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Psalm 121 & Genesis 12: 1-4

The Path to Repair and Restoration: Trust in God's Path

Our second scripture is from the book of Genesis chapter 12, a pivot point in the book. The first eleven chapters in Genesis speak to the universal – God at work in the whole of creation. Chapter 11 opens with the story of the Tower of Babel and ends with the shift to a specific family with the genealogy of the descendants of Noah, through his son Shem. In this lineage is Terah the father of Abram, who will later be named Abraham. Terah took his son Abram and his daughter-in-law Sarai and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, about 500 miles away. When they came to Haran, they settled there. We pick up Abram's story here as God calls him from this land into a unknown future. Hear now these words of promise and faithfulness from Genesis 12:1-4.

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. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

One of my most prized possessions is a 1962 Bill Mazeroski baseball card. Mazeroski died this past week at the age of 89. Now for those of you who are not up on your mid-20th century Pittsburgh Pirate baseball trivia, Mazeroski was a second baseman, who hit, according to his NY Times obituary "the most famous — and surely the most decisive — home run in World Series history, a blast in the bottom of the ninth inning of the seventh game in 1960 that gave the upstart, overmatched Pittsburgh Pirates a thrilling victory over the New York Yankees."¹ The game had been tied 9-9 and it remains the only walk-off home run to clinch a World Series championship in Game 7. Sorry to all of you Yankee fans out there!

What was even more remarkable than his homerun - truly a spectacular feat for a player more known for his defensive prowess than his offensive power - was the path he took to get to home plate for the winning score. His obituary describes it this way: "When Mazeroski hit the ball, he wasn't sure it would clear the ivy-covered left field fence 406 feet away, so he galloped toward first base. Only when he was halfway to second did he see the umpire, with a circular wave of a hand, signaling that it had. By the time he reached the bag, the Pirates

¹David Margolick. Bill Mazeroski, 89, Whose 9th-Inning Blast Made Pirates Champs, Is Dead. *NY Times*, February 21, 2026 <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/21/sports/baseball/bill-mazeroski-dead.html>

second baseman began waving his cap wildly. Between second and third, Mazerowski jumped for joy, spreading out both arms as if doing the breast stroke. As he rounded third, he saw delirious Pittsburgh fans, whose team had not won a championship in 35 years, jump onto the field to greet him, forcing Mazerowski to thread his way to home plate.”

I wasn't born yet when this great feat happened, but it was imprinted in my brain through countless recollections by my grandfather, who took me to Pirates games every summer when I visited. He would tell me how he never gave up trust that the Pirates would pull it out – somehow, somehow, even when it looked like there was no hope – tied score, bottom of the ninth, game 7 against the powerful Yankees, my grandfather had trust that his Pittsburgh Pirates would pull it out. Now I'm not sure how much God had to do with this homerun, but I do recognize what trust in something bigger than yourself can do for an individual and for a community. This is where Abram and Sarai find themselves this morning and this is where generations of people who have recited and sung Psalm 121 as they traveled during difficult circumstances find themselves.

Psalm 121, that you just heard Ben read, is known as a “Song of Ascent.” The city of Jerusalem is situated on a hill and as pilgrims were traveling to Jerusalem for one of the major festivals, they traditionally sang these songs on the “ascent” or the uphill road to the city. It served as a reassurance of God's constant protection. Psalm 121 is a psalm of deep trust in God's faithfulness as travelers embarked on what could be a dangerous journey. The psalm highlights God as a “keeper” who never sleeps, watching over one's life “from this time forth and forevermore.” The Hebrew root for the word “keep” or “keeper” is broad and deep in meaning. It can refer to observing and watching out for someone as a protector, as well as practices like storing up memories, keeping the sabbath, the commandments, covenants and festival obligations.² As travelers were walking the path to Jerusalem in the heat of the sun, God was their shade. In the night, when they were susceptible to wild animals and thieves, God was their moon light. You can imagine the pilgrims singing about their trust in God to keep them safe, as they were traveling to keep the commandments and festival commitments.

The story of Abram and Sarai is also one of trust in God's path. For Abram, God's promise was unimaginable – that he and his wife Sarai, old in age with no children, would have descendants as numerable as the stars – that these descendants would occupy the lands as far and wide as Abram could see. And yet God's promise was brought to fullness and fruition.

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

² Brown-Driver-Briggs Abridged Hebrew Lexicon with Strong's: Based on A Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament. Accessed through *Accordance Bible Software*. Version 13.3.4; OakTree Software; October 2022.

your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” These are definitely some vague instructions from the Lord – “go from your country to the land I will show you.” Talk about stepping out in trust on an unknown path.

