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Genesis 12:1-4

CREATIVE IMPERMANENCE

Wordsworth wrote a poem once that beings, "The world is too much with us; late and soon,/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:/Little we see in Nature that is ours;/We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!/The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;/The winds that will be howling at all hours,/And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;/For this, for everything, we are out of tune;/It moves us not."

This poem, is about the way in which human beings lose touch with the natural world, and thus with our souls, might describe the weariness we feel right now with what's going on in the world. There is so much suffering; should we thus feel guilty that this is the first day of spring — and take delight in the blooming of the redbuds, the Bradford pears, the birds tuning up in the morning? Or is the "world too much with us?"

There is so much to lament — so much suffering. Japan's disaster and epic struggle, the war in Libya, the continued despair of so many people who live on the edge of starvation and are denied a taste of freedom, while everywhere the rich get richer, and constantly complain. So why, on this third Sunday of Lent, when the "world is so much with us," does the lectionary passage speak of the call of Abraham? What's that got to do with anything?

Abram and Sarai (they had not yet be renamed as a sign of the covenant) are nicely settled in Haran, he is 75 years old, and God tells him to gather up all

this stuff and go out in search of the Promised Land. And for some reason, he says “yes.”

He is very rich in livestock, and silver and gold, and he could just as easily have stayed put, but he hears the voice of God telling him that the journey is far from over, and that faith is not about prosperity but about impermanence. It's about the journey. And that's how this text makes its way into the passage for Lent, because Lent is supposed to be a journey. Although, honestly, we would all rather just settle down and enjoy what we have, since by the world's standards, we are all rich — and yet we do our share of complaining.

Permanence and impermanence is a perennial theme in scripture, as it is in human existence. We want what lasts, and yet we often live as if there is no tomorrow. Our world is plastic; it is disposable; everything we buy has structural obsolescence built into it. And so we wonder, how can I stop the march of time? When will I arrive? When can we put down anchor on the good ship Mayflower? And the answer is, we don't, we can't. Until we die, we sail on. While we draw breath, we keep moving — because this is not the world that God has in mind, and we are not living the covenant. Most of us still have our old names.

If you know the story of Abraham and Sarah, you know that they wanted to settle down and live a normal life. The heroic story of Abraham is always told from Abraham's point of view. But what about Sarah? Is she just supposed to pack up everything and follow all his crazy wandering like a good wife? They may be rich, but they are childless and in that world, to be without a child, without an heir, made one poor no matter how rich one might be.

Abraham was old; Sarah was no spring chicken herself. They sat in their tent and looked at each other, and in the brooding silence that stretched between them wondered why God had chosen not to bless them. They had a nursery all fixed up, and ready to go – the crib, the little mobile stretched over it for visual stimulation, and the color scheme – a mixture of pink and blue (just to be safe) – and yet across all of it, cobwebs. When Sarah went to the back door and called out “Everyone come to supper!” it was only Abraham.

All the good parts of this story come later, when one day Abram is out walking, and God says, “Look up and count the stars,” but Abram says “Oh, not

possible, too many” (I’m paraphrasing here), and God says “Neither will you be able to count your descendants, there will be so many.” And look at us now; here we are--the children of Abraham, Jews, Christians, and Muslims — all of us are the children of Abraham — and we are billions now.

But Abraham doesn’t buy it, because he was old, and not feeling particularly potent. But his faith made him believe in the shape of a future that he would never see. That’s what faith is. It is a deep, trans-rational trust. I trust the future I will not live to see forces that I believe are stronger than death — even though they will soon sweep me down the river.

So he went back to the tent, and he said to Sarah, “Guess what?” And she said, “Oh, don’t start on that ‘we’re going to have a son thing’ again” (I’m paraphrasing again), and he said, “I’m not starting on that again. God said it’s going to happen.” And you can’t blame her for doubting this. She doesn’t want to say, “Well God told me that I should tell you to just be happy with the ways things are — and by the way, six goats are missing, and it looks like a storm is coming.”

