

SERMON TITLE: "Journey Together with Your People"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 12:1-11
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 9, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

As you've hopefully figured out by now, today is the beginning of our annual stewardship drive. Lucki did a great job getting us started. In coming weeks, we'll also hear from Lori Maki and Bill Wade. Our hope is that their heartfelt talks about why they support our church's ministry will inspire all of us to commit our financial support too. We plan to mail information and pledge cards later in the month. We will ask all of you, with prayer and careful thought, to fill out your 2023 commitment cards and return them here to worship on October 30, when we will consecrate those pledges to God's ministry.

Every year we have a theme for our stewardship drive. This year's theme is "Journey Together." After all, the ministry of our church is a big project, and it takes all of us contributing our time, talents, and treasures in order to accomplish God's work. To help us get into this "Journey Together" theme, I've selected four Bible stories that we're going to look at. In upcoming weeks, we'll consider Moses' journey together with the Hebrews rescued from slavery in Egypt. We'll read Isaiah's account of the Israelites' journey together as they returned home from their Babylonian exile. And we'll ponder Jesus' journey together with his disciples. Today, though, we begin with Abraham, or Abram, as he was called in Genesis 12. Let's see who his traveling companions were and why it's important to journey together with your people.

1—ANCESTRAL PEOPLE

This story in Genesis 12 is known as "the call of Abram" because it's here that God speaks to Abram and tells him to leave his home country, his kindred, and his father's house and go to a new land that God will show him. If all we had was that first verse, we'd think that Abram's journey was going to be very

individualistic and lonely. We'd think he was leaving all his people behind and striking out completely on his own. But that certainly wasn't the case.

Before we rush forward into the obvious companions on his journey, though, I want to pause and take a step backward. I want to point out that no scripture in the Bible stands alone. Every verse and every chapter has a context. To understand Genesis 12, we need to back up and read Genesis 1-11. In those chapters, we learn of Adam and Eve, their sons Cain and Abel, and long genealogies that lead to the birth of Noah. Then we read of Noah's sons and another long list of descendants who lead to the birth of Terah, the father of Abram. In other words, Abram did nothing alone. He had a very long line of ancestors who influenced who he was, what he believed, and what he was doing.

Genesis 12:4 tells us that Abram was 75 years old when he finally left his father's house and set out on this journey. Over those 75 years of life in his homeland, Abram would have fully absorbed the ways of his people. Their voices were the voices he heard. Their thoughts, their needs, their concerns, and their hopes would have been Abram's driving force, influencing how he heard even the call of God. And, so, when Abram left his father's house and country, he didn't leave all those human experiences behind. In his mind, in his heart, in his culture, he took his ancestral people with him.

"What if our ancestors have been scoundrels?" you might ask. What if they made some terrible mistakes? What if we truly need to distance ourselves from them and their sinful ways? Well, that's the case with some folks in most of our families. But, just as we learn from the school of hard knocks, there are valuable lessons we can learn even from our most troubled ancestors. If nothing else, we learn what not to do and what we should avoid.

That's why the Bible is so valuable to us, even today. That book of saints *and sinners* has a lot to teach us. We learn from Adam and Eve that we shouldn't disobey God's instructions. We learn from their sons Cain and Abel that we shouldn't murder each other. We learn from Noah and his neighbors that we shouldn't ignore predictions of storms and floods. That's why we should all spend time reading the Bible.

Those people with their rich and varied stories are our people. The same goes for the history of our nation, the history of the Christian faith and the Methodist Church, and our biological ancestors. It's helpful for us to be mindful of those who have gone before us because, like it or not, they have shaped our identities.

Whether you want to or not, it's a truth that you journey together with your ancestral people.

2—WE JOURNEY TOGETHER WITH OUR CURRENT PEOPLE

Of course, our journey isn't only with people of the past. We also journey together with our current people. In Abram's case, his most immediate people were his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot. We don't know whether Abram and Sarai chose each other, or if their marriage was arranged by their parents and forced upon them. And we don't know why, exactly, Abram's nephew Lot was such a part of their family. Were they together because of some kind of familial obligation, some kind of economic necessity, or because they actually liked and enjoyed each other's company? Hopefully their relationships with one another included some very positive elements of care and cooperation, laughter and delight. Genesis 13 tells us that, after some conflict, Abram and Lot did eventually part company. But here in Genesis 12, they were still on the journey together.

