

**Genesis 12:1-9**

**word count: 1757**

The “Great Adventure” is something people think about at some point in their lives, and often at different times of life—what will that great journey look like when I finally embark upon it? Where will it lead me? Joseph Campbell writes about how much of great literature points to what he calls, “the Hero’s Journey,” because it strikes such a great chord with the yearning in the human spirit for soul-changing adventure that takes you far from “here” to the place where all things will be made new, including the hero of the journey. The journey itself is fraught with change and danger.

The graduation ceremonies all around us are in themselves a kind of “send-off” for the great adventures that lie ahead for those who have reached this particular portal.

My first great adventure happened when I was twenty-two, shortly after graduating from Syracuse University. I had moved home with my parents the previous year to work and save some money in order to move to New York City on my own.

We lived in Grover Cleveland’s childhood home in the center of a bucolic little village from the early 1800’s in upstate New York. The house had been the parsonage for the church up the street, as Cleveland’s father was a Presbyterian minister. The house had two front doors— one up a flight of stairs for the pastor’s family, and another that lead to the small sanctuary downstairs when they could not heat the church building in winter. I looked out the same small square window in my bedroom as President Cleveland had as a child, and could see the same church spire and hear the same bell toll the hour and announce the fact that for one more period of sixty minutes nothing had happened in the Village of Fayetteville and nothing was likely to either, by the time the bell struck again.

And so, on a hot August night in 1977, my friend Frank pulled up in his old, battered van that said, “Hull Heating and Plumbing” on the side, and helped me load up. My parents came out to see me off. My father gave me \$200 and the advice and assurance that I was now on my own, and it was up to me to use my wits and perseverance to make of my life all I desired it to be—probably the best advice a father could give. Then, sometime after midnight, we were off.

At dawn, the George Washington Bridge shone across the waters of the Hudson River, and the buildings and the city itself were taller than I had remembered. We arrived in front of the brownstone on W. 86<sup>th</sup> St. where I had found an apartment, and started unloading things up five flights. Frank was a good friend to help me get that sofa bed up those 76 stairs in August to an apartment with no air-conditioning under a black tar roof. After trying to nap in that heat, we gave up, went to a fast-food joint on Broadway, and lingered in the cool air inside, and afterwards, Frank said it was time for him to go.

I was alone in a new land, on my own with \$200 in my pocket and a mixture of fear and excitement in my heart. Even *with* a roommate, how on earth could anyone pay \$250 a month for a one-bedroom brownstone apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan? It was crazy. It was a journey. Fraught with perils and happy with new friends, it is where I staked my claim to my own life in my own new terra firma.

Perhaps you can remember such a watershed moment in your own life. When did you know that everything would change? When was it that you were led from your own country and your kindred and your father’s and mother’s house to a new place where your life would eventually open up, pointing the way towards where you are now? Has it happened more than once? Did you know it was happening at the time? I remember mine—the church bell pealing

portents instead of the hour; something was at last happening, and the warning from Frank not to put my feet down in the center floor of the passenger side, where you could see bits of my parents' driveway through the rusted floorboards as we pulled out backwards to meet the forward leading road. Maybe you weren't twenty-two; perhaps you were a bit older (or younger) when you were led to something new that would change everything.

It happened quite late for Abram and Sarah. In the story from Genesis, we have two people quite along in age, being asked to uproot themselves from everything they knew, and to recognize that there was a new country out there for them that would be theirs, and more than that; would be sacred—a blessing for future generations.

So Abram and Sarah, semi-nomads, set out on their journey southward, with their nephew Lot, their entourage and flocks to the new land. Their age, taken literally, looks extreme, but we should realize that numbers were used somewhat differently when Genesis was written. Their ages should be taken symbolically; we might say that they had reached an age of wisdom.

