

September 30
St. John's Women's Retreat
Mercy Center Auburn

Genesis 12:1-9, Ps 65:1-5, John 13:31-35

I chose the Old Testament reading today because Abram was called by God to undertake this huge journey. He pulled up stakes – literally – and took his whole family and moved to the other side of his known world. He did this with no guarantees of having a place waiting for him on the other end. In fact, the area was peopled by the Canaanites, the precursors of the Phoenicians and the Philistines that we know from history and our Bible stories.

Abram does this on faith – faith that God had prepared a place for him and his family. God's promise to Abram included that he would be made a great nation and that that nation would have land to dwell in. We know the end of that story, but right now I want to focus on Abram before he was named Abraham. I want to focus on his faith.

By breaking ties with land and kindred and responding to God's summons into a new world, Abram typifies the person of faith. He is our example of faith. If he can give up so much – and family and land meant almost everything to people in those days. It's how you identified yourself and how people identified you. To practically give up your identity because some god or other spoke to you takes incredible trust in that god and incredible faith.

Now, we know that the God of Abram is the God who created the heavens and earth, but back then, God was one among many. Abram's faith was great and he gives it all up for faith. The modern lesson is that we are to be willing to give it all up and go where God is sending us.

I don't want us to think of "where God is sending us" as a literal place. For Abram it was, for us, it is the journey as we go through life. Our journey is where we find ourselves now.

But what, along our journeys, are we willing to give up for our faith? What is God calling us to do?

We often talk about giving up physical things for Lent. But that is temporary, a spiritual exercise that lasts a finite time. I'm talking about give up gossip, and envy, and boasting, and other vices. These, once given up, remain given up. They are stepping stones on our spiritual journey.

God is calling us to a deeper and deeper spiritual life in him. The vices we are called upon to give up must be replaced by something or they will come back worse than before.

There is a story, I don't remember if it is biblical or not, of a demon being cast out of someone. The person didn't replace the demon with good works so there was a void left. When the demon realized it, that demon called other demons and they all went back and life was worse than before.

Vices have to be replaced. And what are they replaced with?

Kindness

Gentleness

Respect

Forgiveness

Generosity

The bottom line for all of these is love. People will know that we are godly people if we love one another. Love encompasses all these virtues. They are all subsets of love.

We talked this weekend about pilgrimage. Short pilgrimages, such as to Santiago de Compostela or to the Holy Land. These may be the trip of a lifetime, but they are finite. They end and we reflect on them after they are done.

Our spiritual journeys are pilgrimages, too, if we let them be. It depends on our attitude.

Now, everyone is on a spiritual journey because God created us to be spiritual beings. Whether we believe or not, we are on a spiritual journey. We who believe have it easier than those who do not believe because we know how to feed our souls.

Going on a finite pilgrimage is one way to feed your soul. Packing up and moving like Abram did, doing what God is telling you to do, is another way to feed your soul. But another way to feed your soul is to look at this life we are living as an earthly pilgrimage that eventually unites us with God. Our earthly pilgrimage ends when we enter heaven and see Jesus who we worship as Lord.

Our life is our pilgrimage if our attitude is one of journeying in God. Life long pilgrimage is hard to maintain. It is easy to start, because we love the idea of pilgrimage. But to continue and sustain that life of prayer and service takes work.

We also need to be careful that we don't get selfish. Is this pilgrimage to feed our souls only? Or is it to deepen our spirituality so that we may better serve others?

This is where our Episcopalianism helps us. We love to live in spiritual mystery and paradox.

In order to love others, we must first love ourselves. We can't fulfill the second great commandment if we don't. We just need to make sure that self-love doesn't become self-absorption.

We understand the paradox of loving ourselves so that we may love others. So, we practice self-care and feed our souls so that we in turn might feed the world.

Jesus said that the world would know that we are his disciples if we love one another. That loving doesn't extend to only our families and our church. It extends to everyone who is our neighbor. We are to be known as Christ's followers, and we do this through love.

In our earthly pilgrimages let us learn to sustain what we started. Let us keep our prayer lives on course, study our scripture in the light of God's love, and serve others as Christ taught us.

And as we move closer to the kingdom of heaven, let us with joy approach the throne of God. Let us come to God at the end of our pilgrimage and hear the words,

"Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master."

Let us live lives worthy of being called children of God. Let our own pilgrimages inspire others to begin their own pilgrimages so that we may journey together, loving each other and loving God.

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you."

Let us live that love and reflect that love to the world so that the world may know the love of God. That is the goal of our pilgrimage: Love.

Amen