No, she did something women have done for centuries when caught between the implausible and indelicate. She laughed. And so when the impossible child was born, they named him laughter, which in Hebrew is pronounced Isaac. For this very same reason, we named our third child, the unexpected one, Cass Isaac Meyers.

I think the deep lesson of this tenet is that we all live in tents. No matter how large our houses, how firm the foundations, how certain that we have “secured ourselves against our own insecurity” (as Kierkegaard put it), we live in tents. Impermanence is not what punctuates our lives; it is what defines our lives. Life is a trip, not a destination. Take it.

Well that sounds good preacher, but I think there is a case that can be made for permanence. You should see the fence I'm building in my backyard — that puppy will be able to take a direct hit from a tornado. Besides, living in a tent can be fun, as long as it's temporary. It's like camping. Camping is fun because it's temporary. After a few days, or a few weeks, when everything gets damp and soggy, and you just want to take a good, long, hot shower, you know it will be OK because there is a place that you can go to that is not a tent.

All the good pilgrims are flying home from Nicaragua today, my wife included. You can bet they are anxious to get home, because many of them got sick (a few may not have remembered how old they are, because Shawn told me that she painted one day for 16 hours). But I also know that no sooner will they get home than they will begin to plan the next trip. What's with us?

We are pilgrims. We may try to disguise it, refusing to make a will (oh we are too young for that). Or just watch the seasons. God gave us Oklahoma as a living laboratory of meteorological impermanence. Will Rogers was right — don't like the weather, just wait five minutes.

Thank goodness spring is here, but in two shakes of a dog's tail, it will be hotter than Hades — the air conditioners will hum, the grasshopper will drag himself along over the cracks in the parched earth, the roads will shimmer, and the people will say, "Oh, it's a hot one," but it won't last.

August turns to September, the cool breezes will blow, the school bell will ring, the sound of early morning band practice will float over the stockade fences and we will be swept up into the rhetoric of football as if nothing else matters.

The leaves will turn to flame, if anyone is paying attention. But it doesn't last. Those leaves will soon be bitten from the trees and piled in a heap against the back fence. The winter sunsets will turn the trees into shadows, like black antlers begging the sky for cover, only to receive a blanket of snow . . . and the flying clouds and the frosty light and the year is dying in the night . . . and somebody says "Happy New Year!" 2012 . . . (isn't that the year that the world is supposed to end). What happened to 2011?

We passed it: or it passed us, while we were in the tent. We are tent people. If we can embrace this, instead of denying it, then we can feel

ourselves floating down the river without trying to jump out, or paddle backwards, or lash ourselves to a tree. We can take the ride, knowing that we never know what is around the corner.



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Parents, think how fast your children grew up! Cass was a gangly, sweet burr-headed little boy just yesterday. Now, I dare not arm-wrestle him. He can bench press me. But it won't be long before he will stumble around in his own front yard as if it were a foreign country. He loves to make fun of me because without my glasses, I can't read a menu in a dark restaurant, and I have to shine the candle on my credit card receipt just to see it. But one of these days, even Cass will look into the face of his best friend and say, "I didn't get the name?"

We all live in tents. We don't like it. I'm sure there were many nights when Sarah said to Abraham, "Honey is this the place. . .I'm so tired of paper plates and Styrofoam cups. . .can we stay put and get out the good china. Please, you know . . . develop some equity in a real house, not this rental tent - stop throwing away our money. Is this the place?"

And if that was Sarah's question, then our question must be: why has this transience, this uprootedness, this wandering in search of something permanent become the model for the faith of millions? The answer is clear, and simple, and yet profoundly important: the very thing which drives many people to cynicism and despair, drives other people into the arms of God. It is the very transient nature of things that makes some people say, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die," while others say, "For from him and to him and through him are all things. . .to him be glory and honor forever and ever, amen."

I understand cynicism. I water my grass, so it will grow, so I can cut it, so I can water it again. What's more futile than housework? Men don't always get this. You gather up dirty clothes and wash them so you can make them dirty again so you can gather them up and wash them. Why do we spend so much time and energy cleaning up the house when the only way to make sure it stays that way is to lock up the place and go stay in a hotel room?

