

WHEN GOD SAYS GO

SHERARD EDINGTON

Genesis 12:1-9

Our Bible begins in a logical place—at the beginning with the story of creation. There are, in fact, two creation accounts. The first describes God creating the cosmos in the span of seven days, and it was good. The second is a bit more personal. This story focuses on the people. It tells of the sin and subsequent disgrace of humanity. This is the Garden of Eden story with Adam and Eve. For their sin, the first couple was banished from their idyllic garden. They were cast out east of Eden.

The story continues by telling us of the descendants of Adam and Eve and also of the first taking of a life when Cain murders his brother Abel. Despite this crime, the humans multiply across the land for generations.

Eventually, God looks down at the earth and is disgusted at the wickedness he observes. God is determined that the best course of action is to wipe the slate and start over. A flood should do the trick and wash the earth clean. But God relents and allows the family of Noah to live. When the great flood arrives, Noah and his family are spared.

Following the Noah story, we encounter a strange little tale about a tower called Babel. On its face, this story would appear to offer an explanation for why the earth has so many languages. But the story is really about human pride. In this story, we are told that, in a certain place, the people decided to build a grand city with a tower that would reach the heavens. Their goal was to *make a name for themselves*. God saw what the people had done and before they could finish their tower, he scattered the people across the earth and gave them different languages.

It is immediately after the story of Babel that we are introduced to Abram. Later he will become known as Abraham, but for today, he will be Abram. It is significant that Abram follows immediately on the Babel story.

Up to this point, the created humans have been, to say the least, a disappointment. Adam and Eve were offered a perfect life and told not to do one thing, and they did it. Then their son murdered his own brother. Wickedness covered the earth. And it only got worse. This wickedness is epitomized with the tower of Babel as the people seek to reach heaven to make a name for themselves. In other words, they wanted to be gods. Their pride is the hallmark of sin, and God puts a halt to it.

The introduction of Abram and his wife Sarai changes the course of humanity. Up to this point, God had been somewhat distant appearing to take a hands-off

approach to his creation. But with Abram and Sarai, all that changes. God reaches down to one man and one woman and initiates a plan for the salvation of all humankind. God calls Abram and Sarai.

At the time that the couple are called, Abram and Sarai were living in the town of Haran, in the southeastern corner of what is present-day Turkey. Abram had lived there a long time, but not his whole life. As a young man, Abram had traveled with his father Terah on a journey from their home in Ur, which was in Iraq.

As we see in our reading, God calls out to Abram with a command that was, on the one hand simple, but, on the other hand, it would change everything. God said to Abram, *Go. 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.*

Abram obeys. There is no arguing, no excuses, no claims to have other things to do. Abram doesn't tell God, "I'm too busy right now, check with me later," or "Can you ask someone else." Nope. What we find are these words: *So Abram went.* Abram packed his possessions, gathered his servants and slaves, and along with his wife and nephew they headed to a destination known only to God.

When we step back to look at Abram and Sarai, I, for one, wouldn't place any wagers on their success. After all, Abram at 75 is no spring chicken. Yes, today, a lot of folks are super active at 75, but back then, when the average person didn't make it past 40, someone at 75 would be wise to have the funeral home on speed dial. They certainly shouldn't be planning on packing up and moving.

And then there was that promise of a multitude of descendants. That sounds nice until you consider that Sarai and Abram had never had children. And at her age, that was not likely to happen. It is impossible to imagine where all these "descendants" are going to come from. God's plans for salvation seem pretty weak.

But they go. Abram and Sarai pull up stakes and journey south. When they stop in the land of Canaan to rest, God appears to Abraham and tells him that this is the place. God says, *To your offspring I will give this land.* Abram constructs an altar to God in that location.

This is where we step back and consider what Abram has just done. At a time in their lives when anyone else has downsized into a one-story home with an accessible shower that's near a nice golf course, Abram and Sarai have uprooted everything and begun a new life because of a call from the Lord.

Some would call them crazy.

There is so much that we can glean from this story. But what I want to focus on today is Abram's and Sarai's age. Although in their sunset years, they were willing to start a new chapter in their lives following God's call. It is a lesson for us all. If Abram and Sarai had been younger when this happened, we wouldn't blink an eye. If a young person out of college announces that they feel called to ministry, we applaud them. But today, over half of those enrolled in our seminaries are second-career students. They have embarked on a new journey following God's call.

In July, we will be hosting the ordination of Michael Schulte who interned with us for three years. It is easy to forget that Michael had a career as a schoolteacher before he heeded the call and entered Vanderbilt Divinity School. That is not to imply that his being a teacher was a mistake. It was not. Michael was an exceptionally good teacher and it provided him with skills that he will find helpful in ministry.

A call from God is not always a to ministry. A call from God is a call to serve. It is a call to serve in many different ways. And the call can come at any time. You are never too young or too old to be called by God. The ministry is an obvious call, but it is by no means the only one. You can be called to serve God through the church, which is wonderful, or you may be called to serve outside the church. That is between you and the Lord.

Furthermore, calls can change. God may have called you to one thing as a younger person. But now, when your mailbox is full of letters from AARP, God may issue a different call.

Listen to how one writer describes his call when he was in his forties: "A call may come as a nudge, glimpse, touch, glance, fresh insight, or tearing sorrow. It may come in the earthquake of anger or grief, or in a still small voice. However it comes, the initiative of an alien/friendly power strikes us with surprise and disruption. I was taken by the scruff of my life and shaken loose from the securities and identities that had served me or that I had served for 44 years. I was mugged in the night by a strange inner assailant!"¹

"Mugged" is an excellent description because a call is something we tend to fight. A call is a threat to our status quo; it demands change. We may find ourselves literally or figuratively called to a foreign land away from our friends and kin.

A call begins with a small voice that speaks directly to our heart. It is a tickle, an annoyance; it won't go away no matter how much we try to shake it off. As the prophet Jeremiah describes it, a call from the Lord is *like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot* (Jeremiah 20:9).

¹ Robert Raines, *Going Home* (Crossroad, 1985), 17.

A call may be a whisper, a nudge, or a notion. It not likely to be shouted at us from a megaphone.

I know that many of you have answered a call late in life. In your retirement, you have accepted the challenge to live out Christ's command to love God and love your neighbor. You are working with at-risk children, you are ministering to the homeless, you are engaged in a ministry of prayer, and more. You have heard God's call and responded.

The call to Abram and Sarai was exceptional because it laid the groundwork for God's plan of salvation for all humanity. Despite my betting against it, God's plan for them worked. They had descendants beginning with a son Isaac. Their names became a blessing for families all over the world.

The call to Abram and Sarai was monumental. It echoes across time. Our calls are just as important because they are meant for us. No call is too small or too insignificant. All are part of God's great plan. When we answer, we discover that we are blessed. So, in the future, when God says go, just go.