

The Blessing of Getting Lost **Genesis 17:1-8, 15-16**

The life of an immigrant

Have you ever lived in a foreign country for more than a year? Imagine you are alone in a new country and don't know anyone. You have to leave your entire life and family behind. Your ability to speak, write and understand language suddenly becomes impaired. You are surrounded by an unfamiliar culture, food, and people. How would you feel? Trust me... Immigration is not easy. Some scholars say, "In many respects, immigration is trauma... It is a complete loss of identity and familiarity."¹ Sometimes, people cannot correctly pronounce your name, so you have to make a nickname for yourself. Although people willingly immigrate to the United States for the "American Dream," the experience can be painful, frightening, and sometimes humiliating.

A Korean clergy friend of mine told me that he once hit a deer on the road and killed it. His car was damaged and he had to call 911. He was in shock so, at that time, he couldn't remember the word 'deer.' So he said, "I hit Rudolph. I hit Rudolph." The dispatcher asked, "what about Santa?" When my friend told me about it, we laughed and laughed, but we also knew that it is a painful and somewhat humiliating experience when you can't make yourself understood.

Immigration is difficult, so I often wonder why Abram accepted God's call to leave his own country and father's house. Of course, God promised him many blessings. God said, "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... and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (12: 1-3) But it's just a promise and Abram didn't have any tangible evidences for blessings. We don't really know Abram's real motivation for accepting God's calling, but we know one thing for sure. He trusted God's word. He set off on his new journey of faith when he was seventy-five years old and wandered around lands. [ppt] As you can see on this map, Abram made quite a journey. Ur to Haran, Haran to the land of Canaan, to Egypt, the Negeb, and Hebron. Abram became a nomad who continually moved from place to place. He lived as an alien, and as a stranger... but at least he LIVED!

God's calling: Vision Quest

I believe that God's calling to Abram was an invitation for a new life. Haran was known as an agricultural city, so we can imagine that Abram's life in Haran might have been quite settled and predictable. When everything is settled, we feel comfortable, but at the same time, we may lose ourselves and our life's purpose within the repeated annual cycle.

I have been a pastor for 17 years, and I know what a pastor is supposed to do and what the church expects of their pastor. Churches also have their own annual cycle. Once I learned the annual cycle of the church, I can carry out my tasks without difficulty. My weekly cycle is almost the same from week to week. Writing a weekly newsletter, preparing the sermon and worship service, office hours, calling people, pastoral visitation, and leading the worship service on Sunday morning. Monthly finance committee meeting, church council meeting, and outreach committee meeting. A semiannual chancel guild meeting. Quarterly SPRC meeting. Annual church conference. Lenten book study, advent book study. There will be a fundraising event in November. Along with the monthly newsletter, I need to write a special letter for Easter,

¹ <https://careforyourmind.org/immigration-trauma-and-the-power-of-faith/>

Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Since the onset of Covid-19, I needed to be a worship technician, too, and have become pretty good at it. Right?

But recently, a question has haunted me. "Is that all?" I know all these things are essential, but "is that what I and we are really called to do?" I am comfortable with following this annual flow, but I also feel that we stay unconsciously within our comfort zone. What do you think? Some warn, "Don't live the same year 75 times and call it a life." Life begins when we leave our comfort zone and follow God's calling and vision. I believe God is calling our beloved Asbury to a new journey, leaving everything behind and walking before God.

Journey itself was the blessings

Of course, following God's calling does not guarantee a risk-free and safe life. It doesn't ensure that we will instantly experience the fulfillment of God's promise. I am a goal-oriented person, so when I read Abram's story, I often wonder why God didn't give Abram the promised land upon his arrival. God promised and reassured Abram of land and offspring over and over again, but God didn't instantly fulfill God's promise. To have Isaac, Abram had to wait 25 years from God's initial promise. Abram didn't really own his land until he bought a small piece of land for Sarah's burial. Why didn't God give him what God promised? While I prepared this sermon, I realized that it was not only the fulfillment of God's promise but also Abram's journey itself that was the blessing God gave to him.

I love hiking and walking. One of my bucket list things to do is walk the Camino de Santiago trail, a famous pilgrimage route in Spain. It is a 500 mile-long trail, but I would gladly walk it if I have a chance. I love hiking, but I don't like marching. When I served in the military, my unit sometimes had 30 hour-70 mile marching practice without sleep. Pilgrimage and marching are basically the same act. They are walking. But they are different from one another. The purpose of marching is getting from point A to point B, while getting to a final destination is not the ultimate goal for pilgrims. Pilgrims walk on the Camino trail for their spiritual growth. Walking on the spiritual path with reverence itself is the purpose. Our life journey is a pilgrimage rather than a march. Walking with God and learning to work with God is itself the purpose.

