



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Asheville, North Carolina

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“Go Forth”

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Genesis 12:1-9

Genesis 12:1-9 (NRSV)

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. 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. 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.”

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. 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, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 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. 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. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

When the Grace Covenant staff meets with those who are joining our church in membership, Amy Kim, Marica, and I go one by one telling the new members the stories about how we got to Grace Covenant.

My story goes something like this:

I grew in eastern North Carolina in a small, middle of nowhere, two-stoplight town called Plymouth. I was the only child of a funeral manager and a preschool director. I had a really rough time in high school in eastern North Carolina. I was bullied relentlessly because I had long hair, earrings, and an aversion to country music and Nascar. (No offense intended to those of you whose tastes include country music and Nascar. They just weren't my thing during my teenage years.) All jokes aside, I had a difficult time. At one point, I changed schools in the middle of the year because of the threats I was facing.

But even at my worst, when I felt like I couldn't fit in with my community, my small Southern Baptist Church welcomed me with open arms, seemingly without condition. The church was a refuge. It wasn't long before I sensed a call to ministry.

But, the more that I got to know that church and the Southern Baptists more generally, the more I realized that the love and acceptance they gave to me was not shown to everyone. There were barriers - walls around that love. Women were not encouraged to be in leadership in the church in the same way men were, in the same way that I was. You could not be openly gay, and, as I've mentioned from this pulpit before, one of the hardest moments of my time at that church was when a youth advisor whom I greatly admired was asked to leave after he came out.

I grew up with a mixed message about church – it was a place of love and acceptance, but only so much. There were conditions set around the unconditional love that the church preached about.

I carried that ambiguity with me for a long time. I went to a presbyterian seminary and started the ordination process in the PC(USA) in my last year there because of our denomination's beliefs about unconditional grace and its full inclusion of all the people God calls. But for seven years after seminary, I delayed ordination. Because I wasn't ready to trust the church again. I was not sure I was going to find a church where I could say what I really believed, where I could show up fully as I am.

And, seven years passed, and I got into my early-30s. I went on to more graduate school and worked part time as a hospital chaplain because I wanted to learn how to care for people, how to be with people, as they are, not as I expected them to be. At the end of those seven years, Joseph, our son, was 2 years old. Lindsey and I had been married for 8 years. She looked at me one day after I finished my PhD, and said, you know, you really should get real job at some point. So, I found Grace Covenant, a church with a staff and congregation that values authenticity and vulnerability, as we try to follow the call of divine love.

Every person here has a story of how you got to church, why you are here on a Sunday morning. We, as a staff, know, because we have heard so many of your stories. For the majority of people at Grace Covenant, your church journey has not been easy. Many of you have been disillusioned or hurt by the church. And yet, by the power of the Spirit, here we are, again being and becoming the body of Christ.

“Go Forth” God tells Abram when he is 75 years old. We learn in the chapter before our passage that Abram’s father had brought the family out of Ur and into Haran, a place in modern day Turkey. The generation before Abram had died in Haran, and Abram as the oldest child, is expected to carry the family forward. But in the words of ch. 11, v. 30, his partner Sara “was barren; she had no child.”

We have to be careful here. There are echoes in this Scripture of the patriarchal assumption that Sara’s value depended on her fertility. And Abram and Sara were, in fact, stuck. In the Ancient Near East, your survival depended on the labor and care of the generations of a family working together. Children not only carried your family name forward; their presence was necessary for survival in the subsistence farming culture of our ancestors in the faith.

But we mistake the lesson of this story if we take it to mean our future and our worth depends only on fertility. There are many different ways to be a blessing, to leave a legacy that go beyond the traditional family; there are also many other ways of getting stuck, of spending our time and other resources on that which is not life-giving to ourselves or others. There are many ways and reasons to lose hope.

“Go Forth,” God tells Abram. “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 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.”

“Go Forth,” God tells Abram, because God speaks into moments of hopelessness.¹

In the beginning, when “the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep,” God spoke, and light came forth out of the void.

Generations later, a descendent of Abram, a murderer on the run from his home, an exile on a mountain, his people in the chains of slavery, would hear God’s voice speaking his name, “Moses,” a blessing coming out from the void.

Because over and over again in Scripture, God speaks into the uncertainty, the ambiguity, the stasis of our lives, and creates something from nothing: “Go Forth,” God told Abram and Sara.

In Romans 4:17, Paul calls Abram, “Our father in the sight of God...the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.” Have you ever heard God speak in a moment of hopelessness?

Our story does not end with God’s words, happily ever after. Abram and Sara become migrants, threatened at every turn.² Immediately after this passage, after visiting the land promised by God, they flee to Egypt to escape famine. God does not just send Abram on a spiritual pilgrimage. This is also a literal movement of a desperate people, moving to an unknown land.

In other words, even under the promise and call of God, Abram and Sara lived the life of those displaced by war, empire, and poverty. Or, as Moses says at the end of his life, “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor” (Deuteronomy 26:5). So, we do well to attend to the plight of refugees and others pushed to the margins, for they are closest to the very first people that God called. God calls us, but never promises ease or luxury. In fact, over and over Scripture confirms that God is closest to those pushed to the margins.

Our passage ends: “From there Abram 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. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.” Our passage ends but Abram and Sara’s

¹ In this section of the exegesis of the Scripture, I am drawing on Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Genesis (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 114-125.

² In this section, I am drawing on Kathleen O’Connor, *Genesis 1-25A: A Smyth & Helwys Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2018), 202-204.

journeys do not. “Negeb” simply means dry land or desert. It is not a destination but a journey. In fact, Abram and Sara *never* fully arrive; it will be generations later before their decedents settle in the land. In v. 7, God says, “To your offspring I will give this land.” The destination was never promised to Abram.

And so, I wonder if there is something incomplete about the question we ask in our new member meetings: How did you get to GCPC? As if Grace Covenant itself were some type of arrival or destination.

It is a misnomer to say that GCPC is the happy ending of my own spiritual story, though of course, it has been and is still the place that resolved many of the tensions and suspicions I held about church, as we seek to live into the radical love of Jesus. But my spiritual story, and yours, and this community’s, are far from their end.

Rather, as with Abram and Sara, the church is not a destination so much as it is a journey. It is not a place so much as it is a pursuit and a practice. We will never fully arrive. We will never fully see and know divine love in its fullness, in our life together, in this life. Rather, we are called and called again: Go Forth. Go Forth.

- Go forth, not to build walls around the expansive love of God but to tear those walls down in the name of love
- Go forth, not to create a church of insiders and outsiders, but to love, and learn, and celebrate with, and worship beside each and every child of God, knowing that God always calls us into deeper relationship, with ourselves, our neighbors, and with the divine
- Go forth with hearts and eyes open, always looking for the ways the church can exclude and abuse its power.
- And Go Forth knowing that this is especially the call to churches made of those who have been hurt by church, who are trying nonetheless, every day, to grow closer to the beloved community, the body of Christ.

Because when you have seen how much the church can cause harm in your own life, you search ever more fervently, so that we will not replicate that harm.

And even when we do this imperfectly, even in our faltering, or when that path is unknown, we show up and we live by faith, knowing that God creates hope out of hopelessness, and speaks life out of the void.

And by Grace, Sunday after Sunday, and in all the days in-between, God forms you, and me, and our life collectively, into the people of God, growing toward an

ever deeper embodiment of divine love, together propelled by that call, that is also a promise:

Go forth. Go forth. Amen.