

Sermon – June 11, 2023
“And he got up and followed him”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Genesis 12:1-9 and Matthew 9:9-13

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit. Come as a fresh outpouring on us this day, filling our open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words that they may be a blessing for your people, a blessing that continues our transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning! Welcome to the second Sunday after Pentecost. I discovered as I began to walk in my call into ministry that there was a favorite question that the many review and interview panels I encountered liked to ask candidates coming before them. They would ask, “Which biblical person do you most identify with?” In all of my years of work as an engineer, this particular question never came up and the first time it did, I struggled a bit to find a suitable answer. Think about this for a minute: whom would we pick? The first time I got this question my mind went through a quick list of anyone from the Bible I could recall. Jael was one of the first who came to mind, you know, the woman with the tent peg and hammer. If you don’t know her, you need to look her up and read about her. I was pretty sure she would not be a good answer. Then Esau came to mind. It couldn’t be Esau, could it? I don’t have a lot of hair so I really couldn’t relate to a man described as hairy. Jacob came to mind, but he had a bunch of wives and was known for deceiving those he dealt with. Probably a bad idea. That leaves Laban

out as well. Abraham? No, he was called to leave his home and go to a distant land. Better stay away from him. They might think I want to go to some far-off place. And to be honest, I don't recall who I responded with the first time I was asked, but over time I settled on Nehemiah for his diligence in rebuilding the walls and his work restoring Jerusalem after the exile. Or I will sometimes respond with Peter because he speaks up even if he gets it wrong and Jesus calls him back into a relationship with him. I will leave you to think about which biblical character you relate to best and why. This morning we are going to talk about some of Abram's experience with God. Maybe what we learn this morning will help us see Abram in a different light and begin to relate to him in new ways.

Let me offer a bit of background as context for this morning's reading. In the proceeding chapter of Genesis, chapter 11, we find the account of Babel, the time when humanity strove to make a name for itself by building a tower that reached to heaven, and in response God confused the language of the people and spread them out over the earth. Next is a genealogy that leads us to Abram. Abram is married to Sarai who is barren. The story of God's people seems to have come to an end in the barrenness of Abram's family. We have also arrived at one of the great transition points in the Bible. Since Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we have been seeing in the text the effects of the fall on creation and humanity, ending with the people's desire at Babel to reach up to heaven and make a name for themselves. Now we come to a transition in the story of our ancestors, a moment when God's rescue plan seems to hang in the balance with a barren family, the point where God's plan for humanity's redemption seems at risk. It is a transition between the spread of sin and the movement of God. From this point forward, the biblical story is about God's action through humanity to implement God's plan.

At this transition comes the voice of God, Adonai, who speaks to a man, Abram, whose family is barren, without a child. Abram's call from God is audible. God's voice is heard and does not give an abundance of instructions or explanations. Abram is told to leave his country, kindred, and father's house and go to the land God will show him. There are promises to be given by God to Abram if he will obey God and go. God will make of Abram a great nation. He will bless him, and make his name great. He will curse those who curse Abram—hear that as protection—and in Abram, all of the families of the earth shall be blessed. Let me point out two items we should recall from among many that are present here in God's promises to Abram.

First, Sarai is barren. There is no heir in Abram's family and Sarai is old and beyond the age of childbearing. And second, let me point out that what the people of Babel have tried to do, make a name for themselves or make their name great in the land, God has just promised to do for Abram. In both cases, God is promising to do things for Abram that he cannot do for himself.

Abram's response to God's call is to go. The Hebrew word used here is very close to the idea of fleeing. Its use helps us understand that Abram does not tarry but hurries out of Haran and heads out to the land that Adonai will show him. We need to remember that when Adonai called, Abram went. Abram takes great risk, leaving the security of family around his father's house, and sets out to go to the land of Canaan. We are told that Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran. We are given Abram's age at key points in his story, and we might note that God's call is not for just the young. We should also note that Abram took with him his nephew Lot, his wife Sarai, and all the possessions they had gathered. And don't miss the possibility that Abram takes along Lot as an heir. Think of the risk with packing up our families and setting out on a 500-mile trip to a land another people claims, and we are going to seek to live there in response to God's call. Notice also that Abram goes with no child, but a barren wife. God calls and promises, and Abram obeys.

Notice that Abram completes the trip to the land of Canaan and when he arrives, he does not start buying up property but moves into the land to Shechem, then to Bethel, and then on by stages toward the Negeb. This is the same path that Jacob will travel on his return and the same path Joshua will lead Israel along when they come to take possession of this Promised Land. When Abram arrives in the land, he builds an altar to Adonai. And again, when Abram stops between Bethel and Ai, he builds an altar there and invokes the name of Adonai.

