

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
September 18, 2022  
Genesis 12:1-9  
Stepping out in Faith

Last week we heard about the universal covenant God made with all of creation never to destroy the earth through a flood. Noah's descendants rebuild the land and in Genesis chapter 11 we hear the genealogy of Noah's son Shem. The genealogy ends with the family of Terah, the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran. We hear that Terah took his son Abram and Abram's wife Sarai and Haran's son Lot (Abram's nephew) from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan. However, they don't quite make it that far and settle in the land of Haran where Terah dies. We pick up Abram's story, or Abraham as he will come to be known, here in Genesis 12. Hear now the word of the Lord.

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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. 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. 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." 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. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot and all the possessions that they had gathered and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran, and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east, and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

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I love a good road trip. My maternal grandparents retired to Florida when I was in 7 or so and every summer after my family would take the trek from suburban Maryland where I grew up to the Tampa-St. Petersburg area where my grandparents lived. The beginning part of the journey to Florida was tracked by billboards for South of the Border and the end of the trip by billboards for Gatorland and the Mermaids of Weeki Wachee.

This love of road trips continued through my college spring breaks and six weeks of camping across America, when one of my college roommates and I drove from Pennsylvania to

California and back, taking the northern route through the Badlands of South Dakota and Yellowstone on the way west and the Southern route through the desert and plains on the way back east. We stopped at every tacky tourist stop we could find – from Xanadu, the foam house of tomorrow in the Wisconsin Dells, Wall Drug in South Dakota and the cement Garden of Eden in Lucas, Kansas. This was in the days before cell phones and GPS. We had an old station wagon and a road atlas and a desire to see a bit more of the country before we started grad school – Rachel in Washington State and me in Connecticut. We had a general idea of where we were going, which national parks were a must, but really we just took each leg of the journey as it came, with billboards, road signs, and visits to tourist offices to guide us, since there was no Google back then.

So I can resonate with our friend Abram this morning as he sets out on the road with Sarai and Lot. 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. 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.” These are definitely some vague instructions from the Lord – “go from your country to the land I will show you.” Talk about stepping out in faith.

Go from your country...go from your home, the place you know and are known and strike out into an unknown land. And then keep going into another unknown land. Author Bruce Feiler describes Abraham (and I am going to call him Abraham since that is the name he will be soon be given by the Lord) as “the perpetual stranger in the strange land, the outsider who longs to be the insider, the landless who longs for land...”<sup>1</sup>

Our scripture passage this morning is known as the “Call of Abraham.” God calls Abraham and Abraham responds by putting his trust in God. Bruce Feiler describes this call as not a call to a relationship of belonging, but rather a call of a relationship to strangeness. He says, “We are all aliens. Abraham is blessed – the nations of the world are blessed – because he had the courage to go to another place and make himself a stranger. Because believe me, at some point in our lives, all of us have to go to another place, too, and make *ourselves* strangers.”<sup>2</sup>

I find that these words pull at my heart. At some point we all have to go to another place and make ourselves strangers. Whether it is a new school or a new church or a new job; whether it is across town or across the country or across the world, we have to have the courage to make ourselves to be strangers. As we heard Rebekah read from the New Testament Book of Hebrews, “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.”

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce Feiler. *Abraham. A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. William Morrow Paperbacks. 2002, p21.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p52-53.

For Abraham the experience of being a stranger in a strange land changed him. It opened him up to new possibilities, to share the gift of hospitality. Abraham's trust in God, his stepping out in faith not only transformed him, it transformed the world. Abraham became the father of the three monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Throughout history and into our present day, there are countless stories of people who have been transformed by their experience of being a stranger, a refugee in a place that is foreign to them. Hear this story of Afghan refugee Fatima as shared by the PC(USA) through the Peace and Global Witness Offering.

Left homeless following a massive fire that closed the Moria Refugee Camp in Greece, the native Afghani was arrested and imprisoned after unknowingly becoming involved with drug dealers.

Devastated and alone in a Greek prison — her two little ones sent off to a shelter for unaccompanied children — Fatima may as well have been invisible, until her case was referred to Lesbos Solidarity, a migrant justice organization. They collaborated with human rights lawyers to secure her release from prison, provide her with housing close to her children and help her find employment. She now supports other women who are in a vulnerable position like she was.

“Injustice must not become invisible,” said Efi Latsoudi, one of the founders of Lesbos Solidarity, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) partner. “If refugees are seen as a threat coming to invade your country, people don't see their human face. People are afraid; and ultimately, we fear the stranger.”

