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THE PROMISE, THE HOPE, AND THE PLUNGE

Genesis 12:1-4a
John 3:1-17

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The promise. Those first verses of Genesis 12 break from the ancient myths of prehistory in the first eleven chapters and begin the story of a particular people led by their patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

They form another kind of fundamental shift in Genesis as well. Up to this point, Genesis has recounted ancient tales of human sin. Immediately after creation, Adam and Eve blew paradise in the Garden. Then Cain murdered his brother; then after all humanity had run amok with disobedience, God sent the flood as righteous judgment; then after they built the Tower of Babel and arrogantly insisted on "being like God," God scattered humanity into different nations and languages. Those first chapters are a litany of human evil in the midst of God's good creation!

Chapter twelve, however, begins a radically different theme - God choosing and making covenant with a people. From that point on, the Bible all the way to Revelations became the story of Abraham and Sarah and their descendents.

It literally became the story of a people that began when God, without explanation, called Abram to pack up his tents and set out for a far and unknown land. Trusting God, Abram with his clan, hit the desert trial to the land of Canaan and beyond. That's when the Bible really moved out of its primeval past, out of the depths of times beyond clear memory, and into a particular remembered moment in the history of the human family. God entered history in a particular way with a particular person in a particular place and time. The story of the *people* of Abraham begins - that's remarkable for us in *our* day, because it begins the story of the people of the three great monotheistic faiths, including our own, who all claim their roots in father Abraham - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Note that the story begins not with Abram searching out God, but with the LORD speaking to Abram! It begins with *God*, as it always does. Isn't that a bit humbling for us who see ourselves as searchers, initiative-takers, to admit that invariably, God beats us to the punch and invites *us*! So God came with those fantastic promises of what people - then and now - value most of all - and exactly what Abram and Sarah did *not* possess - land and an heir. As we might expect, the second made them more suspicious. Somehow they might acquire some land, but as Abraham himself protested, he was far too old to even imagine fathering a family. Besides, Sarah was barren. They laughed at the very thought of it! Nevertheless, that's exactly what God promised them - land *and* children who, in time, would inherit the land.

Two thoughts about God's promise. First, God chose (and chooses) people without potential. You and I could probably identify more potential with our eyes closed. Perhaps a *young* Abraham with some well-placed connections would have made more sense than a wandering nomad old enough to be a great grandfather. If the land required back-breaking labor and possibly some warfare to capture it in the first place, how could an old man make it? What kind of choice did God make anyway? Children? Well, even if Sarah were *not* barren, she was decades past her childbearing years. These were people without potential. Later, Jesus did exactly the same thing: he announced that *he'd* come to bring the good news to the poor, the blind, the publican and the sinner - in short, to folks who'd been cast out by the system, who had absolutely no potential.

God's promise was also something totally unexpected, clearly the result of God's own work. Abraham and Sarah could look around and see for themselves no possibility of land or children. Their *only* possible hope rested in God's promise - to be filled somewhere out there in the unknown future. Our question: Can we trust God for the journey we can *not* see with our own eyes? Abraham and Sarah placed *their* hope in the promise, and they set off across the desert to that far land.

That journey is a recurring biblical theme from Genesis to Revelations. It is a recurring theme in life. We all face that reality over and over - sometimes it's joyous, sometimes scary, sometimes painful.

When we reach adulthood, graduate, and leave home, we begin that journey.

When we stand before God and speak our marriage vows, we begin that journey.

When we give birth, we begin that journey.

When in midlife, our job is terminated or our marriage tragically ends, we begin that journey.

When we retire and face an entirely new lifestyle, we begin that journey.

When our life partner dies and we face a radically changed life, we begin that journey.

When we are faced with our own approaching death, we begin that journey.

The hope. I dare say we face the journey with a mix of hope and apprehension, perhaps even some fear or despair. Even should we say we've got plenty of faith in God to see us through, that faith could prove misdirected.

I think of the story that's made the rounds recently of the fellow who wasn't the least worried when the floods hit because he was a believing Christian. A truck came along the muddy road and offered him a ride out, but he said, "No thanks. I trust God. God will take care of me." Awhile later, the water had surrounded his house and was pouring in. A rowboat came along, but he said, "No, I trust God. God will rescue me." Pretty soon, the water covered all but the peak of his roof, and there he sat. A helicopter hovered overhead with rope dangling within reach. "No thanks," he

shouted. God will rescue me." The water rose some more and the man drowned. He found himself in front of St. Peter and quite ticked off. "What am I doing here? I was a good Christian. I trusted God to come and rescue me, and God never came. Why?" he demanded. "Just a minute, my good friend," replied Peter." We sent a truck, then a rowboat, and finally a helicopter. What more do you want?"

Do we place our hope, our trust, in the right place? God is not a heavenly magician, protecting me from all things malevolent. I am as subject to the rain falling on *my* head as on my neighbor's. Does my trust reach far enough to see rescue or strength or sustinance in the form of a neighbor reaching out to *me* from her rowboat? Does my pride in self prevent me from reaching out to accept that hand of support and care?

Nicodemus' hesitation may be mine. Good man, that Nicodemus. Respected Pharisee, religious leader, convinced that God already undoubtedly was on *his* side, came to Jesus. Jesus told him that if he were going to find life, he must be "born anew." Nicodemus didn't understand. "That may be, but what do you really mean by that? Do you mean I'm going to return to my mother's womb? That doesn't make sense to me! Come on, Jesus. Before I buy it, put it to me in a neat package."

Jesus, however, meant a very different kind of birth, being born into a new life of trust that came with plunging into the future knowing that wherever it takes us, even through the valley of the shadow of death, we need fear no evil, for God is with us, God's rod and staff will comfort us. "For God so loved the world..." In this, he said, we find hope.

The plunge. It's not always easy. We inch up, hesitate, and maybe back off. I'm not an especially good "plunger." Never have been. When I was a kid taking swim lessons at a Y camp, I was petrified to jump off that diving board. I think eventually somebody sneaked up behind me and gave me a just-hard-enough shove. Maybe that was divine intervention, I don't know! A few years ago, visiting Vancouver Island, we came across bungee-jumping into a deep gorge. No question, *that* kind of plunging was not for me!

But on occasion it has happened: I have been nudged into a modest plunge or two, and I've been much the richer for it on my journey. When I had the chance to break my seminary career and go teach in Turkey, my Nicodemus-oriented family knew I was absolutely nuts. It made no more rational sense to them than jumping back into his mother's womb made to Nicodemus! But enough friends and mentors gave me a just hard enough shove, that I plunged into that journey literally to a far country for those three years, and my life was forever changed.

And, of course, there are those inevitable times when life itself nudges us to plunge into our unknown futures. That *can* be fearsome when we'd much prefer the tried and true, what we can see and chart for ourselves.

There's the oft-told parable of the little boy standing and crying in the upstairs window with smoke billowing out. His father on the ground called him to jump and he would catch him. "But daddy, I can't see you," he cried. "That all right," the father called back, "I can see *you*." Isn't that *our* assurance as we face the plunge into that uncharted journey of life, one step at a time, we know not where?

Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Amen.