Proper 5A; 2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.11.23

Genesis 12:1-9
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. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and invoked the name of the LORD. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26
As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district. (563)

The booth Matthew was sitting in was likely a toll booth, a tax booth. It was likely the place where fishermen leaving the region of Galilee had to stop, to have their catches counted, and to pay what was owed to the empire. The empire owned all the lakes and all the fish in the lakes. Whatever fishermen caught for sale had to be counted and taxed.

The empire must get what it's owed.

That's interesting when you consider that the previous lot of people whom Jesus called as disciples had indeed been fishermen. Peter and Andrew, James and John: when Jesus came along by the Sea of Galilee, Peter and Andrew were casting their net into the sea, and then James and John were mending their nets in their father's boat. For this, they probably knew Matthew, in his tax booth. They maybe had long known Matthew. And if Matthew was like most tax collectors for the empire, he charged more than was owed. (Everyone's looking for their take. The world is cruel. You gotta get what you can while the getting's good.) For this, they probably resented Matthew.

But now he was here, in this small circle of Jesus' earliest disciples.

Really, what was *he* doing here?

I imagine the whole scene felt like tight-fitting shoes and suddenly, for the fishermen, these tight shoes had begun to pinch, to cause a blister. Really, what was *Matthew* doing here?

Maybe those first four had thought this would be fun, easy. Maybe they thought they'd gather and follow with like-minded people. Everyone on the same page about who the bad guys were, and who were good.

There's a trend among clergy and congregations of the United Church of Christ. Affinity groups open a way for people to gather with other people who share the same concerns or interests or orientations in their sense of mission and call. Whether its climate concerns, or the aim of racial justice, or spiritual direction and discernment, these help you connect even across distance with others who are charged up by the same thing you are. Time was, we had regional associations. You were yoked with those closest to you, in your same region.

But it's even more immediate, more intense than that—with congregationalism, our polity, our mode. The radical assertion inherent in congregationalism is that those with whom to build up the reign of God, those with whom to enact the reign of God, are those closest to hand. The local church. Your neighbors. Your noisy, messy, annoying neighbors: the kingdom of God.

Now, though. Affinity groups.

This maps with the larger trend in society to seek out like-minded people, to organize and to act, to be more *effective*. No doubt the internet has enabled this, which the pandemic and its isolating quarantine brought crashing into all our lives. Suddenly, alone in our homes with our phones or our computers, we could connect with people who, though far away, were close to us in our interests, be it macrame or water justice or genealogy or what-have-you.

Time was, you had to relate with people who were just plopped into your proximity, figure out how to converse with someone who's all about macrame while you're really into genealogy.

Now, though! Now, we don't have to be so place-based. Now we can get with people who already have an affinity for what we also like, meaning we don't have the go the trouble of relating through our strangeness, connecting and even gently persuading amidst our particularities. It's just so much easier!

I remember once finding myself taking communion beside someone who was the last person I ever imagined having to suffer meeting in person, to say nothing of having to kneel next to at the rail of receiving. I'd read about him in college. His work, sociological though written for an educated popular audience, had offended the sensibilities of almost every conceivable demographic group—except his own, of course. But even some of them… My professor had held him up as an example of intellectual bankruptcy. Ten years later, in a city church, he was next to me as the Episcopal priest was working his way along with the wafers. I recognized him by his name tag: he *belonged* here. I was nearing the end of my time in divinity school and beginning to discover what a weird thing the church is—or is to be. Not affinity groups. Sinners. Outcasts. Hopeless losers. Beggars, really, each and all.

A toll collector among laborers, someone who taxed the fruits of labor so people who'd never labored a day in their lives could wallow in those goods: what was *he* doing here?

I often like to imagine the movement of a story from scripture, the staging of it. When I have to consider what's called a pericope from scripture to prepare to preach on it, I often imagine how it would look in its playing out, how it would have looked in its long ago playing out. Setting aside that it's unlikely it actually happened this way, it's unlikely that the way a story is presented in any given book of the Bible is a precise spelling out of how exactly it happened, it's still worth imagining what the writer was imagining, if not precisely remembering.

The movement of bodies through space can tell you a lot about the subtleties of what's going on.

Matthew here steps out from his booth, this place in which he'd settled, this place that had contained him and might even have confined him: in some role, in some sorry position in society that wasn't great but was maybe the best he could hope for. Safe in his little booth, at least he didn't have to venture out onto the sea every day in the darkness of early morning to catch his living before it got away. That was *hard* work. That was *dangerous* work. It still is.

On the other hand, there was power in knowing you could make your way. There was power in knowing you had partners to work with, by which partnership lots of other people would

also eat. Peter and Andrew, James and John: these were powerful people in their own modest, hard-won way.

