

Time to Go

A Sermon on Genesis 12:1-4a & John 3:1-17

A Sermon Preached in Duke Chapel by Dr. Norman Wirzba on March 16, 2014

Odysseus is among the greatest of heroes in western literature, and for good reasons. He was smart, even cunning, and he exhibited bravery and strength that left most other men in the dust. He must have been a looker too. Shipwrecked and abandoned, beaten up and bruised, beautiful women could not stay away from him. Even so, he was dedicated to his wife Penelope, and determined to make his way home to Ithaca. Nothing, not even the Greek gods, could match his determination or put a stop to his plans. In a battle between James Bond and Odysseus, even with the help of MI6, Q, and Miss Money Penny, I think Odysseus would win!

One of the reasons Odysseus is so compelling is because his life is such an adventure. Imagine being part of the group that thought up the idea to build the massive Trojan Horse to sneak inside Troy's city walls. Imagine the pride and glory he must have felt when the battle was won. Now, I'll admit that a 10-year, post-war detour and delay trying to make it home may not have been preferable, but think of the escapades: he outwits and overcomes the giant, man-eating Cyclopes Polyphemus by getting him drunk, convincing him that Odysseus's name is "Nobody" (as you may remember, this is a key strategic move because when Odysseus stabs him in the eye Polyphemus shouts "Nobody has hurt me!"), and then escapes his confinement by being tied to the underbelly of a sheep; he manages (with the help of Hermes) to resist the powers of the witch-goddess Circe, who turns some of his men into swine; he skirts the land of the Sirens, even as he gets to listen to the enchanting music that brings everyone else to their deaths; and he sails through the twin terrors of the six-headed monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. All around him ships are going down and being destroyed and men are drowning or being eaten. Makes me wonder if he had a life insurance policy!

When Odysseus finally does make it home he knows that his work is hardly finished. 108 young suitors have taken up residence in his house. They are slowly eating away at his wealth, each determined that they will be the one to replace Odysseus in his marital bed. Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus reconnects with his son Telemachus before returning home. The suitors ridicule the beggar-man, unaware that they are about to meet their doom. Under the guidance of the goddess Athena, Penelope challenges the suitors to a contest: whoever can string Odysseus's mighty bow and shoot an arrow through 12 axe-heads will win her hand. Each suitor tries and fails. They can't even muster the strength to string the bow. But to the great surprise of most everyone there, Odysseus easily strings the bow and makes the shot. Then in a blaze of action that has obviously inspired many Hollywood movies, Odysseus, with the help of his son and cowherd and swineherd—don't ever underestimate a cowherd or swineherd!—disposes of every last suitor. Finally able to reveal himself to Penelope, husband and wife are reunited. Penelope exclaims, "the kind powers have brought you home at last."

By most any account, Odysseus's is an amazing story. Part of its power stems from the promise of home. Odysseus will do anything to get home. Beaten, shipwrecked, marooned, or despondent, Odysseus keeps on going because he clings to the hope that one day he will reach his beloved Ithaca. He endures deprivation and the threat of death because he remembers Penelope and his marital bed, a bed he himself constructed from an olive tree with roots sunk deep into the ground. Home is the haven that finally brings his adventures to fulfillment and his wanderings to rest. Home is the place where he can fully assert himself as the master of his world and the lord of his life. What would Odysseus have done if he knew he had no home to go to, no privileged place from which to assert and develop himself? Would he have had the strength or resolve to go out into the world if he knew he had no home address, no place of security and familiarity to which he could return?

When we first meet Abraham in the Bible, he is Abram, the son of Terah, living in the land of Ur, close to the Persian Gulf. But Ur is not destined to be his home. The Lord God says 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." Unlike Odysseus, the ultimate goal for Abraham is not to be at home. The shocking thing is that for him to be blessed and be a blessing to others, he must leave his home. He can't stay. He has to depart into the unknown. Nor can he hope or long to return. Talk about an identity-shattering event! Who is Abram going to be, now that he is no longer master of the world

he has built for himself and his family? God simply asks him to go. And he does! “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him...” He was 75 years old.

To be sure, Abram would have his fair share of adventures. With his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot he departed from Haran to find the Promised Land. But famine afflicts the land. Rather than return home to the Persian Gulf, he departs with Sarai for Egypt: the opposite direction. Now Sarai is a beautiful woman, and Abram is afraid that if the Egyptians learn they are married he will be killed off. So Abram tells Sarai to tell everyone that she is his sister. It doesn't take long for Sarai to catch the attention of the Pharaoh and to be taken into his household. Soon after, plagues afflict Pharaoh's house. He may be Pharaoh, and thus god of Egypt, but it is still wrong to take someone else's wife as your own. Pharaoh rebukes Abram for his dishonesty and then sends him on his way. A narrow and providential escape!

