

The Hungry Spirit...Comfortable

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

The Second Sunday of Lent

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There are a few people whom I consider to be modern day prophets. I realize that the word “prophet” is a strong word, and I do not use it casually. In the pattern of Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others, they have a challenging word from God to share with the people of the land, and it’s not always an easy word to hear. I consider Anthony Campolo, a retired professor and preacher, to be a prophet to our time. I’ve read many of his books and have heard him speak on several occasions, most recently at the New Baptist Covenant Celebration in Atlanta. I’m going to have to quit listening to him, though. He upsets my complacent faith and causes me to fear that most of us have failed to grasp what the Kingdom of God is really about and the role we are to play in it.

I’ve also got to quit reading his books. I purchased his most recent book while I was in Atlanta. It is titled *Red Letter Christians*. You may have heard of the movement of people who are now calling themselves red letter Christians. In this book, Campolo challenges Christians today who would make Jesus into a Republican and an incarnation of the conservative values of that political party. And he equally challenges those who would make Jesus into a Democrat who espouses their liberal values. Jesus, Campolo writes, refuses to be pigeonholed by our political ideologies. The followers of Jesus, he says, are not called to political alignment; we are called to be *red letter Christians*, people who live according to those words in our New Testaments that are printed in red ink. You know what they are. Those red letters are the teachings of Jesus.

On the last page of the book, Campolo says that in the end we will all be judged by our answers to only two questions—asked by God:

What have you decided about Me and the way of salvation I have provided?

And what have you done to allow My Kingdom to come on earth, even as it is in heaven? (p. 224)

Here's why we still need prophets. We've all agreed with God about the first question, haven't we? Most of us can say with comfort that that question about salvation is settled for us. The second question is where most of us stumble, for most of us have done little, little compared to our potential, to facilitate God's Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. And so the prophets must thunder, shake our foundations; they must rattle us out of our complacency. The prophets know that it is God's nature to be on mission—redeeming, reclaiming, renewing—and it is human nature to be comfortable.

We see this pattern of human nature going all the way back to the earliest pages of the Bible. The three and a half verses that I read to you from Genesis 12—the call of Abram, who will be renamed Abraham—some argue are the most important verses in the entire Old Testament, driving the people of Israel to be on mission for God. But before we can fully understand the raw edge to God's call of Abram, we need to see what has happened in the two previous verses. At the end of chapter eleven, we meet Abraham's father, Terah. The text says that Terah was about to take his clan on a journey. They were leaving a city called "Ur of the Chaldeans," a place we believe to be about 70 miles south of modern day Baghdad. They were going from there to the "land of Canaan," the Promised Land, that great land flowing with milk and honey. The text says that four people embarked on this journey. Terah was the patriarch of the clan. He was accompanied by his son Abram, who like I said would later be named Abraham. Sarai, who will later be named Sarah, Abram's wife, also accompanied them. And we know this important fact about Abram and Sarai: they could not have children, remember? The last person on this journey to the land of Canaan was Lot, the orphaned grandson of Terah.

Okay, you've got this all straight, right? Here are the four: Terah, Abram and Sarai, and Lot. Now, here's what happened. The four of them, led by patriarch Terah, left Ur of the Chaldeans for the Promised Land. And here's what the text says happened, "But when they came to Haran, they settled there." They were supposed to settle in the land of Canaan, right? But they stopped short of Canaan and settled in Haran, where they became comfortable. Big mistake! Here's what the text says happened next, "And Terah died in Haran."

Do you see the picture? Instead of going all the way to the land of Canaan, they became comfortable in Haran, and the patriarch of the clan died there. Abram and Sarai were stuck in Haran short of the land of Canaan, and they had responsibility for Abram's orphaned nephew, Lot. That's where they were when chapter twelve opens. Everything has come unraveled. Their leader is dead. They've got responsibility for Lot. It probably looked as attractive to Abram and Sarai to go back to Ur of the Chaldeans as it did to go forward to the land of Canaan. At least Ur of the Chaldeans was familiar.

Now we can begin to see why these three and a half verses in chapter twelve are so important. Listen to this call of Abram, a call that came in the midst of great uncertainty:

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 (remember Abram and Sarai cannot have children), 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.'

Imagine being in their place. I can imagine the excuses Abram might throw back to God. Why, my father is dead, Lord. I don't know if I can do this. Besides, I've got my deceased brother's son, Lot. And remember, Lord, Sarai and I cannot have children. How can you ever make of me a great nation?

And in response to what seems like insurmountable barriers, the text nevertheless says, "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him."

They left the land of Haran to complete their journey to the land of Canaan. They left their place of comfort as an act of faithfulness in order to reach the land of promise. It took courage. It was a risk for them to be on mission for God, but they did it. They left their comfort and became the model, the catalyst, that drove the people of Israel to be on mission for God.

We tend to get into those situations too, don't we? We begin with big plans, great things we want to do for God. But along the way, we find a place to become comfortable. And then while in this place of comfort, everything begins to unravel. And then one day we realize that we're stuck in the land of Haran rather than on mission to the land of Canaan. We're left with a hungry spirit.

This text is about leaving our comfort zone. It is about courage, taking a risk, to be faithful to the One who has called us to salvation *and* to bringing His Kingdom on earth, even as it is in Heaven. Now let me tell you the best part of all. This is why this text is so important. The power of hope, the power of the future, did not rest with Abram and Sarai. I think this text is clear that everything had unraveled for them. The power of hope rested with God. If they had stayed in the comfort of Haran, they would have missed their opportunity to do a great thing for God. But by the empowering call of God, they took a risk and became "a blessing" to "all the families of the earth."

Imagine some young man or woman hearing this today and deciding, "I'm going to do it. I'm going to hear the call to salvation and along with it the call to make a difference."

Or imagine one of our retirees hearing this today. You've got more time now, resources to travel. You've heard the call to salvation. Hear along with it the call to make a difference.

This is Lent. This is the time when we look at our lives and evaluate. What is God saying to you? Where is the God of Abram and Sarai leading you? May we all have the courage to take a risk and be on mission for God.

Closing Prayer

Calling and empowering God, see us where we are this Lenten morning—full of uncertainty. Call us again and give us courage to follow. Amen.