Matthew might have suspected his power was less independent or inter-dependent, was more co-dependent. He'd sit still, settled in his booth. Life would come to him, and he would *squeeze* it. That's just the way things work—and if he didn't do it, the imperial infrastructure would fine someone else. What, Herod is going to give up on getting what belongs to him because Matthew walked off the job? Herod would find someone else. And on it would grind. So, why not have it be Matthew? You gotta do what you gotta do.

Matthew's coming out from behind his booth or from within his booth: his coming out at the call of Jesus: "Follow me." It wasn't just an exit from a structure; it was an exit from a whole system. And it was an entrance into a new way of life: on the move. Pilgrimage. Going wherever the path of faith leads.

This theme of the life of faith being one of pilgrimage, one of being on the move (if slowly) begins with Abraham, of course. Our father in faith, the father of so many in faith, Abraham was promised so to be. His offspring would be a great nation. That was the original promise. But it would become more artfully stated in future encounters. God would make Abram's offspring more numerous than grains of sand in the desert. The Lord would make Abraham's children more numerous than the stars in the sky.

But there's another aspect of the story. His descendants would get the land, this Promised Land. He wouldn't get it. No, the story makes it clear that, once Abraham found himself in the land that the Lord would then promise to his descendants, Abraham continued on, to the hill country east of Bethel. So, it would be a long time before this promise met fulfillment. It would be after Abraham, after Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and a century or two of enslavement in Egypt, after Moses and the wilderness and at last seeing the Promised Land spread out below. Moses would die there, at that lookout place. And then came Joshua, who was a warrior, and by whose war-making the so-called Promised Land became the people's land.

This moment in the story brings us into the realm of history, moves us out of the realm of prehistory with its admixture of myth, and moves us into where the historical record comes into some focus.

This is to say the people manifest the promise by means of conquest, by means of war—because the fact is that the land the people were promised was occupied by other people, a story whose unfolding we know well, all too well. It's not an uncomplicated thing, to manifest such a

promise as this, to manifest your destiny. It's not an uncomplicated to say the very least, which to say so very little might but be to redouble the original injustice. Trails of tears.

It has long felt to me like something of a gift: Christianity's insistence that there are no places more holy than any other places, there are no places to which some certain people can claim divine right. Christianity is, at its heart, a homeless practice, a pilgrimage practice.

Not that you'd guess it by looking out our structures. Our many, many structures, from meetinghouse to cathedral: the Church has invested quite monumentally in so many monuments.

And there's been blessing in this. This has resulted in richness for the whole human endeavor. The pipe organ: that wouldn't be a thing if it weren't for the church. That instrument is simply way too immoveable to be a product of anything other than an organization working on the time of scale of the church. Same with stained glass as an artform. You need stone walls to hold up the iron framework that gives the outline to the illustration. It's a whole thing.

And I know, there have been far less vaulted results of such grab-the-land moves. I know this. I'm no dummy. I know about the Crusades—a little anyway, the Latin church's obsession about getting the so-called Holy Land "back from the Moslems."

And I know about such oxymoronic sites as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, a Christian sanctuary built over the grave where Jesus spent but a couple of days.

I've never been there. I've never seen it, though I would like to, and I'm sure I'd find it deeply moving, not to mention aesthetically inspiring. It's beautiful, I'm sure. But as far as a site for a faith practice that doesn't go in with such place-based sacredness and, more to the point, doesn't believe in the power of death as all that powerful when it comes to God, a "holy sepulcher" is a pretty funny thing.

Two weeks ago, we celebrated Pentecost once again, the day when the Holy Spirit came down in a move that can best be summed up as uncontained and uncontainable, and as the birthing event of the church. If it is to press upon us anything, surely this is it: ours is a faith that doesn't insist on one place but insists on every place, in all of each and every place's stubborn particularities, just as it doesn't exalt one people but insists on enlivening all people, every person, every part and particle of all creation that is itself simply groaning and laboring to new and full and deathless life.

So, things have calmed down now, and it's but Ordinary Time, the first of twenty-five or so Sundays when we're getting back to basics, when we're simply going to follow Jesus.

Not that this won't have its wonders.

Why, just this morning, we remember him healing a woman who but touched the fringe of his cloak, and then reviving a girl whose father was unusually, touchingly distraught at her death, common a thing though that was.

But here's what he might have been thinking, this distraught father who was facing what any number of countless parents had faced before. Children die. They do: they die. They're like paper boats, made for an environment that could be their dissolution. We all are. These things happen.

But here's what that leader of the synagogue might have been thinking: why accept such tragedy as "just the way things are" when the kingdom of heaven is among you and insists that things could better? Indeed, things could be good.

Want to know more?

Let's keep following.

Thanks be to God.