

## **Trusting the Unknown**

Part 1A - June 11, 2023

### **Genesis 12:1-9**

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup> Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup> Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup> Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

<sup>8</sup> From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and invoked the name of the LORD. <sup>9</sup> And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

### **Matthew 9:9-13 and 18-26**

<sup>9</sup> As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

<sup>10</sup> And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

<sup>12</sup> But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>13</sup> Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”...

<sup>18</sup> While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” <sup>19</sup> And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. <sup>20</sup> Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, <sup>21</sup> for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” <sup>22</sup> Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well. <sup>23</sup> When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, <sup>24</sup> he said, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. <sup>25</sup> But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. <sup>26</sup> And the report of this spread throughout that district.



Today we focus on the starting point – hearing and receiving a call. This summer we will be talking a lot about “call.” So, first, we need to spend some time talking about the “*what*.”

What is a call? What does it mean to be called by God? What does it feel like when you are being called? And, perhaps most importantly, is it something we want?

A call is not always something easy to carry. It can want to send us to a place that we do not want to go, or to places that we are not sure about. There are often lots of unanswered questions when we respond to a call of God.

And one of the difficult things about responding to a call – those unanswered questions don't always get answered or go away. As we prepare to talk about trusting into the unknow, let us pray...

Before you get too comfortable, please know that calls are not reserved for those who end up being clergy or missionaries or on church staffs. If one looks through the Bible, we see that almost everyone called by God was, in fact, just a regular person. The call of God came to a shepherd boy, to a woman living with a 5<sup>th</sup> man, to a tree trimmer, to fishermen, to farmers – just to name a few! The call of God comes to us all. Well, at least to all who seek to follow the path of discipleship in Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The call might be to a place, to a task, or to a way of living. There is one common theme to all calls. No matter what the call, relationships are at the core.

When we first accept a call of God, we are like newlyweds at first. To consider a call is to consider all of life – a new life, a new start, a destination unknown to a degree. Most newly married couples launch off into this new way of being in the world without a real clue about what they are doing or where they are ultimately going. Many newlyweds are woefully unprepared for what lies ahead of them. We celebrate this new union on their special day with smiles and tears of joy and wave goodbye as they head off on their honeymoon. They heard love calling and they answered the call. Can you remember the last wedding or two that you were at? Can you remember how you maybe hoped they survived their first year or two?

This time of year, just coming back from Annual Conference, where appointments are set for the new year, I cannot help but think today of all those new pastors standing on the edge of beginning ministry anew in a foreign place.

Some are fresh out of seminary, having almost no clue what it means to actually serve a church, to really and honestly love the people of God that they have been called to. I think of how lucky I was to begin at the church where Kristin and I had raised our kids. We had been members at First church for 19 years already when I started into pastoral ministry.

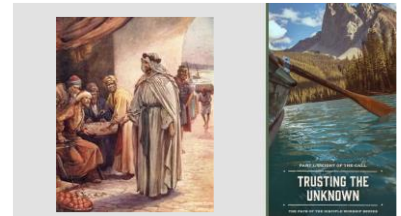
That move to Winner – there was some learning to be done there. Out on my own for the first time, with no senior pastor to corral me, I quickly learned how much I did not know. Without the safety net of First church, I do not know if I'd have answered the call in the same timeframe that I did. To hear God calling and to finally respond, “God, send me” is a scary proposition. Maybe even more than saying “I do” and driving off on my honeymoon!

Turn with me to Matthew 9. Matthew was much like a newlywed – he just didn't quite know it yet. There he was, just sitting at his tax collector's booth, minding his own business. It was a pretty messy business. One so messy that you needed a Roman centurion on duty when you did your job collecting taxes.

Some guy comes walking by and says to him, *“Follow me.”*

And Matthew goes. What, you say? Yes, Matthew gets up then and there and trails along behind this man. Matthew leaves

the people standing there in line. He leaves the centurion standing guard. We do not know what led Matthew to get up and go. Maybe he had job dissatisfaction. Maybe he had guilt over forcing people to pay taxes to oppressors. We don't know. Matthew was probably half-way down the street when he thought, “Wait, what am I doing here?”



That is part of almost all call stories. On that second Tuesday morning in February 2016, when I'd just heard that my associate pastor position at First church was being eliminated, I wondered, "Wait, what am I doing here?" I next thought that I could still go back to teaching. My certificate was still valid. Rapid City was always in need of teachers. Part way down the road, I was questioning responding to the call of God that I'd first heard about six years earlier.

As I went back around the corner, to my office, I felt shock. I felt lost in my own office. Later I would understand that this is part of being called. We can get lost. We can wander off course. Yet we do not wander alone. The one who called is always there.

