

On the move – sermon on Genesis 12:1-9

According to the Methodist lectionary, we were invited to look at the story of Noah and the flood last Sunday, and at Abraham's and Sarah's story this Sunday.

Since we (or I) said Yes to this challenge last Sunday, why not follow the line again this Sunday – as a kind of continuation of what we started a week ago?

In the flood story we were confronted with this utter silence between God and humankind. There is no communication between God and his people throughout all 4 chapters of the flood story. And when someone does speak, it is only God. Last Sunday I told you that communication, real communication, between God and a human being can only be found again when we get to Abraham's story... And, here we are today...

But let us recall, how it all starts in the Old Testament of our Bible. Can you remember: God looked at everything he'd made, and it was very good. That is how it all begins.

But then things go wrong. The first man and the first woman on earth have to leave God's beautiful garden. They grow older, they have children and the first serious conflicts arise with Cain and Abel. Eventually the earth becomes a vast trouble spot, a battlefield, a place of violence and corruption. And the God of Genesis 6 decides to wash the earth clean with a great flood, and start all over again.

If you remember last Sunday's sermon, you will surely remember that at the end of the flood story it is not humankind who has changed, but it is God who's changed once and for all. Human beings were still the same...

God once and for all offers his grace, grants his creation freedom, lets go of control and sets his rainbow in the sky as a sign to never destroy life on earth again.

And when some chapters later, after the building of the tower of Babel, he comes to the point that his whole beautifully meant earth looks ruined and spoilt again, God does not decide again on destruction, but chooses one special person who may understand God better than all the others do and starts all over again with him and his family. And this is when God finds Abraham.

After all that painful silence between God and humankind through so many chapters of the book of Genesis, talk between God and a human being is now possible again. God talks. Abraham listens. And eventually Abraham responds. God calls Abraham out. Promises him his own land, and children as many as there are stars in the sky. Abraham sets off – with his people and his possessions. He follows God's call, and he is blessed to be a blessing to all he will meet.

The only person he forgets to talk to about this blessing is Sarah, his wife. Sarah knew nothing of what God had said to Abraham. He had neglected to share with her all along. And so she is left alone on this move, wondering what this whole leaving home, journeying about and trying to find a new land is all about.

In a British magazine of the Methodist church I found a beautiful piece of text written from Sarah's perspective that I would like to share with you now:

On the move

- Sarah's story of living with a restless man.

Well, we've arrived! I'm not quite sure where we are, but Abraham is out there building another altar, so he must think that it's a very significant place.

Not that it means we'll be staying here. There's no guarantee of that. This is the second altar he's built since we left Haran and I thought the first one meant that he was putting down new roots.

It was a lovely place. Shechem, they called it. There was a vast tree there with wonderful shade and vegetation and water. A very pleasant spot. I could have lived there quite happily.

But, just as I'd started to get used to it, he finished his altar, made his sacrifices and then announced that we were on the move again. I wasn't too happy about it, but he was determined that this wasn't where we were supposed to settle and that the Lord had greater plans for us all.

So now we are among the hills. Apparently we're not far from a place called Bethel – and Abraham is building again.

I wonder when he will be satisfied that he's found the place where we are meant to live. That's the problem with these visionary people – you never quite know where they'll be leading you next. And my husband is certainly a man with a vision. He's sure that he is being driven on by the Lord, not just to find a new place to live, but also to found a whole new nation.

How ambitious can you get?

Sometimes, in the evening, we sit around the fire and he talks about hopes and dreams and he really has the power to make me believe in them. He says the Lord has made him so many promises – about his offspring inheriting this new land and about his own name being revered as that of a great man.

He's very inspirational, but I have to wonder how it's going to happen. He's seventy five and I'm sixty five and there has never been any sign of a child. Although he reassures me that I'm still beautiful, the one thing he can't reassure me about is my age.

Does God mean that Abraham will found this new nation through a child from someone else? It would be wonderful if the miracle could happen through me, but is that really likely? For now, let me say that it's just – just – possible, but as every year goes by ...

That's only one side of the story. This new land is the other. And I'm not sure exactly where it is and don't know how far we have to travel before we finally put down roots.

But it's something of a family tradition, this moving on.

Abraham's father Terah was the one who started it.