We may get lost during our life journey. But that's o.k. God sometimes makes us get lost to show us the way. Mr. Ryu, a Korean writer, wanted to visit Walden Pond because he was so moved by Henry David Thoreau's book "Walden." He took a train from New York to Boston, but he didn't really know where it was. Mr. Ryu asked a passenger who sat next to him, and he explained how to get to Concord from the Boston train station. He was able to find the bus to Concord and got on the bus. It was a snowy day, so he just enjoyed the beautiful New England scenery along the way. Mr. Ryu was told by the passenger that it would take about 30 minutes to get to Concord from the train station, but after 3 hours, he was still on the bus. He felt something is not right. After 3 and half hours, he finally saw the big sign, "Concord," and got off at the bus station. The only problem was that he was in Concord, New Hampshire, not Massachusetts. The bus driver pitied this poor Korean traveler and gave him a free ride back to Boston.

After another 3 hours bus trip in a winter storm, he finally got back to the Boston train station. It began getting dark, but he didn't want to miss this opportunity, so he took a taxi and went to Walden pond. Before the day turned complete dark, he decided to walk the path to Walden Pond. In the middle of the trail, he happened to encounter an old man, and both of them were surprised. Even for New Englanders, walking around Walden Pond on a snowy day at sunset was uncommon. Right? They greeted each other and started to talk with one another. The

man moved to Concord 40 years ago after reading "Walden" and try to live his life as a naturalist. They spoke of Walden Pond and Thoreau until the sun went down. Then, this man invited Mr. Ryu to his home, and they talked about books, life and many things until after midnight. Mr. Ryu stayed at his house for several days, and they became good friends who deeply understood each other. Mr. Ryu said if he hadn't made the mistake of taking the bus to Concord, NH... if he hadn't gotten lost, he would never have met his friend. He got lost and wandered, but on the way, he received an incredible blessing. Sometimes, God makes you get lost to show you the way. If you feel that you get lost, that's o.k. Trust God and believe that God will show you the way.

New Name

Abram wandered from place to place. Sometimes, he got lost. His life journey didn't always go well. He experienced a severe famine, so he had to move to Egypt. In Egypt, he had to lie that Sarai was his sister, not his wife, to save his life, and his wife was taken to the palace of the pharaoh. He also made many mistakes. But throughout all his journey, God was with him, and he gradually learned to walk before God. God gave him a new name, Abraham, a new identity.

Abraham means "father of a multitude." He is not merely a father of one nation or tribe but a father of a multitude. How could he be the father of a multitude and blessing for all the families of the earth? Because of his life journey as a nomad, a stranger, and an alien. By accepting God's calling, he left his comfort zone and wandered the land. As a nomad, he experienced the uncertainty of life. As an alien, he shared the rulers' oppression and saw people's suffering at the bottom. He also learned how those people still lived their lives without losing hope and finding Joy even amid struggle. Because God had led Abraham to wander and live the life of an immigrant, Abraham was able to meet many people and see many things, both good and bad. In his journey, he witnessed how God still cared for people, empowered oppressed people, and gave them hope. Because of this life experience of getting lost and finding his way, he became the father of a multitude indeed.

The Joy of getting lost and finding your way

I believe that this is our time to get lost, wander and live in this strange new world as aliens. Covid-19 has changed many things, and we don't really know how the post-pandemic world will look or how our church should reach out to our neighbors. One thing we know is that we cannot simply go back to the old way. I believe God calls us to out of our comfort zone and truly live out our faith! How? I don't know yet at this point, but we will find out together. We may get lost as we try something new. We may fail to carry out God's mission. But that's o.k. We will learn from our failures. We will learn to trust God entirely throughout our faith journey. This joy of getting lost and finding our way forward is God's blessing for us and a way to be blessings for others. So, my beloved Asbury family, don't be afraid of getting lost. Don't be scared of failure and making mistakes. In all those moments, God will be with us and guide our journey of transformation. During this Lenten season, please pray for Asbury UMC and think of what we can do to be faithful friends of a multitude and our neighbors. Get lost and wander! Be a friend with strangers! Trust God is with us and will show us a new way! Amen.