

“Growing Together In Purpose and Justice”
 (“It Starts with the Altar”)
 October 30, 2022

Genesis 12:1-8

You gotta give him credit. Abraham, or “Abram” as he was known in this morning’s Scripture lesson before God granted him a new name, heard God speak to him. And Abraham did what God told him to do.

“Get up and go from your own country, your own family, your own home, your own community and I promise I will bless you beyond measure.” Those words from God had to be tough for Abraham to hear. To uproot and move to a new place for a specific reason is hard enough. But God wanted Abraham to pack up and go to an unknown place for no apparent reason. With no support structure and no safety net and no plan of action to guide Abraham when he reached his destination.

Even though Genesis doesn’t tell us, you have to imagine Abraham asked a few questions before agreeing to God’s instructions. “Why would you want me to turn my whole life upside down, God?” “Can you give me any idea where I’m supposed to go?” If you won’t tell me where I’m going, how am I supposed to know what to do when I arrive? If I arrive?”

If there was any banter back and forth between Abraham and God, we don’t hear it. All we have recorded in the Bible is God telling Abraham to pack up all the people and all the livestock and all the stuff that was near and dear to him and head on his way. And Abraham proceeding to do what God ordered.

Mind you, Abraham was seventy-five years old at the time and moving when you’re seventy-five is a major challenge. What’s more, Abraham had been living in Haran with his family and his friends and his daily routines for years. And starting over again when you’re seventy-five is a major challenge.

Still when it was time to go, this seventy-five-year-old man, still going by the name of “Abram”, set off with his wife, Sarai, and his brother’s son, Lot, by his side. Along with a whole caravan of relatives, each with their own possessions. And a long line of sheep and cattle and goats stretching as far back as the eye could see.

This band of wandering nomads, perhaps a foreshadowing of the Hebrew people escaping slavery under Pharaoh in the land of Egypt, made their way through the desert wilderness to a place called, “Shechem.” There were already Canaanites living in Shechem and worshipping gods other than the God Abraham knew. And maybe the Canaanites welcomed Abraham and his people as they passed through. But you and I know all too well that people don’t always open their arms to embrace strangers when they enter a new country. Sometimes people even go so far as to put strangers on buses and planes and send them to different parts of the country in order to get rid of them.

In any case, after a brief pit stop in Shechem, Abraham and his people packed up again and continued on to Bethel, where they would finally put a stake in the ground and lay claim to a new settlement.

You have to admire Abraham's courage. To be sure, over the course of his life Abraham didn't always do things in a godly manner. But in this morning's Scripture lesson, Abraham listened to God's call faithfully. And Abraham was richly rewarded for his obedience with many blessings God promised to him.

When Abraham arrived in Bethel, he did what you're supposed to do when you arrive in a new place in the middle of the wilderness. You set up a tent, right? I know there are plenty of people involved with scouts in this congregation. And I know there are a number of people who enjoy camping in this congregation. They'll all tell you the first rule of thumb when you get somewhere outdoors is you build yourself a shelter before it gets dark. So you'll have somewhere to lay your head if you are exhausted and you want to grab a quick bite to eat before turning in for the night.

When Abraham reached Bethel he pitched a tent. It wasn't a convenient, modern pop-up tent you can put together in a few minutes. I'm thinking this was a really big tent. The kind that comes with all kinds of tent pegs and tent poles and tarps with flaps and little holes that you try and plug as best you can so no rain water drips through in the middle of a rainstorm. With no instruction manual to help you figure out what fits where and how it all attaches. But when you're finally done constructing, the kind of tent where you can fit numerous family and friends and food supplies and valuables, keeping them dry for as long as it takes before you build a more permanent shelter.

Abraham and his people, God's people, were finally ready to start over. Still, there is one detail in today's story that's easy to miss. Before he moved from Shechem to Bethel. And before he built his great big tent. Abraham built something else first.

Before he ever thought about shelter, Abraham built an altar. Probably resembling a long, flat table, presumably made out of wood, the altar was a place where sacred objects owned by the settlers could be set up in a prescribed and purposeful way to give glory and honor to God. Or in the case of this morning's story, the altar was a place where animals could be sacrificed as a sign of devotion to God.

The altar Abraham built was a visible, intentional, holy symbol of God's presence. And Abraham consciously built the altar first. The tent and anything else that needed to be built in addition would come later...

The altar and the tent exist hand in hand. **(1)** You can't have one without the other. But when it comes to a life of faith, it's important to remember the priority. Yes, it's important to put up a tent. However, you begin with an altar. The place where people gather together as a community to listen for God's voice, to express gratitude for God's presence, and to respond to God's call in the world.

We create an altar where we remember God's love and look for God's guidance and inspiration. And then we build the tent out there in the world. The tent is where we interact with family and friends and neighbors and strangers. The tent is the place where we serve God's people and put God's love into action. The tent is where we work hard to promote God's peace and seek God's justice.

But time and again we return to the altar. As a way of reminding ourselves that we do what we do as God's people because God is the One who grounds us. And God is the one who gives us strength to live as faithful people...

Wapping Community Church is busy pitching a great big tent right here on our busy corner in South Windsor. The tent is where we welcome brothers and sisters to our parking lot for invaluable Foodshare items to help them get through each month. The tent is where we collect sleeping bags and give them away to our brothers in Hartford who have no shelter over their heads during cold winter nights. The tent is where we welcomed friends and neighbors to join us last Sunday for a Trunk or Treat event where numerous people of all ages dressed up and laughed and had a good time together. The tent is where we collect bottles and cans to support Boy and Girl Scout troops in the nearby Northeast neighborhood of Hartford. And the tent is where we welcome groups from our community to come and use our space for day care and scouts and basketball and tutoring programs and library events.

There are all kinds of ways we are reaching out to this community through our church tent. Promoting peace, providing needed resources to individuals and families, encouraging fellowship, working for justice and welcoming people with open arms no matter who you are or where you might be on life's journey.

Yet we always come back to the altar. We always come back to this sanctuary so we can listen together for God's voice, acknowledge together God's blessings in our lives and find together the inspiration and the wisdom we each need to carry out our God given purpose in the world.

The tent and the altar. You can't have one without the other and no one knows that better than you and me. Wapping Community Church is a tent where we are putting God's love into action every day. First and foremost, though, Wapping Community Church is an altar where God's love is shared in this sacred space through our words and our prayers, our songs and our praises. Amen.

(1) Rev. Dr. Yvette A. Flunder, *Where the Edge Gathers: building a community of radical inclusion*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005) pg. 86.