Abraham started out looking for the perfect piece of real estate. But the longer he wandered, and the more he kept his ear tuned toward things divine, the more he came to realize that it wasn't a place he was looking for at all, but a city whose builder and maker is God.

There is so much in all of us that resists change. Not just old people, either, we all do it - we all want certain things to stay as they are forever. We

do it in the church. The committee said to the young minister: “That was a marvelous sermon that you preached, and during this interview you have demonstrated strong faith and an obvious commitment to the ministry, and that’s why it is with great regret that we say to you that you just aren’t the minister for our church right now.”
And she said. . . “Why?”



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It was not that long ago, when I was a child, that interracial marriage was illegal in Oklahoma. In fact, the marriage which gave us the current president of the United States was illegal at that time that Barack Obama's parents were married.

Change. We resist it, even when we know that it's part of God's plan. Robert Louis Stevenson said it well: "To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive." And Thornton Wilder wrote: "Everyone's always talking about people breaking into houses. . .but there are more people in the world who want to break out of houses."

We are all pilgrims on the earth. Some of us just adjust to it better than others. In fact, what some people think of as painful dislocation after painful dislocation, other people call growth. Think for a moment about the things you once thought were important. They've changed, haven't they? And the saddest thing in the world is a grown man who is stuck in high school, still running about trying to "Take State!"

The past is important, and must not be forgotten. But it's not a place. It's not where we live. God is forever calling us, out of wherever it is that we are, and have gotten too comfortable, and into the future that God has in mind. God's word is "go." Not in search of the perfect vacation, but in search of the peace that passes all understanding.

But don't just go to get away. Go in order to answer the call of life itself. And you don't have to be a famous person to get called. You just have to run with God instead of running away from God.

And don't plan out your life too carefully, because most of those plans will change (or be changed). Life really is what happens while you are making other plans. Just let the fact that you live in a tent make you seekers after what is really important. And don't think that you have to understand everything, or have everything figured out ahead of time - after all, who do you think you are? Remember, we don't live by the rule of Descartes: Cogito ergo Sum (I think therefore I am). We live by something far more risky: Amo ergo sum (I love therefore I am).

So listen closely when it is love that calls, instead of fame and fortune. In 1957, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on that bus, when she stayed seated, the whole world stood up. When Dr. King was called, he knew that the Promised Land was a place he would never see, but life is a trip, not a destination. When Jimmy Carter helped to found Habitat for Humanity, he was doing something that in my opinion is “very Presidential.”

And yet, ordinary people feel the call of God. Mothers who bathe their children feel the call. Fathers who give up the overtime, or Miller time, to go to the concert, watch the ball game, or untie and retie the knotted shoelace feel the call of God. I know attorneys who are called by God to do justice, and not just to make money. I know doctors who treat nurses with respect, and I know ministers who are not arrogant. I know policemen who walk beats and are the bright lights of their neighborhoods. And I know schoolteachers in Oklahoma, who against the steady drumbeat of nay sayers, teach the children that nobody else would spend one hour in a room with.

They have a calling, and even though they live in tents – like all of us – they know something else, something that comes in the form of that ancient promise: that if this earthly tent be dissolved, we have a house eternal in the heavens, a building of God, not made with hands.

The French have a proverb that says, “To leave is to die a little.” But we know that the alternative is worse: to never leave is to be dead already. It was T.S. Eliot who said it best. In fact, he put this whole sermon in just four lines of verse:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And to know the place for the first time.