Lesbos Solidarity embodies the goals of the Peace & Global Witness Offering, which encourage the church to cast off anxiety, fear, discord and division and welcome the stranger as we are called to do in Matthew 25.”<sup>3</sup>

Transforming fear of the stranger into welcoming the stranger. That is not an easy task. It is a task that requires trust in the God in whose likeness we were all created. It requires stepping out in faith.

One of the most beautiful stories of stepping out in faith I have heard this year comes from Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, former leader of Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas. Some of you may know or know of Rabbi Cytron-Walker. He grew up in Lansing, graduated from Sexton High School and attended Congregation Shaarey Zedek in East Lansing. Last January 15, Rabbi Cytron-Walker and three others were held hostage at the synagogue. Reflecting on his experiences, he said “Hatred has already led to harassment and even bloodshed in too many houses of worship. These problems have been with us for far too

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<sup>3</sup> <https://specialofferings.pcusa.org/resource/building-connections-welcome-stranger/>

long. At least part of the problem is because we, ourselves, are strangers. Jews are strangers. Muslims are strangers. People with a different religious tradition — or no religious tradition — are perceived as strangers. People of different ethnicities can be considered strangers. People who hold different political views are seen as strangers. We're strangers because one can look from afar and make judgments without understanding another's reality. We're strangers because it takes too much work to be curious, to give others the benefit of the doubt. It is a lot easier and a lot more comfortable to stick with one's group."<sup>4</sup>

In discussing the challenges of living by the ethos of welcoming the stranger, Rabbi Cytron-Walker acknowledges that it weighs heavy on him that he was the one who opened the doors to the synagogue and unknowingly welcomed the individual who would later attack him and his fellow congregants. And yet he shares, "Still, I remain committed to the idea of welcoming and caring for the stranger and living that value." And that caring means that "we're willing to meet and talk with those who are different from ourselves. Caring enough to know that while our experiences may not be the same, and we will probably disagree, we are human beings with something to teach and something to learn. This is not easy. And right now, it feels countercultural."

Countercultural indeed. Talk about stepping out in faith. After such a traumatic experience it would be easy build up defenses, to want to live behind a wall. To turn away a face you don't recognize, to make it someone else's problem. And yet. And yet we are called, like Abraham, to step out in faith and welcome strangers; to step out in faith and to journey out of our comfort zone to become strangers; to step out in faith to transform our fear into welcome. It is only then that we will know peace.

The International Day of Peace is observed around September 21 each year. The United Nations General Assembly has declared this as a day devoted to strengthening the ideals of peace. They share that "achieving true peace entails much more than laying down arms. It requires the building of societies where all members feel that they can flourish. It involves creating a world in which people are treated equally, regardless of their race." The theme for 2022 is "End racism. Build peace."<sup>5</sup>

Building peace through relationships is part of the mission of the Peace Corps. September 22 will mark the 61st anniversary of the day when Congress approved a bill to establish the Corps. Some politicians had opposed the idea, calling it a "utopian brainwash." But Illinois Representative Marguerite Stitt Church, who had traveled extensively throughout Africa, made a compelling, historic speech: "Here is something which is aimed right," she said, "which is American, which is sacrificial — and which above all can somehow carry at the

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<sup>4</sup>Charlie Cytron-Walker. My Synagogue Was Attacked, but I Will Never Stop Welcoming the Stranger. New York Times. Feb. 23, 2022; <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/opinion/colleyville-texas-synagogue-antisemitism.html>

<sup>5</sup> You can learn more at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/international-day-peace>

human level, to the people of the world, what they need to know; what it is to be free; what it is to have a next step and be able to take it; what it is to have something to look forward to, in an increase of human dignity and confidence.” Her argument persuaded many who were opposed to now support the bill, which passed with wide bipartisan support.<sup>6</sup> To date more than 241,000 Americans have served in the Peace Corp in 141 countries<sup>7</sup>, including some in our own congregation.

The impact of Peace Corps volunteers doesn't end when their formal service ends. Following worship this morning we will share a meal together and learn how the Friends of Moldova are supporting refugees fleeing from the war in Ukraine. The Friends of Moldova is a non-profit organization founded by returned Peace Corp volunteers, people who know the importance and value of nurturing relationships as central to the journey to peace.

Bruce Feiler ends his introductory chapter on Abraham with these words from Jerusalem resident, David Willna: “The relationship between a person and another human being is what creates and allows for relationship with God. If you're not capable of living with each other and getting along with each other, then you're not capable of having a relationship with God...So the question is not whether God can bring peace into the world. The question is: Can we?”<sup>8</sup> Join me in prayer...

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<sup>6</sup> SALT Project. *Theological Almanac*. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2022/9/12/theologians-almanac-for-week-of-september-18-2022>

<sup>7</sup> <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/RS21168.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Feiler. *Abraham. A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. William Morrow Paperbacks. 2002. p14.