Abram heard a call to go out and find a land that would be shown to him, and the Book of Genesis tells us that he heard this call from “the Lord.” There was nothing in Abram's scriptural tradition to tell him that he would find himself the caretaker of a new land. Similarly, there were no political, social or religious institutions supporting him in his belief that this new land was awaiting his caretaking. Genesis simply states that God showed him the way. We must assume that this was unexpected and unprecedented.

There is little in the way of undiscovered land today. Recently, in the western-most part of Brazil, a tribe of people was found who have never been exposed to civilization before. One wonders what their world must be like. Surely, we have asked the same question about our own civilization—to what end is it headed unless we take steps to preserve and nurture it? The world's population has increased by more than 50% in the lifetimes of some of us here in this room, while our natural resources are dwindling and our own pollution threaten the well-being of the youngest generation among us. There are the children and grandchildren who come up to the front of the chancel because their parents want them to know more about a God who loves us, and to be with an extended family they can trust.

The new land that we are being led to today must be a revisioned, renewed and respected version of the one in which we already dwell so heavily.

Abram only had this one conversation with God, and we can only hypothesize how that conversation occurred so that Abram would pull up all roots—upset his family, his livelihood, all conventions and every bit of the status quo he knew and understood in the absence of prophetic words from his own scriptural tradition.

Arthur Peacock, writing in, “Theology for a Scientific Age,” says that, “There is now a strong case for re-examining our own Christian theology in the light of the new knowledge derivable from the sciences, since both enterprises purport to be dealing with what they regard as realities. If such an exercise is not continually undertaken, theology will operate in a cultural ghetto quite cut off from most of those in Western cultures who have good grounds for thinking that sciences describes what is going on...Indeed, theology has been most creative and long-lasting when it has responded most positively to the challenges of its times...”

Like Abram, we are now shown a new land—both what it could be and what it might otherwise become if we do not see this land we have been given and recognize it for the blessing it is and the responsibility that it will take for us to pass it on safely for other generations to enjoy its God-given bounty.

We are once again this week too concerned for short-term economic fears and too short-sighted to recognize the long-term costs of ignoring the gift God gave Abram and Sarah in one

great nation, as well as all great nations of the world that deserve clean air and water. The Archbishop of Canterbury recently said, "The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment."

In a 2005 article called, "There is No Tomorrow," Bill Moyers listed his frustrations with all the bad news about the environment. Then he wrote: "I read all this and looked up at the pictures on my desk...pictures of my grandchildren. I see the future looking back at me in those photos and I say, 'Father forgive us, for we know not what we do.' And then I am stopped short by the thought: That's not right. We do know what we are doing. We are stealing their future, betraying their trust, despoiling their world."

Our churches must incorporate a theology of environment. One of the ways we can do this is to continue to proclaim a Gospel that acknowledges and faces the environmental and energy crises head-on with Christ-based hope.

Our own United Church of Christ published a pastoral letter in October on this subject, which states: "Trust in God's grace will be needed in every congregation, combined with a widespread discipleship reduction of consumption and compassionate advocacy for those who are most vulnerable and most in need: the poor, the very young, the elderly, the inhabitants of non-industrial nations, especially in coastal areas. If the UCC, among other Christian churches and other religions do not lead the way toward unprecedented changes and a new way of living that affirms the sharing of God's abundance rather than competition over scarce resources in the coming decades, who will?"

Perhaps like me, you remember where you were when you embarked on a big adventure, your own hero's journey where everything was up for change, and you like Abram, were willing to move to that new land with trust in God and in your ability to accept the challenges of that journey.

So let this be our prayer—a prayer for strength to begin to change what can be changed; patience in the face of what cannot be changed; and wisdom to know the difference.

### ***Sermon Resource:***

Theological Discussion Points on Environment and Energy, compiled by the United Church of Christ Environmental and Energy Task Force, October 2007 [www.ucc.org/earthcare](http://www.ucc.org/earthcare)

## **Scripture for Sunday, June 8, 2008**

### **Genesis 12:1-9**

1 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. 2 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. 3 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." 4 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. 5 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, 6 Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 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. 8 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. 9 And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.