

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, October 6, 2024

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As we continue in our worship this day and as we prepare our hearts to hear the reading and proclamation of God's word, I invite you to join me in a word of prayer. Let's pray together.

Gracious Spirit, meet us here, meet us here with the power of your transformation. Meet us here with the power of your love. Meet us here with the power of your calling. Open us to hear your word read and proclaimed this day, and in our hearing transform our lives that we might respond to your work within them and around your good creation. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We have our final sermon in our four-week sermon series that we've entitled Behind the Bulletin. We've gone through the four movements of our worship service. If you're visiting with us or if you just haven't paid attention, we have four bold centered headings in our bulletin, and we've spent the last three weeks going through. Gather in God's Name, the first movement of worship, then Proclaim God's Word, then Respond to God's Word, and our final movement that we'll talk about this morning, we'll explore together, is Send in God's Spirit. So we believe that this order of worship that is called our liturgy, we believe that...we believe its original translation from the Greek which would be, it means the work of the people. We believe that every time we gather we are doing work together, and this morning we conclude with figuring out what it is that God is calling us, what the work is that God is calling us to as we leave this place today and every day. We're going to use Genesis, the 11th chapter and the 12th chapter, to help center our time of worship this morning. A little bit of editing to your bulletin—we're going to read Genesis 11. We're going to start in verse 31. We're going to go through verse 8 of chapter 12, okay. So let us listen together to God's word to each of us and to the church.

*Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were two hundred five years, and Terah died in Haran. 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 into 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.*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

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A bit of context that precedes the scripture that we just read this morning. We hear of Abram's father, the one who we will soon call Abraham. His father is Terah, and this father of his has had an experience of the Lord before we get to the text that we just read. The experience of the Lord was something like this. God appears to Abram's father and says, "You should go to the land of Canaan. I am calling you there. Gather up all your people and make the journey." This helps to frame for us this idea of sending, because it is going to make us wrestle with a question that's fundamental, we believe, to the Reformed tradition and to our faith journey. It's a question that many churches have wrestled with, and each of us probably wrestles with in a particular way at different times. The question is, fundamentally, is God behind us or is God ahead of us? Is God behind us or is God ahead of us? Is the purpose of God's movement in our life to help us be called back to a perfect past that we are called to reclaim, or is the purpose of God's movement in our lives to pull us toward a better and fuller future for ourselves and indeed for our community? In our Reformed tradition we, as we often do, say that the answer is C. God is not simply behind us, but God was present in our past. God is not only ahead of us. God is also present with us in where we find ourselves this very day. Our Reformed belief is that God uses the stories of the history of our people and of, indeed, of all creation to help shape us for the next thing that God is drawing us into. We do not believe that our purpose as a church is to try to reclaim a church that existed a couple of thousand years ago. We believe that the purpose of the Church of Jesus Christ is to create the community that God is calling us to be—one that is new and hopeful and full. It's important for us to sit with that fundamental question of where God is located in our lives and in the world, because that is really the question that Terah and Abram's family are having to wrestle with. God appears to Abram's father and says there is a place I am calling you to. They give you the geography of this land. We have the homeland of Ur or of the Chaldeans. If we were to put that on a compass, we would put it at due east. Okay this is hard. East is over here, okay, it's due east, all right. If we were to put Canaan on that same compass, Canaan would be due west. If we were to follow the path that the crow flies, it's a pretty straight journey, straight from the east to the west. In order for Abram's father to be faithful, all he has to do is grab his family and go due west, and he will arrive at the location God has called him. However, between Ur and Canaan is a great desert. It's a desert that would take much less time to travel through if you could carry enough water to make the journey and not die. So, being a well seasoned traveler, Terah decides on another path, one that doesn't go from due east to due west, but indeed goes due north. It's a little confusing because we not only have Lot's son who is named Haran, but we also have a town named Haran that's also due north. So Abram's father gathers up everyone and begins the journey. This journey that goes due north follows along the rivers. They will not be parched on their journey, or at least he doesn't think they will. They will have places to gather water along the way. Those rivers will lead them, really, all the way over to Canaan, and that is what is supposed to happen. He is going to follow along the rivers and make his way along with his family to the place that God has called him to go, except something else happens. Scripture tells us that along that journey, when they get to the place of Haran, they're about halfway to the place God is calling them. What happens? They stop. And they don't just stop for an overnight or even a week to rest. They get halfway to where God is calling them, and they put roots down. Later we'll hear about all that Abram has to collect in order to keep going on the journey. What that

