

The Second Sunday in Lent – March 8, 2020 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

One of the disciplines that many people choose to engage during Lent is the reading of a “spiritual” book. For several years it has been the practice of the Bishop to recommend such a book. This year the book is entitled “The Art of Pilgrimage” by Phil Cousineau. In it the author describes his own experience of pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is defined by Cousineau as “transformative journey to a sacred center.” The chance to be a pilgrim comes often in our lives, at those times when we are at a crossroads, seeking answers to pressing questions. We can travel physically away from home or travel more deeply within right where we are. It is a matter of intent and attention, of focus and concentration. In describing an automobile accident, one of those involved declared that there were plenty of onlookers to the accident but no witnesses. Pilgrimage requires that we go deeper, seeing things we have not observed before, encountering God in the most unexpected places. It requires us to be true witnesses not merely onlookers.

One of the first pilgrims of history was Terah, the father of Abram. Together with his children, Terah set out from Ur to go into the land of Canaan. Scripture doesn’t tell us why they set out. Perhaps in the way of people everywhere they were seeking a better life. The destination was Canaan, but about half way there, in Haran, Terah decided he had gone far enough and he settled there. Oddly, the place where Terah decided to put down roots means crossroads. Terah came to the crossroads in his journey and decided to stop, to settle. Abram and Sarai, (they had not yet become Abraham and Sarah), settled down with the family. But at some point, God said to Abram, go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you.’ Abram was being called to go where he had never been before. God invited Abram to leave the crossroads behind, to embark on a great adventure, a pilgrimage, seeking whatever God had in store for him. It was the beginning of a transformative journey to the sacred center of Abrams life. In the course of the journey, Abram became Abraham. There was risk and there was promise in God’s call. Risk and promise are two essential ingredients in the pilgrimages of our lives.

We don’t know much about the invitation to Abram, all we have are a few short verses of promise and challenge. The promise of blessing and the challenge of seeking God in a new and strange place. “Abram took his wife Sarai...and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan”. Leaving behind security, family, and the familiar and going. They set forth with enthusiasm. **Enthusiasm has as its root meaning,** They set off seeking God and God’s promise of blessing. If you read Chapters 12 through 25 in the Book of Genesis, you can follow the adventures of Abram and Sarai as pilgrims.

If we listen consistently and carefully, for God’s voice, we will find that we too are invited to participate in a journey of risk, renewal, and blessing seeking God or a deeper understanding of God.

Abram was instructed to go, to leave behind all that encumbered him and in leaving behind his father's house, kindred and country. In leaving behind, in letting go, Abram was freed to go out into the wilderness, to find the way to the sacred center that was calling him. We don't easily leave behind all that we have known without the hope of something more. For Abram, the hope of something more was blessing. "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." SO, such a small word and in this context a word with great meaning. It would be easy to think that what propelled Abram out of Haran and into the wilderness journey was the promise of greatness, the father of a great nation and a great name. But, for Abram the purpose of the promise was so that he would be a blessing to all of humankind. Blessing is how God's mercy comes into the world through human beings who are blessed and who share the blessing with one another. Abram and Sarai accepted God's call to be a blessing and we too are called to be a blessing to those around us, our families, our friends, our enemies, those with whom we disagree. It is easier to be a blessing to those we love than those we find "difficult". It is often challenging to return blessing for harm. But that is God's invitation to us. Like Abram and Sarai, we are asked by God to bless instead of curse, to return good for harm. Blessing that we give is the pathway to our journey to the sacred center. Blessing transforms curse can only deter. There are many ways of being a blessing instead of a hinderance, but, generally, blessings are of three types. The first way of blessing is simply that sense of abiding peace or well-being in the life of the one blessed. This is the blessing of forgiveness, of restored relationship, the blessing of acceptance and tolerance for that which is "other". This is the blessing of making room for thoughts, opinions, and ways that are contrary to our own. This blessing when openly given will be returned to the giver many fold. The second type of blessing becomes real when we participate in the world in lifegiving ways. God, the creator gave human beings dominion over the creation. God given dominion is the ability and the invitation to participate with God in continuing creation. In the making of all things new. It is a blessing when we make a new space, an enlarged understanding, when we create a place for ourselves and others to breathe and engage new thoughts and ways of being. We are a blessing when we join with God in making our corner of the universe a bit more like the original Garden of Eden. The blessing is returned to the giver of blessing as well. When we make room for others we make room for ourselves. The third way of being a blessing is by recognizing the gifts that God has given us and to use them rightly. God's instruction to Abram and Sarai was to be fruitful and multiply. This can be understood in a much larger context than simply procreation. We are fruitful, when we use our resources to make the place where we are better, for all creatures, for our fellow humans and for the land itself. We multiply God's original blessing of creation when we take the gifts of skill, reason and energy to further God's intention for the world. In discovery, invention and productivity, in our curiosity and creativity we are a blessing to our surroundings. Of course, there is another side to blessing. Blessing is an invitation and like all invitations, it comes with a choice. We can refuse to bless. When we refuse to bless, we engage the other side of blessing, curse. Most of us find the idea of cursing someone or something shocking. Biblically, curse is not merely angry or inappropriate language. The refusal to bless is a form of curse. It means that things are stuck, that we cannot move forward. In refusing to risk blessing, we bear the consequences, a shrinking of possibility and peace. In choosing not to bless we foreclose all of the blessings that would come back to us. In the same way that blessing returns to the one blessing, the result of

the refusal to bless comes back to the one refusing. Comes back in loss, lost opportunity and lost relationship. When we refuse to bless we hurt ourselves as well as the one who goes unblessed. We are called by God continually to go, go beyond where we are comfortable, go beyond where it is safe, seeking God where God is to be found. God offers us a spiritual pilgrimage, a transforming journey to that place of the sacred both deep within us and all around us. God is calling us to go so that we may be a blessing to each other and to the world. How will we answer, what will we choose?