Abram heads north to the region of the Negeb. At this point God's promise of blessing is not looking too bad, because Abram and Lot have flocks and herds so large that they need to split up to access more land. But it's not entirely smooth sailing because not long after their separation, Abram has to assemble a guerrilla team of fighters to go rescue Lot from his captors in the north country. Admittedly, Abram faces no giant Cyclopes or six-headed monster to battle, but surely there is enough excitement in this rescue mission to make for some really good stories for the grandkids.

The problem, however, is that there are no grandkids on the horizon, not even a legitimate heir. Abraham and Sarah are old. They are far from home. The promise that prompted them to leave home seems to have been a joke without a son to carry on the family line. But God does not forget them. In their old age he provides for them a son Isaac. The surprise was great, but so too was the joy. Now they could finally be a family and a home. But God comes calling again, this time telling Abraham to leave his home with his son Isaac and then sacrifice him on a mountain in the land of Moriah. Having children of my own, I can't imagine the terror of that visit from God. Abraham can't stay within the comfort and joy of his home. He can't rest easy in the knowledge that he is now in control of his world. When God comes to Abraham, it is time to go. And he does.

How are Abraham and Sarah able to do it? How are they able to go whenever God comes to call? Unlike Odysseus, who can frame his exploits as an exciting journey to and defense of home, Abraham seems to have given up the hope that what matters most is the comfort and safety and familiarity of home. As the Bible presents him, Abraham and Sarah live by faith in God. They trust that the place God directs them to, even if it is an unknown or terrifying place, is the place they most need to be. The story of Sarah and Abraham teaches that the place of blessing is to be found by departing into the unknown.

What's it like to depart and know that you will never return home? What's it like to go and not know your destination? What are you prepared to risk, what fears are you willing to face, to go?

The Bible is full of stories of people who, when asked by God, go. Their going is not always a physical departure to a new address. The “unknown land” God calls people to can be a new task, a new neighborhood, even a new group of friends. As scripture shows, sometimes people respond with resistance, or worry, or suspicion, but the mark of faithfulness is that people respond by going. God appears to Moses in a burning bush and says, go to Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go. Moses is doubtful, but he goes. God instructs Joshua and the Israelites to go into the Promised Land. The people are fearful of the residents in the land, but they go. Ruth gives up her homeland and her people so that she can remain faithful to her mother-in-law Naomi! She says, “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” (Ruth 1:16) God comes to Jeremiah and tells him to “go to all to whom I send you.” (Jeremiah 1:7) Jeremiah does not trust himself. He thinks himself incompetent and unprepared, but he goes.

Shift, now, to the New Testament and think of young Mary's willingness to enter the unknown, even unimaginable, territory of unmarried pregnancy! Without her willingness to listen to the angel Gabriel and her trust in the power of the Holy Spirit—“Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38)—would we even have the gospel as we know it? In the gospels, Jesus approaches people like Matthew and Levi, tax collectors, and says leave the world you know and follow me. They go. Jesus is in a fishing boat with Simon and James and John, and then tells them to leave their boats so they can follow him and become fishers of people. Clearly frightened by the prospect, they nonetheless leave everything and go. Saul is

busy persecuting Christians when God comes to him and blinds him, and then instructs him to go to Damascus. Meanwhile there is a disciple in Damascus named Ananias who is instructed by God to go to Saul so that his blindness can be healed. Ananias is scared because he knows of Saul's violent past. But think, if neither Saul nor Ananias had followed God's call to go, would the gospel have made its way to the Gentiles and thus also to us? Again and again scripture presents us with people who follow God by leaving the places that are familiar and comfortable. Entering the unknown seems to be a precondition for receiving and being a blessing to others.

In today's gospel lesson Jesus tells Nicodemus that to enter into the Kingdom of God he must first be "born from above" and "born of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8). This is a strange way of speaking. What sort of place is the Kingdom of God, and why is it that you can only get there by means of another birth? Rather awkwardly, perhaps thinking about the biology or mechanics of it all, Nicodemus asks, how can a grown person be born again? Must they first re-enter their mother's womb and make the journey through the birth canal again? A fairly terrifying prospect, I think, even for the doctors at Duke Hospital! How, exactly, would that work?

