

**Caroline Voss & Emily Zumpe**  
**Sermon for 24 February 2008**  
**Genesis 12: 1-9 (Caro) & Genesis 15: 1-6 (Emily)**

**Abraham and Sarah departing...**

Dear sisters and brothers,

I don't know about you, but I for my part love to travel. Packing my suitcases and planning an itinerary for the journey is always exciting and it's a big relief to leave my every day life behind for some days and face new landscapes, interesting people, a different language and very adventurous experiences. But I have to say that it is quite easy to leave, knowing that I have my credit card with me, a map to guide me when I get lost, a dictionary in my hand and the assurance that somebody is taking care of my flowers while I'm gone. And unlike many of you, I have always left, knowing that I would come back some day. Abraham and Sarah's journey was different.

*„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."*

This is how their journey begins. The Bible passage that it comes from is all about departure. About finding a new beginning. About hopes and dreams but also about leaving familiar ground and becoming a stranger again. To many of you that might sound very familiar but let us look at Abraham's story before we take time to reflect on our own departures.

Abraham and Sarah were not that young any more. In fact they were quite old and in a stage where many people think about settling down and living a quiet life rather than starting all over again. But Abraham and Sarah set off and left everything behind: their home and a big part of their family.

Home- that is the place that we grow up in with all its memories full of familiar colours, sounds and smells. It has to do with the language that we learned first-words, intonation that we use naturally without having to think about it. It's everything that is familiar to us and gives us a feeling of security.

And in Abraham's time the family was not only a group of people that you love and care for but also an environment that granted you protection. There were no laws then, no courts to fight for rights, no social insurance or income support. All that a person had in terms of security and protection was his family. What a risk for Abraham and Sarah to leave them behind, not mentioning the emotional stress of breaking bonds and saying good- bye.

So why would they leave then? The Bible text doesn't give us much insight into Abraham's personality. His religiousness, his courage and his obedience to God are only indicated by the way he acts. The main stress lies on the fact that God calls him. It is God who decides to choose Abraham. God relies on him and makes promises that are ever so encouraging.

*„I will make you a great nation“* God sends his promise of hope to Abraham and Sarah who are suffering from not having children. They will be father and mother and have the assurance that they can pass something on to the next generation. Sarah's grief will have an end and sorrow will change into hope if they trust in a step towards a new beginning.

„*I will bless you*“ God’s second promise is one of well-being and assurance. Their life will be full of joy and satisfaction because they are blessed by God. He will be with them, lift them up in hard times to come. And he will guide them.

„*I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing*“ This is the last promise. A promise that they will make the difference. That their departure is not a personal decision that is made only for their benefit but a step that will mark a new beginning for everyone to come.

God calls Abraham. And Abraham sets out, taking only a few people with him. I have very vivid images of his departure in my head. Choices of what to take and what to leave behind. A last glance at the surroundings that meant home to him for so many years. And then images of his first firm steps into the future. And when I close my eyes and see him leave, I see so many people departing with him:

I see the millions and millions of refugees, sitting at the harbours, airports and trainstations of this world- today and in the past- waiting for a boat, a car, a plane or a train to take them away to a world, where there is less misery. Less poverty. More humanity and dignity. All their hopes lie on this new place and they have given up everything for their dreams and visions.

I see husbands and wives who give up their homes for the person they love. Families who face the difficult experience of becoming a stranger again and having to cope with the feeling that they are in a place that they might not belong in. I see them struggling with authorities, losing hope that they will ever be able to communicate in a decent way and finally finding new friends that make the place so far a way from home a bit warmer, safer and friendlier.

I see a prisoner who is released from jail and facing a world of prejudice and harshness. I feel for him in his struggle to get back into the routine of life and starting out from the beginning, leaving not only the prison barrs but also part of his past behind to face a new beginning.

I see many of us making decisions for a new job. Some of us facing changes in family life due to the birth of a child or the death of loved one. Children starting out at a new school or struggling to find a school carrier that will please them and be more promising than the situations they have had to experience. We all have experienced departure in the one way or the other. And we all will face days, in which we set out for something new. And I can see us, lining up behind Abraham, Sarah and the camels... setting out towards something new.

And while we struggle to say good-bye to the familiar... while we are desperately facing new structures and finding our place in life again together with Abraham and Sarah, I would like to invite us to remember God’s promises to Abraham and the guidance he offers.

Whoever we might have to leave behind on our path, God will always be with us. Whatever tasks we might have to bear, we can always be assured that God is holding and embracing us... expecting much of us but also encouraging us with

his promises of hope and assurance and giving a meaning to our lives that lies beyond wealth and success.

We only see the beginning of a path- not the end. God knows the whole stretch and he blesses our journey. It is a calculable risk we take, when we follow God. What a precious gift that we can lean on him and know him behind us when turn around and walk towards the uncertain.

God guides our departure and promises us that we will arrive one day, be it in his kingdom. God feels our fear and sends us his promises of hope. God is there when we loose familiar structures and also when we find new ground. And whenever we take a deep breath and prepare a step in a new direction he whispers his words of assurance in our ears: „May you be blessed- and may you be a blessing to others“

## **God's Promises**

Following the Divine Promise made by God to Abraham in Genesis 12, there was a lot of excitement in Abraham's life. But not the positive kind Abram expected after receiving God's uplifting words. No, at first, he and his wife Sarah had to leave the Negev, where Abram received God's promise, and move to Egypt due to a famine. But after the Pharaoh insisted they leave Egypt, they returned to Negev, where Abraham prospered but soon ran into problems with his nephew Lot. Lot and Abram were both herders of livestock and the land was not prosperous enough to support both tribes. So Abram gave Lot first choice and they divided the territory. Soon thereafter, Lot was living in a town called Sodom when it was overtaken by a group of 4 warring kings. When Abram heard the news, he went with an army to defeat these kings and rescue his nephew. The King of Sodom wanted to bless Abraham with all of the possessions of the city which he had saved. But Abram refused.

