

Genesis 12:1-9  
Psalm 33:1-12  
Romans 4:13-25  
MATTHEW 9:9-13:18-26

### **Here I am, Lord; Send Me**

Perhaps, right now, you're feeling content with your life, settled, fulfilled, serene, or perhaps you're feeling unsettled, maybe anxious for specific reasons, discouraged, or just vaguely uneasy – or maybe somewhere in between. However each of us feels about our lives right now, we have much to gain from reflecting on the lives of the people featured in today's Bible readings: Abraham, Paul and Matthew; an unnamed woman who was healed by Jesus; and a leader of a synagogue and his daughter. All experienced radical changes in their lives at the hand of God – sought or unsought by them – and as a result came to know wonders far beyond anything they had experienced before.

We don't know Abraham's state of mind as today's great passage from Genesis 12 opens. What we do know is that Abraham had spent all of his 75 years in or near modern-day Iraq, known, around 1900 B.C., as Mesopotamia. He had grown up in the religious world of ancient Babylonia, shaped by belief in those arbitrary, capricious, self-serving deities I referred to in last week's sermon, a religious world in which the idea that the universe was ruled by one God who would be spontaneously generous and loving beyond all expectation was, quite literally, unthinkable.

So, Abraham didn't think up these concepts. He experienced them. Suddenly, the real God spoke directly and personally to Abraham and said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Suddenly, God, whom he had never known or even known *of* before, spoke directly to him and asked him to leave behind his country; to leave behind his clan or tribe except for his closest relatives and, implicitly, to leave behind his previous religious beliefs to follow the directives of this Voice from Heaven. Abraham, whose entire life savings was in his flocks of sheep and herds of goats and any other animals which walked around with him, was also asked, for the first time in his life, to move away from a major river and believe that this Voice would lead him to enough water and good pasture for his flocks and herds – and his family and himself – to live. And God did not give Abraham a physical GPS to help him in his travel to an unknown country, God just said "Go...to a land that I will show you."

Breaking camp and moving west into the mountains of Syria en route to what would, *because of Abraham*, become known as the Holy Land, would have taken lots of faith if God had stopped speaking then. But then God continued: "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."

WOW. Talk about a big-time promise. And remember – Abraham owned no land this time and had exactly zero children, so the notion of being “made into a great nation” would have seemed to most people not extravagant but absolutely delusional.

But Abraham was not most people.

He became the first **immigrant for the Lord**, starting a new chapter in his life in a new place in new ways at an age when most guys, let’s face it, might be a little set in their ways.

And he left no “safety net” behind in the old country, no safety deposit box with valuables he could go back to and cash in if this new adventure didn’t work out. Abraham and Sarah “took all the possessions that they had gathered.”

He, in effect, used the words of Isaiah from over a thousand years later: “Here I am, Lord, send me.”

And now Abraham is considered the great shared ancestor and preeminent example of faith by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike – over two billion people. We are *all* children of Abraham.

I guess those promises weren’t so delusional after all.

St. Paul, who lifts up Abraham as the exemplar of faith in today’s excerpt from Paul’s “Letter to the Romans,” knew himself what it was like to have his life changed by God. Paul, who had very definite opinions about almost everything – you know people like that – had become set in his ways as a *young* man, zealously dedicated to his faith as a Pharisaic Jew and convinced that the followers of Jesus were dangerous, radical heretics who needed to be stopped.

God can get through to *some* people in subtle ways; Paul was not one of them. He was going 89 m.p.h. in the wrong direction with his life, and for Paul to do a u-turn, first God had to put a “wall” in his way because only if Paul hit a wall would he realize that his way was not the right way.

When Paul had a vision of the risen Christ while traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians, he hit his wall. He was blind for three days, and afterwards he saw the world very differently, accepting Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He said, essentially, “Here I am, Lord, send me.”

