of the earth. Chapter 11 ends by following a particular trail of that worldwide dispersal. A long, spreading genealogy narrows down to Terah, the father of Abram. And for a few verses we follow Terah, Abram, Sarai, and Lot as they leave their home in Ur and settle in Haran.



Genesis 12:1 then signals a new beginning in human history—it opens the salvation history, the unfolding of promise and fulfillment—as God singles out one people upon the earth for a special relationship, an everlasting covenant that remains to this day.

Lek leka...you go. Has there ever been a time in your life when you were faced with an abrupt uprooting? Maybe it was a call from God...or, perhaps it was a call from a new employer...or a new relationship and there it was, this voice, an invitation that felt like a command it had such power. *Lek leka...you go...*striking its staccato urgency, like the tick-tock of a clock, its hands pushing forward. My first *lek leka* experience came when I was 26...newly graduated from seminary and about to begin my first full-time job in ministry. I was moving from Alabama to New Jersey, which might as well have been moving from Ur to Haran, it seemed so foreign and far away. Still, the moment remains vivid, standing in my parent's garage, the meager belongings—some things from my bedroom at home along with a few donated pieces of furniture and wedding gifts still in boxes—being loaded onto the U-Haul. The metal door closing on more than those 'belongings,' closing, too, on childhood and being someone's 'dependent.' I hugged my mother and father good bye and then set out for a place I did not know, to start 'adulting,' as it is now called.

All these years later, the voice came again, abrupt as always as invitation and command, *lek leka*...no longer young, but younger than Abram and Sarai, I gave up a permanent job for this transitional one, which many of my friends and colleagues found crazy and sort of admirable, too. We let go of a home, of so much that seemed settled, and put boxes in storage...traveled from Atlanta to New York to engage with you in a season of ministry which God has given us together. You have had to travel, too, I recognize. Not geographically, but you have had to engage a journey you might have wished had a different tour director...a journey where leadership is different in personality and gender...and well, I could go on...but I'll let you fill in your own blanks! And now, after 250 years, Brick Church faces its own *lek leka*...where you must go into a new era as you seek your



14th Senior Minister for the significant season ahead. The Mission Review is our opportunity to talk together about where God is calling us to go.

None of us is on a par with Abram and Sarai, of course, yet we are their heirs in the faith. Like them, we follow the God who speaks...the divine *lek leka* that invites and commands with the same breath: *you go...* without supplying all of the details we prefer in our faith life and frankly require in most ‘real life’ situations.

Rabbi Sacks acknowledges that there has never been anyone like Abraham. Yet, he also notes, “the Torah is exceptionally understated in its account of him.” Abraham does not fit any conventional image of the religious hero. He is not like Noah, daring survivor of a flood...or like Moses...liberator who stood up to Pharaoh. He is not even like any number of the fiery prophets. He seems, Sacks says, kind and gentle and gracious, not the attributes we usually necessarily associate with heroism. Sacks says that Judaism really does not have ‘heroes’ in the sense that other cultures did, like the Greeks: “...one convinced of his or her own importance...playing a part on the world stage under the admiring gaze of his contemporaries.”ⁱⁱⁱ Sacks describes Abraham as an “unheroic hero...one who “does what is right because it is right;” not for popularity or fame.

If we had time to jump into the chapters of Genesis between our two readings today, Abraham’s status as even an ‘unheroic hero’ might generate a debate. Frankly, neither Abraham nor Sarah consistently “does what is right because it is right.” God promises that though they are very old, they will have a child. That they will, in fact, have descendants that are greater in number than if one could count the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16) or the stars in the night sky (Gen. 15:5). That they will have land, and become the parents of a great nation and that in them all the families of the earth will be blessed.