Nicodemus is being called into a life of faith. He is being asked to be "born again," which means he is being asked to leave what he knows and the womb-like home he has built for himself—all the familiarity and security and comfort that have given meaning to his life—and trust the Holy Spirit that, like a wind, blows wherever it wills, all so that he can enter a new place of blessing called the Kingdom of God. We are left to wonder if his, or our, refusal to go is not also at the same time a refusal to love. The question is whether or not he will go. The question is whether or not he will trust God to be his guide and companion in the ways of love.

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus alerts us to a profound truth about human existence. For life to flourish, people must first leave the safety and warmth and nurture of the mother's womb. You can't stay. Think what that would do to the poor mother! That seems obvious, but then upon further reflection we may discover that we spend a lot of time as adults creating surrogate wombs that protect us from the harsh realities of the world. I don't know about you, but when I seriously face my own or the world's pain, or the suffering of the people I love, I want to get into a fetal position and shut everything out. I want to escape to a womb-like place where I can be safe and where I can be nurtured, never to be hurt again. And then along comes Jesus telling us we need to be born again, telling us we need to leave our places of presumed safety.

This is hard. Sometimes it's *really* hard. If you have been deeply hurt by others, or feel yourself betrayed, why would you want to risk going out again? If you have offered love to another and been rejected, why offer love again? If you have done your best and found your best ridiculed by others, or simply ignored, why make the effort again? If you have seen too much suffering, why not give up hope? Isn't it easier to stay put, pack in provisions, lock the doors, and never go out again?

This is why we need to hear the promise of God: God does not call anyone to go anywhere without also committing to go with them every step of the way. Long before the days of Siri and GPS, God showed Abram where to go by being present to him in covenantal relationship. God promises to the Israelites that he will cross the river Jordan before them and that they should have no fear: "Be strong and bold ... because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6). To the prophet Jeremiah God says, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy' ... Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" (Jeremiah 1:6-8).

God does not ever abandon people on the journey of faith. Though there may be plenty of times when we *feel* we have been abandoned, the story of Jesus Christ is that God will be our companion even when we enter the darkest and most terrifying and most lonely places of our world. There is no place we can go that God has not always already promised to go with us. As the Apostle's Creed instructs us, he even descends with us into hell—into all the places of excruciating fear and pain and alienation—so that he can raise us into the newness of life and love that is the Kingdom of God.

I must admit that when I first read the lectionary texts for today, a little groan welled up inside me. I have long been put off by John 3:16 Christianity, the kind of Christianity that says, "If you just believe, everything will be alright. You get to go to heaven!" But this verse is so much deeper. It tells us that God *leaves* heaven by *giving* his son to the world. It tells us that in the person Jesus, God departs from the eternal, triune life of joy so that he can be a blessing to us, heal our heart, nurture our hunger, calm our fear, befriend our loneliness, and reconcile our estrangement. Looking out into a broken and wounded and brutalizing world, it is

as though God says, “It is time to go, time to leave the blessedness of the divine, heavenly life so that all creatures can share in the blessing that our life together is.” Imagine if Jesus had refused to go!

Where are you called by God to go? What unknown territory awaits you? It may not be that you need to move to a new city or a new country. Maybe God is calling you to a new job or neighborhood, a new volunteer opportunity or group of friends. Maybe God is calling you out from the shadows to assume a leadership role that only you can fulfill. How is God calling you to leave business as usual, leave what is comfortable and familiar, so that you can experience and also be a blessing to others?

God’s call to us “to go” is fundamentally God’s call to us to learn to love. It is a call to us to submit to the movement of the Holy Spirit which, like a wind, blows wherever it wills, taking us to places we could not have imagined or dreamed. Sometimes this love calls us to places we don’t want to go because we are afraid of what is there or anxious about the pain we might suffer. Sometimes this love calls us to places that eventually become the sources of our greatest gladness. But how will we know if we don’t go, trusting all the while that the world God calls us into is not a world God wants to condemn, but rather a world that will be saved and reconciled and resurrected into newness of life?

As Christians our home is not the place we build for ourselves, the place where we can be comfortable and secure, knowing that we have done everything we can to be masters of our own fate. Our home is the Kingdom of God, a place that we enter under the steam and companionship of the Holy Spirit of love. In this home, there is no place people will not go to care for another’s need or celebrate another’s success.

Where is God calling you to go? Are you ready to be reborn in the Spirit and then go out into a tough world to love it as Christ does? I don’t know about you, but perhaps, for me, it’s time to stop making excuses. It’s time to welcome the love that casts out fear. It’s time to join with God in God’s own, outbound journey to bring healing and delight to the many places of the world’s loneliness and pain. It’s “time to go.”