And so we come to chapter 15 – many years have passed since God's promise to prosper Abram and make him into a great nation. Many years gone by ... and still no children. No sons, no daughters – nothing. Abram has shown great generosity and love to his nephew Lot. He even fought a war – a war against four very strong and dangerous enemies. Abram was certainly tired, and must have feared revenge from these warring nations. And in this quiet moment, the Lord appears to Abram, as we read earlier in verse 1, “After all these things, the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.’” God recognizes the need to comfort his son Abram, He wants to remind Abram that he is not alone – that God has been protecting him through the hardships of the past years, and that He will continue to defend, protect and care for him in the future. God wants to reward Abram for his faithfulness – and reminds him that He himself, the Creator of this world and Most Powerful being, is Abram's reward – being with God is the reward of all those who follow him. And knowing that He is always there should silence every fear and fill us with peace and joy.

But how many of us can truly count our blessings? When we wake up on a cold and rainy day, do we thank God for a warm bed, comfortable rain boots, colorful umbrellas or magnificent rainbows? Or do we complain about not wanting to get out of bed? Not wanting to get wet or cold. Can we truly see God's hand in our daily lives, or are we too concerned with our own plans to be "bothered" by his holy interventions, as Pastor Christine reminded us last week in her sermon on refocusing ourselves during this season of Lent? Often, we have our own busy schedules, daily priorities and pressing concerns. And so it was with Abram.

Despite his recent military success and the reminder that God is still defending him, protecting him and blessing him, Abram does not delight in what God has done, but focuses on the promises of God which he has not yet fulfilled. In a moment of weakness of his faith, Abram questions God in verses 2 and 3, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram also said, "You have given me no children, so a servant in my household will be my heir." Abram's concern may be familiar to many of you – the desire to bear children, the desire to grow your family. These desires and even pressures are still strong in today's society. But in Abram's time, this desire was not only to perpetuate the family name, but also to ensure safety and prosperity for all of the servants, extended family and other members of the household. Each family, each tribe, was like a large business – they had to be fed, cared for, protected against aggressors. And leaving your estate to a servant, like Eliezer of Damascus, was a great risk and shame to any leader. We can see the parallel in Germany today, where many family-owned businesses are passed down from one generation to the next, father to son or daughter, even when a professional manager may have made the company more prosperous. Abram made no comment about Eliezer's ability to lead his estate, but like most founders, he did not want to consider letting the business get out of the family.

In verse 4, we find God's response to Abram's complaint, "Then the Word of the Lord came to him, "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." And if a promise directly from God in a vision was not enough, God gave Abram a visual reminder of His promise in verse 5, "He (God) took Abram outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.' Then He said, 'So shall your offspring be.'" God gave Abram this lively visual image to reinforce his promise – I have not forgotten you, my dear son Abram. I am not only planning to prosper you but I will make your sons and daughters so plentiful that no one will be able to count them. They will fill this world like the stars fill the night sky – and they will be great in glory and splendor. Abram, often called the Father of the Faithful, was reminded in this moment, through this image of the stars blazing across a dark sky –that God was with him. Even when the years passed and no sons or daughters were born, Abram need not worry. It was not his timing or his to-do list which ruled his life, but it was his father God, whose timing is perfect, whose will is perfect – this amazing Creator and El Shaddei – who would fulfill his promises in his time.

Although Abram had just struggled with his faith in verse 2, a mere 4 verses later, he returns to certainty and trust in God's holy power and

faithfulness to keep every promise. Verse 6 tells us that, ‘Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.’ It only took a gentle reminder from the Father to still the son’s worries – it only took a short visit in a vision – a simple illustration of a starry night. Abram teaches us that faith must not be complicated, requiring complex thoughts and advanced teachings. And faith is not a product of actions – Abram had led armies in God’s name, relocated his family, risked everything he had to follow God’s will. But these actions did not justify him, that is restore a right relationship between himself and God. No, all it required for Abram to regain his righteousness was to believe in the Lord. This comforting verse reminds us that we are justified by faith, showered with grace and shown mercy for our shortcomings. After all, God wasn’t angry about Abram’s complaint. He accepted Abram’s frustration, fear and lack of trust. And rather than focusing on why he temporarily lost faith, God just did what was necessary to restore a right heart in Abram.

And that is just what He is waiting to do with each and every one of us. Just as we are – right now, in this moment, the Father is waiting with arms open wide. We may come with doubts, fears, disappointments or frustrations. He will not judge us, but He will hear our cries, comfort us, shield us and remind us of His promise: „May you be blessed- and may you be a blessing to others“.

**Please join me in prayer:**

Father God, Creator of all things and maker of promises so rich and wonderful that we cannot even fathom, please be with us this morning. Give us the faith to accept your promises, to believe that you are with us and have plans for our lives. Fill us with the ability to lean on you and trust that you will produce blessings and miracles in our lives. Lord, give us patience to wait for your timing. Give us peace as we wait – showing us all the numerous and surprising blessings for us along the way. God, allow us to focus on our triumphs, on your blessings – let us focus on this journey of life. And rejoice with you in the dance of each day. Amen