

Sermon: Harken Forward
Text: Genesis 12:1-9
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Context: WWPC
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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.'

Genesis 12:1

Of all the columnists who write for the NY Times, David Brooks may be my least favorite. If you're a reader of the Times, it's quite possible you disagree with me. And that's perfectly fine. It's certainly not my intention to change your mind.

I mention Brooks only because, to my great surprise, he answered a question for me this week that I didn't even know I had.

When thinking about the origins of the Jewish faith, it is customary to refer to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In a time when we're all striving for greater gender equity, I always want to add, *and the God of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, too.*

These men, and their wives, are, without doubt, three of founding pillars of the Hebrew faith.

Which is a little surprising. The opening chapters of Genesis give us the origin story for creation and the rise of human culture. But they also feature another legendary figure in Jewish mythology and theology, a man whose story precedes the one we just read. And yet Noah is never included in this litany of the great patriarchs of Judaism.

Reading David Brooks' article this week, I realized it's worth asking why that is. I also realized that the answer may explain why the story of Judaism in particular, and the Judeo-Christian tradition more generally, starts with Abraham, and not with the man who built the world's most famous ark.

In a piece entitled, Harvey, Irma, Jose ... and Noah, Brooks asks, “Is there anything we can learn from hurricanes, storms and floods? People have been asking that question for thousands of years, telling stories that try to make sense of natural disasters. These flood myths are remarkably similar to one another” (NY Times, Sept. 12, 2017; the following quotes also come from this article).

Brooks goes on to note that the most famous of these myths is, of course, the biblical story of Noah.

What does Noah say when he learns of God’s plan to literally rain destruction down upon the earth, to wipe out virtually all of humanity with a great deluge? Nothing. He does not argue or protest. He simply builds his ark, and then disappears into it, taking refuge from the stormy world.

Brooks further notes that more than a few rabbis and scholars have judged Noah harshly for this. They see Noah’s response less as an act of faith and more as an act of blind obedience.

“Noah was righteous but not a leader,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes. “A leader takes responsibility for those around him and at least tries to save the world, even if people are too wicked to actually listen . . . Noah, by contrast, opts to withdraw from the corrupt world, in order to remain untainted.”

Rabbi Sacks writes, “One of the strangest features of biblical Hebrew is that — despite the fact that the Torah contains 613 commands — there is no word for ‘obey.’ Instead the verb the Torah uses is *shema/lishmoa*, ‘to listen, hear, attend, understand, internalize, respond.’ So distinctive is this word that, in effect, the King James Bible had to invent an English equivalent, the word, ‘hearken.’”

“To hearken is to be faithful but also responsible, to defer to just authority but also to answer the call of individual conscience.”

And that’s the difference between Noah and Abraham.

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country . . .’”

“And Abram went, as the Lord commanded him.”

Abram did not just obey. He hearkened. He listened, heard, attended, understood and internalized. And then he responded. He did not retreat. He rose, pulled up his tent stakes, and went out into the world.

That in turn raises another key question. Why? Why did Abram heed God's call?

The short answer is we have no idea. We know only the barest details about Abraham's background.

What we do know is that at this stage in the story, there is no Israel. There is no one group of people who call themselves and know themselves by that name. And there is, as yet, no land where this people call home.

And that's what makes this story so remarkable, for it marks the beginning of a whole new era in history. Like Genesis 1, it is an origin story of sorts. Only this time it's not about the origin of the cosmos and of humanity. It's the origin story of the Jewish people as a distinct group.

But it is also, in a sense, the origin story of faith itself. God's faith in humanity, and our faith in God.

I say God's faith in humanity because there is nothing noteworthy about Abram, nothing that qualifies him for his starring role as the forebear and progenitor of three major world religions. For remember, Abraham is not just the father of Judaism, but of Islam and Christianity, too.

At the time of this encounter, he is every bit as ordinary as the rest of us. His father, Terah, had gathered the whole family, including Abram, Abram's wife Sarai, and his grandson Lot, and had they set out from the land of Ur, where they had settled, for Canaan, the land of promise.

But they didn't make it. They failed to get where they were going. They settled in a land that was not home. They shot for the stars and fell short, landing on the moon instead, like people have always done.

We also know that, at the time of this encounter, Sarai and Abram had not been blessed with children. Given that they were both north of 70 at the time of this encounter, this was unlikely to change.

Biographically, Abram could not have been less qualified for this job. And yet the promise comes: *I will make of you a great nation*. It's a promise rooted in a faith that runs in two directions.

God does not ask Abram to prove his bona fides as a faith leader. No CV, no references. In a sense, it's a great risk for God.

And Abram does not point out the absurdity of God's audacious plan. He does not reply with a rational analysis of his situation, citing the fact that it is now biologically impossible for him and Sarai to give birth to a single child, never mind a nation.

Instead, he hearkens. He gets up and he goes. And in so doing, Abram gives birth not just to a nation but to faith itself.

It is true that God gave Noah a command and Noah obeyed. But all he risked was ridicule. Noah would suffer no other consequences if the rains did not come. And if the rains did come, his ark would benefit no one beyond his own tiny little tribe.

Abram risked everything to respond to God's call. Together, he and Sarai left the land they had come to know as home. They left the safety and security of a present they knew and understood for an uncertain future with no guarantees of their safety or survival.

They had no map, and no plan for how to get where they were going because at the time of their departure, they did not yet know where they were going. They just went.

This act of hearkening, in other words, required a response from Abram and Sarai that runs counter to some of our deepest human impulses. Counter to our longing to live settled lives. Counter to our fear of and resistance to change. Counter to our apprehension about, and aversion to, the unknown.

How hard must this have been? How extraordinarily faithful was this act of going? Turns out we have a handy bit of proof of how hard it was.

In modern English, there is always one other word that is used in conjunction with this otherwise archaic word, *hearken*. Today we always hearken...which way? That's right. We always hearken back. Which is to say the word now means exactly the opposite of what it meant for Abraham.

For him it meant to hear and respond, to move and live into an unknown future.

For us it means to reflect nostalgically on the way things used to be. We hearken back to the good old days. Back to the time when we all left our doors unlocked because there was no reason to lock them. Back when people talked to another face to face, rather than yelling at one another on FB.

Back to when the weather made sense and giant, once-every-hundred-year storms did not routinely slam into our coasts and our cities, flooding subways, devouring beaches, turning roadways into rivers, and displacing millions of people.

We hearken back. It's an almost universal human tendency, a strong and pervasive impulse in all of us.

And it is also fundamentally at odds with the way faith works. Last week we launched a new sermon series focused on exploring just who exactly this God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is.

This foundational text, this primordial story, tells us some important things about this God. It tells us of God's intention to bless all the nations of the world. It tells us that God is willing to make promises to, and establish covenants with, human agents, and is willing to trust and enjoin ordinary human beings to help realize these promises and fulfill these covenants.

But it also makes clear that God's call always runs on one direction: forward.

Juan Martinez, a professor of pastoral leadership at Fuller Seminary has pointed out that when people move, they do so for one of two reasons. Because they have to. Or because they want to. Because of need, or because of hope.

That is not true for Abram. He gets up and goes because he's called to get up and go.

It is that choice to believe, to hearken forward, to move into unfamiliar territory and live into a future he cannot see, that gives birth to faith. In a sense, it also creates Abraham himself.

He is Abram at the start of this story. But by the time his journey is complete and his story is at an end, he is Abraham.

Obviously very few of us are called to do what Abram and Sarai were called to do: to give up the life they knew and to leave the country they called home -- to put their entire future at risk just because God says Go.

But it's also true that, at some point in our lives, most of us sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah will likely be met with the opportunity to hearken forward, to step out in faith into an unknown future. And the choice we make in that moment may well create and define us, just as it did for Abram and Sarai.

In her new book, *Braving the Wilderness*, Brené Brown tells the story of when she faced just such a moment.

Her family moved around when Brené was a kid. So during her formative years, she never really felt like she fit in anywhere, or belonged to a specific posse of friends--the two things we long for the most in that vulnerable stage of life. The two things we long for the most at almost any stage of life.

Toward the end of her eighth-grade year, her family moved to Houston. They arrived shortly before tryouts were to take place for the school drill team.

Brené had had several years of ballet instruction under her belt, and she was desperate to fit in and find a place where she belonged. So she worked hard to prepare for the tryout and had every reason to believe she would make the team. But despite her fervent hopes and her deep longing, and her hard work, she came up short.

She was heartbroken when she checked the notice board and realized her name was not on the list. Traumatized that her hopes had been dashed, she began to act out...to do unhealthy things, things that put a young girl's future at risk.

It turns out that when it comes to hearkening back, trauma has as much gravity as nostalgia. It was tempting for Brené to let this past experience define her, to constantly hearken back to it, to let it dominate her present life.

Until one day she realized she had a choice. In the end, Brené survived high school intact, and went on to college and then to grad school. She began to make a name for herself in her field, so much so that she was getting invitations to speak before large and influential groups.

One on such occasion, the event organizers gave her very specific instructions about how she was to dress. This was a conference of, by and for business leaders, and she was expected to dress in business attire, sensible shoes and a conservative skirt.

Perhaps a little bit like Noah way back in the day, Brené meekly complied with this command. But she was to give a talk about authenticity, and there she was dressed like someone she didn't know and didn't recognize.

And that's when she opted to hearken forward. This is not who I am, she decided, not who I am created and called to be. I am called to be Brené.

She decided to put her reputation, and perhaps even her future, at risk. She changed into her normal attire and went on to give the most popular talk of all the speakers at the conference. And then went on to give one of the most popular TED Talks of all time, dressed like herself.

To us, this story may sound almost quaint. But it wasn't quaint for Brené. In that moment of reckoning, it felt like her very identity was at risk. But she nevertheless hearkened forward and it changed everything for her.

Each one of us hearkens back to different things. Some of us to times that felt easier or better, times for which we feel great nostalgia, times we wish we could return to. Others of us hearken back to times that were so painful they keep us trapped in their gravitational pull.

But like our forebears in the faith, like Abraham and Sarah, we will likely have a moment of reckoning at some point, a moment when God calls us to leave what we know behind and to hearken forward, to step out in faith into an unknown future. Honestly, that can happen when we're 17 or 97.

Yesterday I saw a video of a woman who looked about Sarah's age, publicly protesting an unjust verdict in Saint Louis. That person could be you.

As I was wrapping up this sermon earlier this morning, it occurred to me that we have experienced this moment collectively, as a congregation. We had to choose between hearkening back to a past we know and love, or heeding God's call and hearkening forward into the future God is calling us to.

Unlike Abram, we actually have a map, a plan to guide us. But if you still might be wondering, how exactly we're going to get to this future, the answer is: the same way Abraham did.

And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb. That is, one faithful step at a time.