We don’t know about Matthew before he became a disciple of Jesus. Jesus may have planted the seed of discipleship in Mathew’s mind, either directly or by what Matthew heard of Jesus’ words and deeds, or else Matthew just knew instantly when Jesus called him that he, Matthew, needed to change his life immediately by saying “yes” to Jesus.

Let’s think about this guy Matthew. Being a tax collector has never been the fast track to popularity; if you were introduced to someone after today’s service and told that he or she was the head tax assessor for your town – or the Commissioner of the IRS – that person would probably not be first on your list for guests at a dinner party you gave. Unless you were Jesus.

Tax collectors are generally unpopular, but Jews who served as tax collectors in Israel for the Roman Empire were way past unpopular. Imagine a Palestinian today collecting taxes for the Israeli government on the West Bank. Think of a French tax collector for the occupying Germans in World War II. Picture a black South African collecting taxes for the pre-1994, white supremacist apartheid government. You get the idea.

Plus, tax collectors for the Romans worked on a system under which, as long as they turned over to the Romans the amount of money the Romans wanted, tax collectors could keep whatever else they collected! You thought Sharp James had something going in Newark! That was subtle compared to standard operating procedures for Roman tax collectors.

And a Jew ripping off his own people for the sake of their brutal, foreign, pagan occupiers and his own well-lined pockets? How much was Matthew's life worth without Roman protection?

And how many other Jews in the world at that moment thought Matthew had any chance of salvation, any chance to be forgiven, transformed by God and made new and different?

Just one Jew thought so. Jesus.

Let's say Matthew's response together, "Here I am, Lord. Send me."

Women in the first century Middle East did not publicly reach out and touch men who were neither blood relatives nor their husbands. Hey, ladies, try it in a traditional Muslim country today and see what happens! (Don't if you value your health, safety or freedom.) Same thing 2,000 years ago. So this woman who had had bleeding for years – think of 12 consecutive years of having your "period," ladies – had to take a desperate risk and defy all of her family, culture and civil authorities to try to be healed, hoping there was just one Jewish man whose touch could heal her – and not, at the same time, endanger her.

There was one person like that. Jesus.

And Jesus *commended* this rash, radical woman who defied all convention. He said, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well."

This woman's "journey" was only a few feet long, but in its own way it was as much of a break-through as the 500-mile journey of Abraham. She had broken taboo and been commended for her faith and identified as "daughter" – a faithful child of God. What else could she next say to Jesus but – let's say together – "Here I am, Lord, send me."

The ruler of the synagogue was a distraught father whose 12-year-old daughter had just died. Everyone else must have thought he was wasting his time to seek out Jesus; heck, the professional mourners – the flute players and the crowd – were already at the house; the "wake" was well underway. But this grieving father believed that there was one person in the world who could turn this wake into Easter.

Jesus.

I think I can imagine the father's response to any request Jesus might have made of him afterwards. Let's say it together, "Here I am, Lord; send me."

And imagine being that 12-year-old girl, slipping away in your fatal illness; perhaps the last words you hear being those of your father: "I'm going to get Jesus." And then, you come back through "the white tunnel" because Jesus is waiting for you, not in heaven, but here at your bedside. You feel a hand gripping yours, you hear a voice calling you back, you open your eyes and see a face: all belong to Jesus.

What would you say to Jesus if you were that girl, what could you say to say "Thank you?" Let's answer together, "Here I am, Lord, send me."

Whether each of us currently feels settled or uneasy, serene or anxious, brimming with optimism or depressed about our lives and prospects, *God has a future for each of us*. It may not be the one we're used to, or the one we expected, or the one we thought we were stuck with. Or, it may be something "passing wonderful" right where we already are.

But the future God has for each of us does depend on one thing: on our listening and responding to his voice. Whether the journey he calls us on is hundreds of miles or a few feet, whether we are popular or loathed, whether we are younger than 12 or older than 75, God reaches out to us with a plan for us which is more wonderful than anything we could come up with all by ourselves.

As Dr. Seuss put it, "Oh, the places you'll go." All we have to do is say, "Here I am, Lord, send me."

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