When Abram arrives in the land, God appears to him. Notice this is not another verbal encounter with God, but an appearance of God, a theophany. When God appears, he tells Abram that he will give this land to Abram's offspring, not to Abram. Abram will not possess the land; possession will come later to his offspring. And so Abram lives in the land among the people of Canaan. Abram and a barren Sarai live among the people of Canaan and Abram invokes the name of Adonai. Building altars and invoking the name of Adonai is worship of God by Abram. The idea of invoking the name of God or calling on the name of God is "to turn to the one named as the single referent of life."ⁱ Those who call on the name of God turn to God alone; they set aside all other gods and follow the one true God. We see in Abram's invoking of the name of

God the idea of having no other gods before God. Abram places his trust in God and has faith that God's promises will come forth. Abram has faith in God and God alone.

Let's move now into Matthew chapter 9. Matthew is sitting at his tax booth working as a tax collector. He is one who is considered a sinner and is seen as a traitor by the people and religious leaders of Israel. Jesus walks by, sees Matthew, and says to him, "Follow me." Jesus, God in the flesh who is walking among the people of Israel, sees Matthew and calls him. Jesus calls a sinner to follow him. Matthew's response, like Abram's, is to immediately get up and follow Jesus. He leaves his tax booth and follows Jesus. He leaves behind the barren work of a tax collector to follow God in the flesh into the work of the kingdom of God, following Jesus into the promised land. Jesus sees a man who is sitting in a tax booth collecting money, seeking security through the emptiness of wealth and calls him to follow him. Matthew is not yet sent out by Jesus. First, Matthew will follow Jesus, watch him, learn from him, hear him teach, and see what he does. Later, Matthew and all of Jesus' disciples will be sent by Jesus. Jesus and his disciples and his new follower find their way to Matthew's house for dinner where there are many tax collectors and sinners, and Jesus sits down at the table and eats with them. Jesus sits down among those who are living a barren life in the false security of the world, the world that tells them they are living abundantly, and eats with them. Jesus is among sinners as Abram was among the Canaanites. Jesus eats with sinners. And of course, the religious leaders, the Pharisees, see Jesus sitting with sinners and ask why. Jesus tells them he has come not for the righteous but sinners. Jesus has come to possess the land, to bring the kingdom of God into the land and possess it. Matthew has been called to follow Jesus and he goes.

Now let's move to June 11th in the year of our Lord 2023, today, right here, right now. Jesus sees us and calls us to follow him. We, like Abram and Matthew, need to learn who Jesus is, grow into his image, and be transformed from those who are living barren lives in the false security of the world to those who are truly alive in Christ. The first call we hear from Jesus when he calls Matthews parallels the call of Abram. It is a call for us also to follow Jesus. The first call happens when Jesus sees us and tells us to follow him. When we hear Jesus' call, we have a decision to make. Will we leave our barren lives and trust Jesus to lead us into abundant life? Will we get up from where we are trying to live in the world, clinging to the false security the world claims to give us, the bareness of the world, and follow Jesus? Will we be those who choose to invoke the name of Jesus and follow him and him alone? Will we trust Jesus to lead us

to the promised land and out of the barren land we strive to hold onto, strive to live in? When we hear Jesus' voice speaking into our hearts, we have to decide if we will take the risk and follow him. Let me point out that Abram does not find a home in the land of Canaan. He moves through the land but does not possess it. Possession will come later, as God promised, through a barren wife too old to have a child, through Abram's offspring. Abram does not live to see the possession of the land by his offspring. Notice that Abram does not find security in the land of Canaan but lives among the people of the land, pitching his tent, building altars, and worshiping the one God in their midst. Yet God is faithful and brings Israel to the Promised Land. And if you know the story, you know that Israel's journey to the Promised Land is a journey through suffering. Our journey today into the kingdom of God comes through suffering, suffering by Jesus, who suffered and died so that we might be reconciled to God. God is faithful today and will bring all people who will follow Jesus into the kingdom of God, the inbreaking kingdom, the land of the new Israel, the promised land. Notice that we are also like Abram in that we do not get to see the possession of the land—the total inbreaking of the kingdom of God, but we also must live in the world among those who see our lives as not in harmony with the false promise of abundant living. We are to be like Jesus and eat with sinners and in doing so, introduce them to the love of God that now lives in our hearts. We are to live among them, inviting them to take the risk and come out of a barren life into a life of following Jesus into abundant life. If we hear the voice of Jesus calling us to follow him, then let me encourage us today to get up and come and surrender our barren life and exchange it for abundant life in Christ. If we look in our hearts to find Jesus and instead find doubt that leaves us wondering if we are following Jesus, then get up and come during the hymn and let's pray that we will follow Jesus completely with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind. If we are struggling with taking the risk to get up and follow Jesus, then come and let's pray for a more complete surrender to follow Christ. Come during the closing hymn as you are led.

Pray with me: Lord Jesus, call us out of the barren life into the abundant life. Jesus, speak our name, call us to follow you, and give us the courage to risk everything and follow you. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

ⁱ Brueggemann, Walter; Brueggemann, Walter. Genesis (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching) (p. 124). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.