Turn with me to Genesis 12 as we explore the story of Abram. For most of the Biblical account, we know him as Abraham. But now he is just Abram. He is at home in Haran. That has been his home for a few decades. It was originally just a pit stop on the way home to the ancestral lands in Canaan. But his father Terah stayed, and it became home to him and his family. They put down roots. That is, until God came calling. In verse 1 we read, *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."* After God offers a few blessings, Abram gathers up all he has and sets out. Just like Matthew, he begins a journey with an unknown destination. How far into the journey was it when Abram asked, "Wait, what am I doing here?" This is just one of many questions that we ask when stepping out in faith, when answering a call that God has placed upon our lives.

*"Go from your country  
and your kindred and  
your father's house  
to the land  
that I will show you."*

- Genesis 12:1



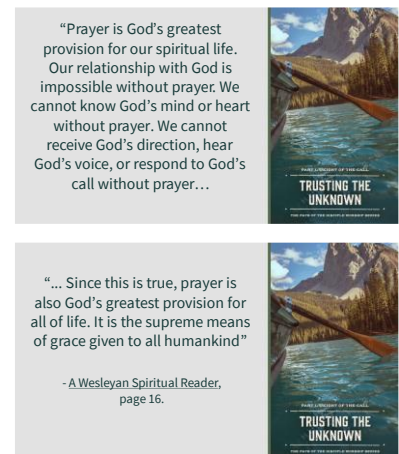
The other question that I wrestled with was this one: Is God really calling or am I hearing my own voice? Is this really God or is this some secret desire of my heart?

It is a question that we want answered. In the Bible, it seems certain that it was God calling Abram or David or Moses or Elijah. When God said, *“Go from your country...”* there is no doubt as to who is talking to Abram. In order to discern my call – to know if it was God’s voice or not – I spent a lot of time in prayer. Prayer is an essential means of grace to employ when trying to discern a call from God. Like our Methodist founder and like Jesus long before him, prayer is our primary connection to God.

In the Wesleyan Spiritual Reader, Reuben Job shares this insight concerning our prayer

life: “Prayer is God’s greatest provision for our spiritual life.

Our relationship with God is impossible without prayer. We cannot know God’s mind or heart without prayer. We cannot receive God’s direction, hear God’s voice, or respond to God’s call without prayer. Since this is true, prayer is also God’s greatest provision for all of life. It is the supreme means of grace given to all humankind” (page 16). Through a lot of time in prayer, I began to sense that this was God speaking into my heart, mind, and life. Through prayer, I began to better know God’s mind and heart. Prayer gave me the assurance to begin to voice this call outside of my own head and heart.



As I slowly began to confide in Kristin and Pastor Doug, they were reassuring and trusted that God was calling. I wasn’t totally sold. But when I had mostly decided – it was like 95% at this point – when Kristin and I told our kids that I was considering this call, it was Matthew, our oldest, who said something like, “It’s about time.” Even with much still unknown, that was what I needed to step forward into my call that held many unknowns, into the *“land that I will show you.”*

Turning to Genesis 12, verse 4, we read, *“So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.”*

That’s it. He went. He believed God and he went as God had told him to go. How similar are the call stories of Abram and Matthew. A simple call, an extremely trusting response. And like it was with Matthew, there was no road map, no end point. At least Abram had *“to the land that I will show you.”* That was more than Matthew had. That’s sometimes more than we have too when we respond to the call of God. Back in 2012, when I first responded to my call, my immediate future was clear at First church. But beyond those first few years... I know that is not really comforting, but it is the truth. God wants our trust, our willingness to go when God calls.

God does not want us to be certain or to wait until we have the first few steps all planned out. That’s just not often part of responding to the call. God wants us to trust into the unknown. It is not easy. When the district superintendent called that Thursday – two days after he was sitting in my office, waiting for me to walk out of that first bombshell meeting – my first instinct was to ask, “Move where?” Truth be told, it did not matter where. God says ‘Anywhere.’ God says, ‘Somewhere.’ God says to trust into the unknown. Abram packed up all that he had and set off as God led. He made it safely to Canaan and he builds an altar to mark the spot that God says to him, *“To your offspring I will give this land.”* Abram went forward in trust and in faith. God proved to be trustworthy and faithful, leading and guiding Abram. Moving on to settle in the hill country east of Bethel, here too he builds an altar to the Lord, invoking God’s name – the name of the one who saw him safely through.



Abram was blessed in the going, in the trusting God into the unknown. The same can be said of Matthew. Leaving behind all he knew, leaving behind his security and wealth, Matthew got up and followed Jesus. Many blessings came from this one decision. Later that day we find Jesus at Matthew's home. In verse 10-12 we see that Jesus has gathered with *"many tax collectors and sinners,"* eating dinner together with these and his own disciples. The Pharisees grumble about this situation. In their eyes, it is sinful to eat with such as these.

