

The Reverend John E. McGinn, Rector  
Saint John's Episcopal Church  
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

March 20, 2011  
Second Sunday in Lent

Today's sermon is taken from the book of Genesis, chapter 12, verses 1-4a.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

Celebrating the national holiday, St. Patrick's Day, the other day was a good time for all. I came across a wonderful story that I want to share with you this morning. There was this article about two Irishmen who set up a company in order to sell dirt, genuine Irish dirt, to Americans. The two men say that the demand for this official Irish dirt has been phenomenal. They sold one million dollars worth of their product in a very short time. One elderly New York businessman placed a one-hundred-thousand-dollar order so he could be fully buried in genuine Irish soil. Obviously that gentleman was very, very homesick. His body was in the United States but his heart was still in his homeland. That happens to many people who are transplanted to another culture. You miss the sights and sounds and perhaps even the dirt of home.

When I returned from Viet Nam in 1972, as the plane landed in Oakland, California, and we were disembarking the plane, I can remember very vividly falling on the ground prostrate and kissing -- kissing -- the ground, the dirt. That sounds far-fetched to many of us, but there's something very special about home. We ought to describe our country as being very mobile, but did you realize that fifty percent of Americans live within fifty miles of their birthplace. Most people, given a choice, like to stay anchored close to home. Not everybody, of course, but most people are more comfortable in familiar surroundings.

For many of us home gives us a sense of identity. People move to this country, but at heart they still remain Italian or Irish or Japanese or Scottish or African. They move to move to another state but they are still Hoosiers or Gators or Yanks or Nutmeggers or New Yorkers or Down Easters. This is why sports teams have such a following. People define themselves as Southern California Trojans or Tennessee Volunteers or UConn Huskies or UMass Minutemen or Northeastern Huskies or Yale Bulldogs. This explains why people can be so fanatical about their sports team; that is part of who they are.

The Associated Press carried an article about a dentist in North Canton, Ohio, who came up with a way for sports fans to show off their loyalty for their home team. When he fixes patients with a porcelain crown, they can have it decorated with their favorite athletic team logo. Imagine that -- you could have the Red Sox on your crown -- or the

Yankees or the Patriots or the Celtics, or you might have one on the inside back for the Bruins at the moment, but you could have that logo put in there.

Many people get homesick when they are far from home. Sir Walter Scott said:

“Breathes there the man with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said,  
‘This is my own, my native land!’  
Whose heart hath ne’er within him burn’d  
As home his footsteps he hath turn’d.  
From wandering on a foreign strand.”

In the Old Testament for this morning in the book of Genesis is about a couple who were called by God to be home. Their names were Abram and Sarah. We know them, of course, as Abraham and Sarah. More than seventeen hundred years before the time of Jesus, God came to Abram and gave him a command and a promise. “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.”

Abram was a wealthy landowner living in Ur in Mesopotamia in the north of what is now Iraq. He had family and friends and an honored place in the community. This was no small demand that God was laying on Abram. It certainly could not have been easy for Sarah, his wife, either.

Sometimes moving is more difficult for the spouse or for the children than it is for the one who has been called to leave to go to a new place. A Philadelphia school teacher tells about a fourth grader who came to her and said, “Miss, I won’t be coming back to this school anymore. I don’t know where I am going, but I won’t be coming back here. This is my dolly, and I’m going to give her to you because I know you will give her a wonderful home.” Children sometimes understand things in a way that adults never can. It’s not an easy thing to leave home. “Home is where the heart is,” says the old platitude, and it’s true.

God to Abram to leave his home. That must have been difficult for both Abram and Sarah. However, God spoke and Abram obeyed. It is one of the most important statements, I think, in all of sacred scripture. So Abram went as the Lord had told him. It would be impossible to overstate the significance of Abram’s step of faith or the subsequent history of the world. Three great world religions -- Judaism, Christianity and Islam -- traced their roots back to Abram’s act of obedience. So Abram went as the Lord had told him. This, by the way, is what faith is; God speaks, we obey. We don’t say, “I’ve got to bury my father.” We don’t say, “I can’t afford it.” We don’t say, “My friends in Sunday School won’t approve.” God speaks, and we obey. Faith is much more than belief. Jesus said even the demons believe. Faith is action. Faith is obedience

to God.

When Hitler and the Nazi party took control of Germany in the 1930s, many German Christians refused to cooperate. One of the most famous of those was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*. He could have been given, he **was** given, at least in the mail, a chance to become a full professor at Union Theological Seminary, but he chose to stay in his homeland to try to fight the Nazis from within, and it ended with him losing his life.

We really should talk more about the cost of committing ourselves to Jesus. So many people today think they can follow Jesus and not make any difference in the way they live their lives, and that's really absurd. At the meeting of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes years ago, Bobby Richardson, former New York Yankees second baseman, offered a prayer that I wrote down, and I think it says it all: "Dear God, Your will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Amen."

God told Abram to leave his home and go to a new country. God spoke, and Abram obeyed. And God made Abram a promise: "I will make of you 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."

God and Abram enter a covenant relationship. Abram and his descendants sometimes forget their part in that covenant, but God never forgets.

Some of you might remember when Roger Staubach was the quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys. If you don't like football, I apologize for this story, but I think it's a wonderful one. After college Roger Staubach was named the Heisman trophy winner. He spent five years in the Navy as an obligation because he graduated from the United States Naval Academy. He helped bring Dallas an NFL championship in 1971. Roger Staubach admitted that his position as a quarterback who didn't call his own plays was a source of trial throughout his career. Coach Tom Landry sent in every play. He told Roger when to pass, when to run and only in emergency situations could he change the play, and he had better be right. Even though Roger Staubach considered Coach Landry a genius, when it came to football strategy, pride said that he should be able to run his own football team. Roger later said, "I faced up to the issue of obedience. Once I learned to obey, there was harmony, fulfillment and victory."

Abram obeyed God and God fulfilled God's promise to make of Abram a great nation. But one thing more I think needs to be said. God called Abram to be a blessing to others. Whenever Abram's descendants, whether they be Jews or Muslims or Christians, cease to be a blessing to others, they are ultimately, I believe, disobedient to God.

Now, I have to be careful. This thing of being obedient to God can be tragically abused. There are people who have done terrible things in this world, and they have explained it

like this: “God told me to do it.” Friends, mark this down and don’t forget it: If you hear a voice and it tells you to do something evil, something violent, something that brings pain to others, that is not the voice of God. That is the voice of Satan. God calls us to be a blessing -- to our family, to our neighbors, to the world as a whole.

As St. Paul writes in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians: “God reconciled us to himself through Christ, and He has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” And that’s who we are and what we are about. God has blessed us, and we are to be a blessing to others.

I read a story of Yugoslavia, and it tells of four angels who witness creation. The first angel observes God’s handy work in awe and said, “Lord, your creation is beautiful. How did you do it?” And that’s the world view of a scientist. The second angel observed in awe and said, “Your creation is beautiful. Why did you do it?” That’s the worldview of a philosopher. And the third angel observed in awe and said, “Lord, your creation is beautiful. Can I have it?” And that’s the worldview of a materialist. And finally the fourth angel observed in awe and said, “Lord, your creation is beautiful. Can I help? That’s the worldview of God’s faithful.

That’s the kind of obedience that God honors. God told Abram to leave his home, and God made Abram a promise and an assignment that he would be blessed, and that he would be a blessing. May we be blessed and may we be a blessing to others as well.

*Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs