

Last week when we read the creation story from Genesis 1, we got the macro view of the universe, the big picture of how God created the heavens and the earth in all of its vastness. In the past several weeks I have been sent several links to websites showing pictures of the scope and magnitude of the universe, and they really are fascinating; actually they are mind-numbing. One in particular begins with a ground level view of the earth and then begins to move progressively farther out, showing pictures from ten kilometers up, then 100 kilometers – about the level of the astronauts, then 100,000 kilometers – ¼ of the way to the moon, then a million kilometers, then 100 million kilometers and so on until the earth becomes just a speck and our sun just a pin prick; then 1 light year and 10 light years out – bear in mind light travels 6 trillion miles in a year, and farther and farther out, until our galaxy, the Milky Way, is lost in a myriad of thousands of galaxies. The images are staggering, but more staggering still is the magnitude of it all and the thought that “*in the beginning God created*” it, all of it. That is the world view, or even bigger still, the cosmic view we get in the opening chapters of Genesis.

But then in Genesis 12 that perspective changes, radically. At this point in Scripture that ever expanding view of the universe suddenly changes course and the picture begins to narrow, getting closer and closer, until finally it focuses on one planet, one nation, one people, one family, one man – Abram – and his wife, Sarai; we know them as Abraham and Sarah. Of all the people on earth, God chooses them for a special purpose, to enter into a special relationship with Him. He calls them to establish a special people, a new community of faith. The God who called the universe into being, now calls a second time, in a more personalized, individualized way, to an aged man and his barren wife, and this is where the story of faith begins.

Here we read how the Lord speaks to Abram and says, “Go.” Our God consistently gives two great imperatives and both are insinuated in this call to Abraham. The first is always “Come”- “Come to Me. Come, walk with Me. Come, trust Me. Come, follow Me. Come, be blessed and used by Me.” “Come” is always God’s first word to us, and “Go” is always His second. Here the Lord says to Abram, “Go, from your country and your family and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

There are many conversations in Scripture that I would love to have been party to, and this is one of them. I would love to know what kind of questions Abraham had when God told him to leave it all and go. I would also love to have been able to listen in on the conversation when Abraham went home that night and tried to explain this whole thing to Sarah.

“Who said what?” she surely asked. “The Lord said leave everything and go to the land that I will show you.”

“What land?” “I don’t know. He didn’t exactly say, but He did say He’d tell us when we got there.”

“Abraham, why would we do this? What do we have to go on?” “Because God told us to go and He promised to bless us.”

Now, even God’s promise or blessing would have to raise some suspicions. His promise to Abraham was three-fold. First, He said, “*I will give you land*” – an as of yet unspecified parcel in some far away place that admittedly already has people living on it. Second, “*I will make of you a great nation and your offspring like the dust of the earth.*” A wonderful idea, but bear in mind, Abraham is 75 years old when he hears this call and Sarah is barren, so in every sense this is a hopeless situation. And third, “*I will make your name great. I will bless you so that all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you.*” Even that ambiguous promise seems to be a stretch, but on that, on those promises alone, Abraham and Sarah pack up all that they have and set off to find the land that God has promised. Why would they do this? For one reason only, because God called.

There is always a dual action in the call of God. The first move is always God’s. God is always the Initiator, the Creator, the First Mover, and we clearly see that here. This was not Abraham’s idea, it was God’s, and it is quite certain that if God was not in it, despite every human effort, this plan would be doomed to failure. This call of God arises out of the vision and purpose and provision of God, and it comes with a promise – “*I will bless you and through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.*”

So while the first action always belongs to God, the second action is equally as important: the human response. God’s initiative requires our response. In order for God’s purpose to be fulfilled He needed Abraham and Sarah to say “yes” to His call to “Go!” That human response we call “faith.” Abraham and Sarah were acting in faith, trusting that the promise-Giver would be faithful to be a promise-

Keeper, and in that act of faith Abraham, and Sarah, become the prototype for all who hear and accept and follow the call of God. Even when the way is not clear it is that trust in God and in His promise that enables us to let go of “the present we know” for the sake of the future that is still uncertain, and that response of faith is as necessary now in you and in me as it was in Abraham and Sarah centuries ago.

I have always loved this, but now I feel a certain affinity to it. We have been at Tab for about 2 ½ years and periodically during that time, and as recently as about a week and a half ago, someone will ask me, “Why did you ever come here?” I realize I have never really told my side of the story, perhaps I’ve hesitated in telling it because I try hard not to make my ministry about me, but I did have an “Abraham-like” sense of calling. You know the Tab side of the story, what was happening here, so here is the other side of the story.

We had been at our former church, Crossroads, in suburban Milwaukee for 13 years, and they were 13 wonderful years. During that time the church went through tremendous growth, every conceivable measurable of worship attendance and participation and giving, tripled or quadrupled, and we successfully completed two major building projects, adding a new sanctuary and a new Christian Life Center to accommodate our growth. Life was good for us: we loved our church and friends, Kris loved her job, our kids were both out of college and living near-by, we had just bought a house a year before because Kris asked me, “Are we here for the long haul?” and I said, “Yes.” We were making plans to settle in and retire there.

But then a funny thing happened, God called, and it happened in this way. We had known about Tab for many years, Kris since grade school and I since college, and we had long respected the ministry here. We had also been aware of the long succession of pastors and the many struggles of the past 20 years, but during that time there was never any sense of God’s leading us here. Then in the spring of 2007 we heard from friends that Tab was open again and things did not look hopeful here. We heard about the declining membership, the changing neighborhood, the desperate finances, the uncertain future and then the offer of a designated pastor position, not even a permanent call, only a three year “contract” position, to see if things might work out. In their telling there was no hint of “Are you interested?” It was just a statement of fact. But then, after our friends left, Kris turned and said a most interesting thing to me. She said, “You know what Tab needs, don’t you? They need a pastor with your skill set and your gifts for ministry.” Isn’t it funny how God calls?

Why would we even consider leaving where we were, what we were doing, the hopefulness of the plans we had made for the future there to come here? Why, because of this curious sense of the call of God. I had just finished re-reading a book titled *Half Time* by Bob Buford, in which he speaks of the difference between “success” and “significance.” In many ways I had achieved “success” there, but felt the weight of “significance” in what was happening here. My prayer became, “Lord, where can my ministry make the most difference for the work of Your Kingdom?” It wasn’t about me, it was about where I thought God could best use me, my gifts and skills and years of experience in ministry to have the most impact for His Kingdom work. And I came to believe then, and still believe today, that I was being called here to be your pastor. I came to believe that God still has important Kingdom work for Tab to do in the future and I wanted to be a part of it.

As the process unfolded that was also the sense of the calling committee and eventually of you, the congregation, for me to become your pastor for a designated period of three years, at which point we will both re-evaluate that sense of call on a more permanent basis, which will happen before the end of the year. So, back to the fall of 2007, I felt the call of God to come and you affirmed it with your vote, but I still had to explain my decision to the folks back at Crossroads, and believe me, it caught everyone by surprise. No one saw this coming, admittedly myself included. When I made the announcement there was a stunned silence in the congregation, but then I explained where we were going and why I felt a sense of God’s calling and almost immediately they got it! I could feel their acceptance, even excitement about the possibilities for the future, and that sense was best summarized when someone said, “I get it! You are doing what you’ve been telling us to do for the past 13 years. You are following Jesus.”

Friends, God is still in the calling business. We see it in the Abraham story. We hear it again in our Gospel lesson when Jesus sends the twelve out to preach, teach, and heal. He was calling them to do ministry in His name and He promised to give them His power. I have felt that same sense of God’s calling in my own life, and I know many of you have as well. God is still very much in the calling business. So today I wonder: What is He calling you to do? Where is He calling you to go? And, what is your response?

You may be saying, “God wouldn’t call me!” Well, He called the likes of Abraham and Moses and David, the motley crew of the twelve, and even me. You may be saying, “But I’m too old and the circumstances really wouldn’t work!” Really? Abraham was 75 when he started on the journey of faith and Sarah was barren, and look at all that God did in that “hopeless” scenario. Or maybe you are saying, “I’m too settled in my way of life.” Believe me, God can deal with that excuse. Abraham was wealthy and established before God told him to pick up and move, and we had just bought a house with a 30 year mortgage!

Friends, God is still in the calling business and inherent in His call is a promise of blessing. Abraham was promised land and off-spring and greatness. We needn’t necessarily assume any of those, but what we can be assured of is this: God promises to be with us. He will not ask us to do what He will not also empower us to do. He will not send us where He does not also promise to go with us. When God calls He will provide because He calls us for a purpose, His purpose, to do the work of His Kingdom. Abraham was told that he would be blessed so that all of the nations of the earth might be blessed through him: *blessed to be a blessing*. The twelve were sent out to do the same work Jesus was doing by announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God: they were *blessed to be a blessing*. I can honestly say I have a clearer vision of the ministry God is calling us to do now and twenty years from now here at Tab than I did when I first sensed His call to come here. We have been *blessed to be a blessing*, right here at 34<sup>th</sup> and Central, in the Mapleton-Fall Creek neighborhood, throughout this metropolitan area and around the world, and I want to be a part of that blessing and I pray you do too.

Friends, God is calling. He is calling us to be part of the work He is doing in the world. So, what do you say? How do you respond? I know, in so many ways it sounds absurd and questions abound. What have we got to go on? Only this: the call and promise of God, and somehow that seems to be sufficient.