

A call without mystery

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March 10, 2014

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The call of Abram is one of my favorite stories in the whole Bible. I have moved quite a lot, and the experience of packing up my life in England to move to the U.S. nearly three years ago is still fresh in my memory. The challenges that face Abram and his family are exciting, probably daunting, but certainly not without their cost. I love the way the call is vague about the destination: it seems that getting moving is more important than knowing the final details.

Liturgically, we nearly always start reading this story at Genesis 12, and by doing this we create the impression that God's call comes to Abram right out of the blue, as if it has never before occurred to Abram to travel to another land. But if you go back to chapter 11, you discover that Abram begins his nomadic journey years earlier with his father, Terah. They leave Ur of the Chaldees, Terah and his sons and their wives and children, and their destination is Canaan—the place Abram will eventually find as the land of promise.

But at some point the whole family stops in Haran. Do they change their minds about Canaan and decide to settle down? Or do they just intend to break the journey for a while, and then somehow they never get moving again? We don't know, but what we can see is that God's call to Abram isn't something he's never imagined before. It's a call to resume a journey he has already begun years earlier, but for some reason has forgotten or given up on.

The call of God can be as simple as a reminder of something we used to do and have somehow stopped, something we started and never finished. The call of God might be quite the opposite of mysterious: it may be a question that asks why we've

settled down, or why we've given up, and that gently prods us to start again.

Starting again with a sense of call adds layers to the original vision: layers of promise, but also a letting go of control. There is something in the way Abram's call is phrased that suggests you don't need to have it all together to follow God—that to some extent it's in fact better to be able to let go of the details of how things will turn out. All we do need to do, when we catch the Spirit's breath, is take the first step and start moving.