This is, of course, an enormously preposterous promise to make to a couple without children at ages 75 and 65. That it takes God another 25 years to make good on the promise seems like such a joke, such an impossibility, that it’s no wonder Abraham hears God’s reassurance at age 100 and falls on his face while



LOL-ing. When Sarah hears the same at age 90, she guffaws behind her tent curtain until her ‘innards’ hurt, as the Hebrew puts it. As their *lek leka* drags on, they decide it’s up to them if God’s promise is ever to come true. God must have meant their nephew Lot is to be the adopted heir; but no, that’s not what God has in mind. Maybe Abraham’s slave Eliezer is to get the inheritance? No, that’s not it either. Sarai suggests Abraham have a child by her slave, Hagar, which is awful for everyone, but especially for Hagar. Abraham and Hagar’s son, Ishmael, will inherit land, but he is still not the fulfillment of God’s promise. God also promised them land, a home...but while going through Egypt, Abraham wasn’t sure he could count on God to see them safely through, so he passed Sarah off as his sister instead of his wife, letting her be taken into Pharaoh’s harem. In her 60’s Sarah, beautiful and desirous, came in handy just in case God was not really with them after all. Like us, Abraham and Sarah prefer to take their life in their own hands, rather than leaving their lives in God’s. They will manage the promises of heaven with their own resources here on earth.

But from the beginning, Abraham and Sarah were called to trust. To leave their family, their home, and all that was familiar, going out with nothing more than the wild promise that God was with them and had a plan. They were called to trust God’s power more than their own. To trust that what God has promised, God will in fact do. To trust that one blessing from God can spread like dust and stardust until others, too, are blessed. They were asked to strike out trusting in God as their guiding source of confidence, and to keep trusting that the plans and purposes of God are reliable, no matter how scant the evidence or long the delay. They were to demonstrate this trust in God alone in their dealings with others.

“Called to Trust” is a counter-cultural calling. Numerous articles cite the “crisis of trust” affecting our life together in the United States and many countries in the world. The communications marketing firm, Edelman, has been asking people around the world for the last 18 years about their level of trust in various institutions. Never before have they recorded such steep drops in trust in the United States as in the past year and a half. Their reporting places the United States



as having the least-trusting informed public, those ages 25-64 with college degrees, of the 28 countries the firm surveyed.^{iv}

The capacity to trust is, as we know, one of the most basic and important building blocks for a baby to develop in order to grow into a healthy, whole person. A level of trust is also a necessity for a democracy. What is it doing to us, then, as individuals and as a nation as trust erodes? When what is true is constantly up for debate...when trust in every institution is constantly undermined? We become anxious and fearful; we become suspicious and angry. We divide into tribes, retreat into enclaves and health is not in us. We decide we have only ourselves to rely on.

Our Presbyterian theology has something important to offer in this present and pressing moment. The central claim of the Reformed tradition is its insistence, the priority of belief in the providence and sovereignty of God. We are absolutely clear that God is in charge and can be trusted. God has a purpose and plan for all creation and even now is working out those purposes in human history. God's promises will be fulfilled. We do not always understand or perceive how God is at work given the vagaries of life and the chaos of world events, nevertheless we trust that it is so. Trusting this, we are set free from overwhelming anxiety, fear, suspicion and anger. Trusting God so deeply with our present and future, we are free to spend our time and energy discerning prayerfully and together where and how God is at work; then participating in God's purposes and plans, which are always directed toward life, health, justice, and resurrection.

The way ahead is not always clear. The delay can be unbearable. We are not promised that danger and defeat and death will not touch us. Nevertheless, we regularly confess: In life and in death we belong to God. We are admittedly unheroic heroes when it comes to trusting fully in the sovereignty of God. We still try to manage the promises of heaven with the resources we have on this earth. But in a time when trust is precipitously low and anxiety and fear is palpably high, we have been called. *Lek leka...you go* in trust.



How does our strong belief in the providence and sovereignty of God invite us to think about our mission and engage our neighbors? Children of Abraham and Sarah, a sense of adventure will be essential. A sense of humor will be helpful. It may even become be a blessing to others.

Amen.

ⁱ Jonathan Sacks, **Covenant & Conversation** (Maggid Books and The Orthodox Union, 2009), 73.

ⁱⁱ Kathleen M. O'Connor, **Genesis 1-25A** (Macon, Georgia: Smyth&Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2018), 190-191.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sacks, 74-75.

^{iv} Uri Friedman, "Trust is Collapsing in America" in *The Atlantic*, January 21, 2018. See also "A Crisis of Trust" in *The Economist*; "American Cynicism: In Nobody We Trust" in *Forbes.com* from 2016.