Go from your country...go from your home, the place you know and are known and strike out into an unknown land. And then keep going into another unknown land. Author Bruce Feiler describes Abraham (and I am going to call him Abraham since that is the name he will be soon be given by the Lord) as “the perpetual stranger in the strange land, the outsider who longs to be the insider, the landless who longs for land...”³

Our scripture passage this morning is known as the “Call of Abraham.” God calls Abraham and Abraham responds by putting his trust in God. Feiler describes this call as not a call to a relationship of belonging, but rather a call of a relationship to strangeness. He says, “We are all aliens. Abraham is blessed – the nations of the world are blessed – because he had the courage to go to another place and make himself a stranger. Because believe me, at some point in our lives, all of us have to go to another place, too, and make *ourselves* strangers.”⁴

I find that these words pull at my heart. At some point we all have to go to another place and make ourselves strangers. Whether it is a new school or a new church or a new job; whether it is across town or across the country or across the world, we have to have the courage to make ourselves to be strangers. For Abraham the experience of being a stranger in a strange land changed him. It opened him up to new possibilities, to share the gift of hospitality. Abraham’s trust in God, his stepping out in faith not only transformed him, it transformed the world. Abraham became the father of the three monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

And I find that these words pull at my heart in a more existential way. Sometimes we find ourselves as strangers in our own country – in our own world – in our own community. We look around at the values and practices we see on display, greed and self-promotion, deceit and selfishness, fear of others who are different than we are in some way, who like Abraham and Sarah, have traveled long distances as God has called them to trust. We look around our own country and don’t recognize it and we feel like a stranger. Feiler’s comment that at some point in our lives, all of us have to go to another place, too, and make *ourselves* strangers seem to me an important part of our Lenten narrative, as we are on a path to repair and restoration. Because throughout history and into our present day, there are countless stories of people who have been transformed by their experience of being a stranger.

One of the Lenten devotionals I read this week started off with this provocative statement: “There’s a version of Lent that makes you a worse person. Not because the practices are bad. Not because prayer, fasting, and reflection are wrong. But because it’s entirely possible

³Bruce Feiler. *Abraham. A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. William Morrow Paperbacks. 2005, p21.

⁴ *ibid*, p52-53.

to spend forty days focused on your own spiritual refinement while the world outside your prayer closet continues to burn—and to come out the other side feeling better about yourself.”⁵ The reflection went on to share how we have turned Lent into a self-improvement project that can focus so much on our interior life that something essential gets lost. Our words of preparation in the bulletin from church historian Kate Bowler echo a similar notion... “Lent is not designed to fix us. It’s a season that tells the truth about what it means to be human—finite, dependent, unfinished. Lent is a recalibration. It asks us to be honest. About our exhaustion. About our fear. About the disappointments we carry quietly. About the ache we keep trying to outgrow, numb, or spiritualize away.”⁶

The ache we have in our hearts for our crumbling nation, a nation now at war, is real. Lent asks us to be honest about that ache. And Lent asks us to be reflective about what we will do with this ache. Will we seek to sooth ourselves or will we seek to trust that God has called us to a path of transformation? This path includes our witness and our actions – the steps we take on the path to repair and restoration. Through the trust of Abraham and Sarah, God’s promise was brought to fullness and fruition. Like Abraham and Sarah, we live with this high and holy hope that what God has done, God will continue to do. That God will continue to shape us into a community of the beloved, a community where we care for neighbors whether they are sitting in the pew next to us or are a refugee from Afghanistan or the Congo or Ukraine; a community where we stand up to injustice and nurture our young and bear witness to the resurrection, singing with tears and in joy.

On Thursday, our PCO Out on the Town event was an opportunity to hear Mary Ann and China Pettway from Gee’s Bend, Alabama share about the quilts created by a remarkable group of women, and a few men. Gee’s Bend is a small town southwest of Selma, isolated as a consequence of geography. The residents are descendants of the enslaved people who worked the cotton plantation established in the early 1800’s by Joseph Gee. During the talk, Mary Ann remarked how their quilts began with pieces of fabric that would otherwise be thrown away. These pieces were shaped and molded in unique patterns that had never been seen before, creating a beautiful new creation. She also shared that stitching a quilt requires sewing through all three layers – the backing, the batting and the fabric. She described this process as stitching through the past, the present and the future – trusting God to reveal a unique and beautiful design. This is the path we are on this Lenten season, a path of trust in God’s call in our lives as we seek ways to be vehicles of a new creation fashioned out the discarded and scattered remnants strewn about. I invite you to this journey of trust and faith, a journey that may challenge you and that may ask more than you think you can do, yet nevertheless, a journey where you will be fed by the love and grace of God and neighbor.

⁵ Ministry Matters. Your Lenten discipline might be the problem. February 19, 2026. Online at: https://ministrymatters.com/2026-02-19_your_lenten_discipline_might_be_the_problem/

⁶ Kate Bowler. The ache is not going away. February 18, 2026. Online at <https://katebowler.substack.com/p/the-ache-is-not-going-away>