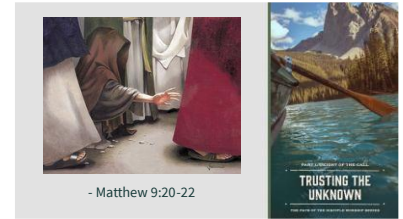
In response, Jesus says, *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."*

Skipping down to verses 18-26, we see this unfold in real life – not once but twice. Quite suddenly a leader from the synagogue comes to Jesus and begs him to come to his house. His daughter has died, and he believes that Jesus can lay his hand upon her, bringing her back to life. This synagogue leader trusts into the unknown, choosing to believe that Jesus can and might even heal his daughter. The man went and was blessed by going. His daughter is restored to life. Taking her by the hand, Jesus helps her up. This is a powerful story about hearing the Spirit speak and stepping forth in faith, going where God leads.

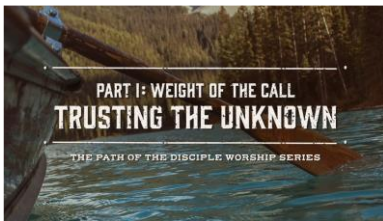
Couched in this story, right there in verses 20-22, we find an even greater example of responding to God's voice. The synagogue leader was desperate. His daughter had died. He knew that there was none other than Jesus that could restore life to his dead daughter. This woman found in verses 20-22 had been suffering for 12 years.



With great trust and faith she works her way through the crowd, coming up right behind Jesus. She thinks, *“If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.”* That is the call that God had placed upon her heart. It is the call she responded to. Yes, she wants to be well. Yes, she has been long-suffering. And, yes, she believes that Jesus is the answer to her condition. Jesus turns and sees her. He speaks these words to her: *“Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.”* We read that instantly the woman was made well.



Did she have moments of doubt? Surely. Did she have a moment when she asked herself, “Wait, what am I doing here?” Probably. And yet she went, and she reached out to touch the fringe of Jesus’ cloak. She received a blessing in the going, in the trusting



into the unknown at times, in listening to and responding to the call of God. God was faithful. God was trustworthy. She was healed and made whole. This too is our God. My God, your God, our God is faithful and trustworthy and true. Yes,

God calls us all to trust into what feels so unknown, believing that God knows the way. God was faithful. God was trustworthy. My God, your God, our God is faithful and trustworthy and true.

The move to Winner in June of 2016 was an exercise in trust and faith. We knew absolutely no one. These two suburban kids were moving to a small, rural town out there on the prairie. We went believing that it was where God was calling us. The move to Piedmont was less an exercise in trust and faith.

Not only was there a familiarity with the area and with some of the great folks of Grace, but because we had trusted God and leaned into the unknown moving to Winner, believing that our God was faithful and trustworthy and true, our next step was surer, more confident. You see, that's the thing. When you answer the call, when you are able to trust that there is blessing in the going, again and again, then the response becomes easier. Each time I learn even more that, yes, my God, your God, our God is faithful and trustworthy and true.

My friends, we will all hear the call of God. We hear the voice. We hear the call. Maybe God has placed a call upon your heart. Perhaps God's voice resonated with one of your passions. Or maybe God has placed a call upon your mind. The wheels start spinning and God calls you to take action, using a gift that God has blessed you with. The question is: will you trust God? Will you step forward, trusting God even into the unknown?

Let us pray... Lord, we hear so many voices. Some are inside our heads – they sound so familiar. Yes, they are self. Some are in our hearts – is that you speaking? Many more are out there, the voices of the world clamoring away. Help us, O God, through prayer and discernment, to hear your voice above all other voices. Those other voices, they seem so sure, so tried and true. They claim to know the way. Yet they are not your voice. They do not call us to love and kindness, to mercy and grace, to humility and service. Help us, Holy Spirit, to lean into the voice of God this week, to trust into even the unknowns that come with hearing and responding to the call of God upon our lives. Help each of us to trust that you are faithful and trustworthy and true, that you are the way to abundant life. Lead and guide us this week, O Spirit of God, as we seek to respond to the call of the one who loves us. Amen and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. How is your prayer life a means of grace in your life? In what ways could your prayer life grow, deepening and elevating God's voice in your life?
- 2) *Pray*. Where might God be calling you right now? What trusted friends can you share this call with? How might this help you to respond to the call?
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 9:27-34. What would these two experiences add to Matthew's confidence about his decision to follow Jesus?