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tells us, what that should signal to us, is that they were there a while. That became their home. Not the place to which God was calling them, but the place that was about halfway there. Terah in Hebrew means delay. Haran in Hebrew means parched. Scripture tells us that Terah died in Haran. He got halfway to where God wanted him and his family to go, and he decided that was far enough. And then it turns out that that was a place where he would die. And when I read this story, it's a convicting one. And maybe, like me, you've had an experience of having a sense that you were being called from a place. It might be a job, it might be a relationship, it might be a place where you are serving. You get the experience of knowing that you're being called away from that place. Let's call it Ur. You're being called away from that place. Maybe it's a geographical place, but it also very well could be a mental place, a spiritual place. You're being called away from that place. You're being called to something. Let's call it the land of Canaan, and you don't know what it looks like, but you know that it's not where you currently are. And maybe you're faithful enough to start the journey, but somewhere along the way you tire out, you get parched; and so you'd rather stop somewhere short of where God is calling you to be. It's easy to do it. It's easy to have the early energy of knowing that you are to move from where you currently are to somewhere new. It's hard to follow all the way through. This is a story about a group of people who make it halfway to where God's calling them, and they decide it's far enough; and it turns out to kill them. It turns out there isn't life in that halfway place. But it's not just a story about that. It's also a story about a God who sees this happen, and when they have experienced a death amongst them, returns and says, "Abram," and the subtext is 'I tried this with your father. He got you halfway here.' "Abram get your wife Sarah and all your possessions and this community that you've collected here over time, and get up and continue the journey to the place that I'm actually calling you. Where you are right now is not going to be life-giving for you, and it's not going to enable you to be a blessing that I intend for you to be, a blessing not simply to your nuclear family but indeed to the whole world. Where you are is not where I...where you are currently is not where I intend for you to be. There is something more."

Maybe, this morning you know the place that has become barren for you. Might be a spiritual place, it might be a relationship, it might be vocational. Maybe you know the place that used to feel fertile. It worked for a while, and it's not that place anymore. This story is not simply about people who stop half way. It's also about a God who comes and says, "I have something more in store for you, more in mind for you. You're halfway there, and here's what I'll do for you. I'll make a way for you to go from that place that is barren into a place that is verdant and fertile and good. And I'm going to take you to that place, not just for you but so that you can be a blessing for the entire world."

We have talked for the last four weeks about the work that we do as we worship God together. What this story reminds us of is that it is not work that is simply for our own edification or even for God's glory in this stone place. The work that we do here is practice. It is repetition. It is preparation for the work that God is calling us to out there.

Here's what I don't know. I don't know what your Canaan is. I'm not sure the next place that God is calling you to go. What I do know is that there is a place that is being prepared, that you,

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uniquely, can be a blessing in. But what is asked of us is a willingness, an openness when we hear the voice of God calling us, to say, "I'll go. I'll pick up from this place that is comfortable. I'll believe for a time that it is not going to be a place that gives me life any longer, and I'm going to move." And it's going to take a whole lot. Abram was 75 years old when he picked up and moved. He took his wife. They still hadn't had any children. They picked up and they moved. I don't know what your Canaan is, but I do believe the testimony of scripture—that there is a place that God is calling you, that if you are unafraid to make the entire journey will be a blessing to you; and you, in turn, will be a blessing to the whole world. When we talk about being sent, what we talk about is having the courage and the belief that the Holy Spirit is walking with us into the world, that there is something we are being called to that's beyond this place. I wonder if we...if we might not stop halfway, if we might be willing to make the entire journey and see what God has in store for us there. It's a courageous decision. It's a hopeful decision, but I think it's also a decision that is pregnant with all the possibilities of the Divine, all that can be found in promise, all that can be located in Canaan, all that God can accomplish in and through you as you are sent from this place. Lord knows we are needed, not here only, but there.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.