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 2 Lent A: Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17  
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 St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis, MD  
*Leaving Home*

Today's lessons are about leaving home – literally and figuratively leaving home. Abram is called to leave the home of his country and kindred, and Nicodemus is called to leave the home of his assumptions and expectations. Their stories are about the awesome truth that God calls even us to journey forth into something new, and sometimes all we have to take with us on the journey is trust in God's promise.

Abram, who will later on have his name changed to Abraham, is called by God to leave home. Abram is seventy-five years old. His wife Sarai is also well-qualified for the senior discount. They're in the time of life when it's a good time to retire, relax, settle down, stop working so hard. But Abram hears a call from God: "Abram, leave your country, your kindred, and your father's house and go to a land that I will show you."

So Abram puts a For Sale sign on the front lawn. He's loading the camels with the few possessions they're going to bring along. His neighbors are curious, "Where are you going, Abram?" "I don't really know," he replies. "To a place God will show me." Some people think he's finally lost it. "Sounds like a delayed mid-life crisis to me," one neighbor says. Another says, "You're going to leave everything you know, your people, your home, to go follow some crazy dream?" "Not a dream," says Abram, "A promise."

Perhaps that's what makes leaving home easier for Abram and Sarai. They have a purpose in leaving home. God said to Abram, "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 . . . and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

The word promise comes from a root word meaning being sent out or sent forth. A promise is sending forth a word that will come true in the future. God calls Abram to a promise of new life, but Abram has to leave the familiar, break ties of kinship, and go wherever the promise and God lead him – into new relationships, new territory, new responsibilities. No road map. Just faith in the God who made him a promise.

Abram and Sarai do leave home, and the rest of their story is one of God's faithfulness to them and their struggle to be faithful to God. God had to remind Abram many times of God's promise before God fulfilled it in God's own good time. Eventually, despite their advanced ages, Abraham and Sarah give birth to a child, and they become the father and mother of a great nation, and our forebears in faith.

Many, many generations later, one of their descendants, Nicodemus, is about to set out on a new journey of his own. Nicodemus is called to leave the home of his assumptions about Jesus and about his own life in relationship with God.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a leader of his people. He has heard of Jesus and what Jesus is doing and he wants to talk with him. The big question for faithful Jews like Nicodemus was, What must I do to enter the kingdom of heaven? As a Pharisee, Nicodemus has been trained in the tradition that says there are rules and laws to follow in order to get into God's kingdom, to be in right relationship with God. But is that answer enough? Is it right? Something is keeping Nicodemus up at night. Something leads Nicodemus to knock on Jesus' door one night, to seek Jesus out as someone who may have some answers.

But, notice, Nicodemus begins the conversation, not with an invitation to dialogue or a question, but with a statement of certainty. "Rabbi, we know" are the first words out of his mouth. "We know," and even though the rest of the sentence is a compliment, "we know you are a teacher who has come from God," he's also saying, we know. We've got your number. We've got you pinned down. Nicodemus is confident he knows the scope of Jesus' ministry and has him sized up.

But Jesus wants more for Nicodemus. He wants Nicodemus to leave the home of his certainty and to step out to a new land that he will show him.

So he says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Born anew, born again. The word Jesus uses can be understood in these various ways. Nicodemus hears it only in its literal sense, as if one were to be born physically a second time. Jesus means it in a spiritual sense, born from above, reborn by water and the Spirit, as in baptism, a birth in which our lives are made new, a birth in which new possibilities emerge.

And then Jesus gives a picture, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The word for wind and Spirit is the same. And neither the wind nor the Spirit will be pinned down. In fact, the Spirit often calls us to a new home, invites us to a new understanding of our lives, lived for God and formed by God.

For Nicodemus, this means he would have to change his ideas about what he knows about Jesus. He would need to trust God and step out toward an unknown destination, where he could believe that Jesus is more than just a teacher sent from God. Jesus tells him and us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Jesus isn’t just another teacher. Jesus is a gift from God, with the gift of eternal life to give – a life that begins in this world, a life marked by listening for God’s call, which is often a call to leave the comfortable and familiar and follow God where God leads.

Jesus, of course, is speaking to us too. God calls to us as well. Is God calling you to leave some home and venture out on a journey, to undertake some new task for God, for the sake of God’s kingdom? Is God calling you to leave some place where you’ve grown too comfortable? Is God calling you to leave some situation in which you are uncomfortable or unhealthy, but which offers you the comfort of the familiar? Is God calling you to leave some assumption behind? Are there places in your life where you say too quickly, “I know,” when maybe God has some new things to show you? Is it time for you to enter into a new relationship with Jesus?

Being open to that call, to leave home and go to a place where God will show you, in order to be a blessing and bring blessing is the greatest adventure of all. It may lead us to people and places and actions we wouldn’t otherwise expect. It may lead us to new understandings of God’s promises to us.

Dr. Tom Long was preaching professor at our alma mater, Princeton Seminary. He says that when he was new in that community, he went to a nearby Presbyterian church that prides itself on being an academic, intellectual church. Early on, he said, he went to a family night supper and sat down next to a man, introduced himself, told him he was new and said, "Have you been here long?" "Oh yes," that man said, "In fact I was here before this ever became such a scholarly church. Why I'm probably the only non-intellectual left. I haven't understood a sermon in over 25 years." "Then why do you keep coming?" Dr. Long asked. "Because every Monday night a group of us get in the church van and drive over to the youth correctional center. Sometimes we play basketball, or play games. Usually we share a Bible story. But mostly we just get to know the kids and listen to them. I started going because Christians are supposed to do those kinds of things. But now I could never stop. Sharing the love of God at that youth center has changed my life." And then he said this, "You cannot prove the promises of God in advance, but if you live them, you find they're true, every one."

If you make the decision to leave a familiar place and walk with God toward an unknown destination, the immediate result will probably be a mix of anxiety and anticipation, fear and hope. As you travel your journey with God, you will discover that you are more and more at home with this unfolding life that you are living in response to God's call, and your confidence will grow that the God with whom you are increasingly at home on the journey is the God with whom you will be completely at home at the journey's end. You cannot prove the promises of God in advance, but if you live them, you'll find they're true, every one.

May God bless us all on our journey.