Now there was a character! He had three sons and one of them died before he did. That was Haran – I think the place we used to live was named after him, though I'm not quite sure. Anyway, when Haran died he left a son called Lot and Lot became a part of Terah's own family. His other sons, my Abraham and his younger brother Nahor, both married and we all lived together in one big group, with Terah as the father figure.

I'll never forget the day he called the men together and told them that he was moving us all from Ur, where we lived. We were all young then and it was an exciting adventure, packing our belongings and moving in a great caravan of people all looking for a new place. We settled in Haran and lived there happily for many years until Terah died at the ripe old age of two hundred and five!

It was rather a shock when I found out that Abraham wanted us to follow his father's example and start to travel all over again.

I'm not as young as I used to be and I was happy enough in Haran. But once the idea was fixed in Abraham's mind, there wasn't much

point in trying to change it, so I started to think positively about it and work out what might be good about moving on.

A change may shake me up a bit.

I had become a little set in my ways and this new challenge has certainly made me rethink my future.

Will I stand up to the journey?

What will the new place be like?

Will God fulfil his promises to my husband? If so, who will be the one who has the child that will found this new nation?

Could it possibly be me?

Can God really perform a miracle like that?

Maybe ...

But, for now, it's time for supper.

Who knows? We may be moving on again tomorrow.

Sarah is not blaming or accusing Abraham at all. She believes him. And she believes in him and his God. She takes the whole challenge very positively. She is open and curious. But of course she has her doubts and questions.

She is more down to earth than Abraham seems to be, but she is flexible enough to move with him and to try to make the most of it.

And that hasn't changed in all those almost 3000 years since Abraham and Sarah set off for the promised land. We can find very similar stories in the 21st century, and we can surely find very similar stories if we just look around in this church this morning and try to remember the bits and pieces we may know about each other's life stories.

Let me share Dorota's story with you:

I'm fine!

We moved to Britain 18 months ago from Poland with our ten year old daughter. My husband was a seaman, working away from home, when he was offered the job on the Isle of Man. We didn't know anyone when we came. The cost of living here is very high, but now we are together.

I thought it would be easy to find a job when we came here, and there was plenty of work available in the hotels. However, the pay is low and because migrants are desperate for money they have no choice but to accept what is offered. I was lucky to have a choice, and I chose instead to go to college to learn English, and to do volunteer work in the Well café which is run by the local church, to improve my language.

I wanted to learn to speak English. It's such a useful language. If you can speak English you can do so much more, because it's the most common language in the world. It was hard at first. I was trying to make friends but I kept being rude without meaning to and without realising what I'd said wrong! It was frustrating, too. At college they taught us what to say in practical situations, but when I met people I had a lot of problems with conversation. I had so much I wanted to say but I didn't even know how to start. I felt like a deaf person. Sometimes I'd just turn off and stop trying. How do you learn those kind of language skills?

And coming to a new country is not just about learning a new language; there's a whole new culture too. For example, in Poland if someone asks "How are you?" we tell the truth: good, bad, worried, happy. In Britain the answer is "I'm fine."

In Poland I stayed home with my children, but here it seems that your work is your life, and if you don't work then you are treated as if you don't have a life. In Poland, those who work make an early

start, but they can be home by three o'clock and spend the rest of the day with their families.

Now I love it here. It's a very safe place to live, a small island with a low crime rate. It's a very relaxed atmosphere. Everything I need is here, except my son of course, and it's a very beautiful place. My work in The Well coffee shop has really helped me. My colleagues are patient with me and they always correct me when I make mistakes. They showed me how to live here.

I don't know about the future. I don't worry about it. But I do get homesick. What comforts me is the people in church who share my faith, and the knowledge that God's always called his people out to be on the move.

Again no blame. No lament. No accusation... neither of a person nor of the political or economic or whatever else situation...

But instead Dorota talks about the comfort she finds in the stories and in the people of faith, and in the fact that God's people somehow were always called to move on and travel light, - if you recall the NT reading which we heard earlier on in this service.

But back to our OT passage and the people in it - on the move:

Abraham, Sara and Lot set off with all they have and with all those who belong to them. They follow an aim which is not clearly described. They arrive in Canaan and find a land which is already inhabited by others.

God walks along with them, promises this land to their descendants. They build an altar and move on. Later on they build another altar and move on again... heading down South.

In between a famine forces them to find refuge in Egypt. They are economic migrants.

Eventually they return to the altar which they had built last; and they separate... decide from now on to go different ways, because the country couldn't possibly feed them all. Abraham and Sara arrive at Mamre, where he builds another altar... a sacred place again...

What begins in Genesis 12 is the long story of a journey...

People set off together, they separate, they flee from hunger and return, they fight and cut off relationships, they are searching for a place to stay and bread to eat. And all that is always happening in the light – or in the shadow sometimes? – of God's promise of blessing.

That they felt God with them, that they expect his presence to be real, can be seen from the building of the various altars... places of worship, of gratitude and hope...

Abraham, Sarah and Lot are living and believing in the constant tension between promise and mission, between making oneself at home and setting off again, between calm and challenge, between having found friends and moving on again.

And it is in their lives as it is in ours:

People are changing... situations... societies... political circumstances are changing – and sometimes one has to set off to something new...

Partners, family, friends can be so different after a couple of years... That can cause much pain. It can make us feel extremely uncertain and exposed. But it could also be a chance which we can take on in faith and trust and curiously and calmly see what happens next...?!

Talking so much about uncertainty, moving and changing it becomes clear that at the same time when we imagine the move, we also need places – or spaces – to feel safe, be still and have a break.

Not necessarily real places where we stay for long, maybe just moments, spots or thoughts in which we remember our roots, in which we are reassured of our mission and strengthened by God's blessings. Places from which we can again set off – strengthened, comforted and full of courage for life. And maybe or hopefully times and places, where we – unlike Abraham – share our thoughts and dreams and visions with those who they may involve.

Abraham is building altars – not only in our biblical passages of today but many more. He establishes places to thank God for being with him and blessing him. There he reassures himself and those who are travelling with him of God's never-ending care. He goes back to these places at certain times in his life or stages of his journey. He creates and appreciates places where one cannot forget but must remember God's story with us all and his care for us all.

Places where we hang on and hold onto can be just as manifold as we are. And they can help us to survive on our different journeys. They can be thoughts in our heads, recalled feelings in our hearts, a hand we feel, a story that touches or very concretely a spot which we create in our homes, on our desks, in our pockets or handbags, a keepsake that reminds us of sacred moments...

Whether you do it practically, or whether you take it as a mental thing: feel encouraged to create altars in your everyday life and on your life journeys. Take the chance to hold on a minute... Ask yourself: Where are you right now on your journey as a child of God or a disciple of Christ? Which spirit is leading your life? Could it be time to change something about the way you live and pray and practise your faith? Are there things, you'd love to let go? And new things to be brought into your life? Could there be a call which you can hear? A destination you'd have to turn to – hesitantly, fearfully or even curious of the challenge that it could hold?

We all know, moving on is not at all as simple as it may sound in Abraham's story. And we are not asked to leave a time or a place just for the sake of leaving. We are asked to look at our lives and our faith seriously and clearly - and be open to changes that we might come across or are asked to undergo for God's sake or our own or our family's sake...

Whatever will happen in our lives, whatever happens in the lives of the Sarahs and Dorotas of this world, whatever we will decide or must decide, wherever we go or stay, may we always be reassured of God's walking with us in never-ending

grace, of his speaking with us, of his protecting and blessing us and never leaving us alone.

And if we would like to, let us do what Abraham did:

Built our little altars that make us not forget that God is with us on our journey.

God wants to be our companion, he is with us on our ways, he is sharing our stories, he is rejoicing in our joy and he is feeling our pain. And he always has a land for us to stay, a mission to fulfil and sisters and brothers as our support.

Let me finish the sermon... and my thoughts for now with an affirmation of faith which is dedicated to those who are on the journey...

We believe in God
who created us from nothing
and goes on bringing to birth
new things beyond our imagining.

We believe in Jesus Christ
who entered our unknown journey
and experienced all our living,
who walked in our earthiness
and can still be discovered
in our midst.

We believe in the Holy Spirit
who calls us on to truth
in light beyond our seeing, who stirs within our being
like a melody of possible music,
who dances on before us
in the freedom of passionate life.
Amen.