Abram's traveling party wasn't limited to just three people, however. Verse five tells us that their present company also included "the persons whom they had acquired in Haran." The fellow travelers would have included servants and slaves, livestock herders, and their families—who had little choice but to go along. And it's also possible that the sojourners included some neighbors who also *wanted* to migrate, who chose to join together in the long trek. We don't know if the number was big or small, but it was sufficiently large to ensure some measure of safety from wild beasts and possible human enemies.

Those members of Abram's traveling party point out to us the varying degrees of our choice about the people with whom we journey. Sometimes we are obligated. Sometimes we travel with certain people out of necessity for them and/or ourselves. And sometimes we do, fortunately, truly get to choose.

One beautiful feature of the church is that it's a chosen family, a company of spiritual travelers who have gathered in this congregation because we want to walk this road of faith together. Even for those of you who were born into this church or have been a member for 50 years or more, you always have the right to choose to leave, if you would want to. We certainly hope you won't! But it's an important value to know that you could leave, if you wanted.

For many of us, our relationship to church is like a long marriage. It has times of intense joy and satisfaction, and some times of significant strain and trial. To keep the marriage strong over decades, it takes a lot of recommitting. Those marriage vows we said 30, 40, 50, or 60 years ago—for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health—aren't just vows to be spoken once and done. Those vows have to be chosen and spoken again and again. We have to make up our mind in big and small ways to reinforce our commitment, to promise our love and assistance, to reassure our partner that we will be with them until death do us part.

We make these vows because we all need a company of fellow travelers. Life of any kind requires companionship, and a life of faith certainly does. We need good people in our lives who will support, encourage, and bring out the best in us. We need to journey together with current people.

3—JOURNEY TOGETHER WITH FUTURE PEOPLE

Ancestral people and current people aren't our only fellow-travelers, however. In Genesis 12:7, we read that "the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.'" This promise of God to Abram was a big factor in Abram's journey. A 75-year old man doesn't start out on a long and arduous journey just for himself and his current company. He goes because he believes this journey is going to have a positive effect on future generations. Abram had faith that his offspring would benefit from this new home in a new land. He might not have been able to see their faces, but Abram held those children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren in his heart. They were with him on his journey.

Likewise, the faith journey that we're on isn't just for us in this current time. Just like we've donated all these diapers (approximately \$1500 worth for diaper drive) for young families and small children, our Judeo-Christian faith calls us to always be thinking about the life and well-being of the next generations. We make our pledges in support of Christian faith and the ministries of this church because we want this church to still be here after we're gone. We want its ministries to be available for the children, youth, and young adults of the future. I hope you agree. We don't journey just with the people of the past and the present. We journey together with the people yet to come.

CONCLUSION

There's an icebreaker game that was commonly used in groups I've been in. The people in the circle would get acquainted with each other's names by talking about going on a journey. One after another, they'd go around the circle and say their name, and something they were taking on the journey with them that began with the same letter of the alphabet. For example, Bob would say, "My name is Bob. I'm going on a journey, and I'm going to take a basketball." Then Mary, who came next, would repeat that Bob was going to take a basketball, and then she would add her own statement. "My name is Mary. I'm going on a journey, and I'm going to take make-up." Then it would be Janet's turn. Janet had to repeat that Bob was going to take a basketball and that Mary was going to take make-up. Then Janet would say, "My name is Janet. I'm going on a journey, and I'm going to take a jump rope." The process would continue around the whole group, so that the last person had to remember everything everyone else had said before finally adding their own name and what they were taking. By then, of course, the entire group had learned everyone's names. And then everyone was able to take everyone else along with them on whatever journey that group was taking.

So I'll end this sermon by saying, "My name is Kim. I'm going on a journey. And I want to take kindred spirits along with me." I hope that's you and that you will consider First United Methodist Church *your people*, so we can journey together.