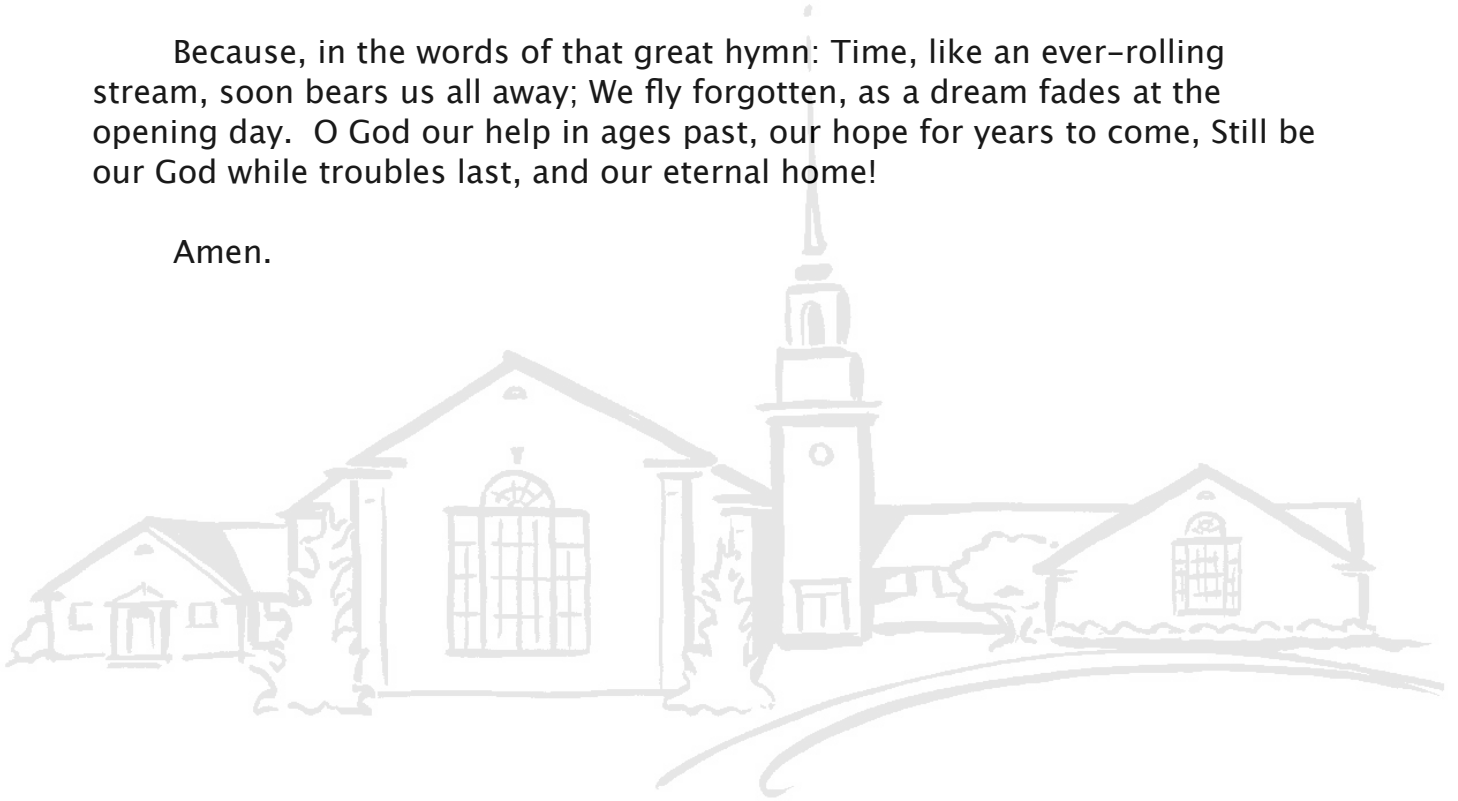
I cannot wait to welcome home my beloved from Nicaragua this evening. And to hear the stories of the painting of the bakery, which is very close to opening — covered now with beautiful murals that are a visible sign of our friendship and our love for the people of Nicaragua.

I give thanks every day for this remarkable church and her remarkable people. We travel on the good ship Mayflower, and we will pitch our sails to

catch the wind, so that we can be on our way to a future that God has in mind. To do this, we will love for the sake of love itself, and plant trees under whose branches we will never sit.

Because, in the words of that great hymn: Time, like an ever-rolling stream, soon bears us all away; We fly forgotten, as a dream fades at the opening day. O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, Still be our God while troubles last, and our eternal home!

Amen.



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