

*The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.*

- <sup>2</sup> *“I will make you into a great nation  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.*
- <sup>3</sup> *I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.”*

<sup>4</sup> *So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. <sup>5</sup> He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.*

<sup>6</sup> *Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup> The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.*

<sup>8</sup> *From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. <sup>9</sup> Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev. (Genesis 12:1-9)*

### **Leave Your Native Country!**

Where were you born? I was born in Germany. I first came to the US when I was just a few weeks old. But I was always a US citizen – my dad was in the army, stationed in Germany. As the Lord worked things out in my life, two of my children were born in Colombia because I was serving as a missionary there. So are they Colombians or Americans? Right away when they were born, we got US passports for them and the US government has always considered them to be “ours.” But so has the Colombian government. In fact, a couple of years ago when my daughter visited Colombia, she had to enter and exit that country on a Colombian passport. Now, like me, she grew up here in the US and we both think of ourselves as being Americans. But our family history shows how easy it is to not be “from here.” When I look at our confirmands this morning, all of them, including my youngest son, were born here. They are Americans, every one. What would it take for them to leave here and never come back? All of them have ancestors who did that. They left their native country and came here. But it’s hard for us to imagine doing that – even in my family, even though we have lived for years outside the US. In our reading from the book of Genesis this morning, we see an immigrant leaving his homeland for a new country. He did it because God told him to. His physical journey can teach us about the spiritual journey God calls all of us to make. Our Lord calls us to leave the natural way of life that every human being is born into and to follow him. My friends, **leave your native country!**

#### **I.**

Now, that doesn’t mean you have to leave the United States. I’m talking about a spiritually reality that needs to be true no matter who we are or where we live. **Leave your native country because of God’s promises.** That’s what Abram did. We know him better as Abraham. He was born in a city called Ur in Mesopotamia, what we know today as Iraq. His father had moved the family to another city in Mesopotamia known as Haran. But it was still the same basic culture and way of life. After his father died, God told Abram, **“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.”**

God called Abram to turn his back on everything he knew and go to a foreign country and live there for the rest of his life. When we went to Colombia, we always expected to come home. In fact, we visited the US every year that we were there. But when our ancestors came to the US, many of them came without any plan of

ever returning home. Think what that must have been like. The people spoke a different language. Even the landscape looked different. They had to learn out to survive in a strange place. And so did Abram. He left behind a life that he was comfortable with and he was seventy-five years old when he did it!

Now, is that what God calls us to do? Physically, no. But there is a sense in which God calls us to do what he called Abram to do: God calls us to leave behind everything that a human being naturally thinks and believes and follow him. To go from where we are all born to where we are when we Christians die is to leave behind our native land and travel to a country that only a Christian can know. None of us knows it before we get there.

What am I talking about? Every one of us is born an unbeliever. We're born slaves to sin. That means that we belong to the devil's kingdom. He rules in our hearts. The way we are all born, we think like sinners and unbelievers. We're selfish and impatient and unkind by nature. And we grow up in this world with all of its antichristian attitudes and beliefs and we simply absorb it all. We watch TV. We listen to music. We drink deep of the spirit of our age – a spirit sent by the devil – and we think and act and feel like unbelievers. But when we come to faith, God calls us to leave all that thinking and feeling behind. He calls us to make a spiritual journey that no unbeliever can understand. That journey is what we're celebrating today. You twelve young people have spent two years in catechism class learning what it means to live in God's kingdom. Likewise, you four adults who will be received into membership today have been studying with me for months to understand what this new life is like.

Now we live as children of God. That means that we change inwardly and outwardly. St. Paul speaks of offering our bodies as living sacrifices to God. He tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. He's telling us to leave behind the life that comes to us naturally and to live a new and different life even while we live here on this earth. Abraham understood that. He dedicated himself to a new life. He went where God told him to and lived the way God told him to.

Why did he do that? The incredible promises of God! God promised to make Abram a great nation. The truth is, God promised to make his descendants into the true people of God. The New Testament makes it clear that all of us who trust in the promises God gave him are his spiritual descendants. We are that nation, that true people of God. God promised to bless Abram and to protect him from his enemies. Above all else, God promised that through Abram, all nations on earth would be blessed. That is the heart of the promise. It was not a promise that Jewish laws and culture would be a benefit to all nations. It was not a promise about Jewish scientists and writers and thinkers, as impressive as they have been. It was a promise to wash away the sins of all people through the descendant that God would send to Abraham. It would take more than two thousand years for this promise to reach its fulfillment. But God called Abram to leave Haran and travel to a foreign land to be the ancestor of the Savior. Jesus says that Abraham saw his day and was glad. Abraham believed in that promised Savior who would wash all his sins away. Because he believed, he went where God told him to go and lived as God told him to live.

Could it be any different for us? Our confirmands today haven't quite reached the ripe old age of 75. Even the adults we'll receive into membership today are a fair distance from that age. But all of them are going to stand up today and promise to follow where God leads. They will promise to reject the devil and all his lies and empty promises. They will promise to continue steadfast in the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away. They will promise to conform all their lives to the teachings of God's holy Word and to be faithful in coming to church and in taking communion for the rest of their lives. They – you – will promise to live for Christ.

Why will you make that promise? Because God kept his promise to Abraham. Jesus came. He lived in our place. He was perfect and that counts for us. He died and paid for all the time and all the ways we've lived for the devil instead of for God. He paid for the selfishness and the ego in our hearts. He paid for all the times we drank deep of this world's sinful thinking and parroted it in our own words and actions. He rose and God declared that we are holy and righteous in his sight. God promised that we will rise just like he did and we will live with him in joy forever. That promise reaches into our hearts. It made us believers and for as long as you live, hearing that promise, receiving that promise in communion, confessing your sins and being personally assured that that promise applies to you, will give you the strength and courage and joy to keep the promises you will make today: to leave the country of sin and unbelief and live for Christ.

It's not always easy to leave the country of sin and death. Everything that our society screams at us contradicts it. Indifference to faith is at an epidemic level in this country. As these young people go forward, their faith is going to be challenged again and again. That isn't just true for them. It's true for all of us. Living for Christ means taking a stand for the gospel here. **Leave your native country to proclaim God's love.**

Abram left behind a pretty good life. When he set out, he took along all the possessions and all the people he had acquired in Haran. While it is true that he carried all that wealth with him, it's also true that he left behind whatever business or inheritance produced it. And he took it on the road. He didn't put in a bank and then use an ATM card whenever he needed to. He carried it over all those miles and through all those foreign countries. Every day, it was at risk from powerful local rulers and river crossings and thieves. Abram risked it all for God's promise.

Leaving sin behind has a cost. Our society understands people who live for themselves. It understands the pursuit of money and standard of living. It does not understand sacrifice for God. The devil always tries to make it hard to live for Jesus. While God does not call us to take a vow of poverty, every day that we put him first puts wealth and standard of living and popularity at risk. But trust in Christ takes the risk. Jesus died to give us eternal life. Jesus washed away our sin and our guilt and gave us the promise of life in a new and perfect world. Jesus promises that if we seek him and his righteousness, all that we need will be given to us as well. We may not be the richest or most popular people in the world. But God will carry us through.

When Abram went to the Promised Land it was inhabited. The Canaanites were there and they were not believers. Their sin was so offensive that God eventually wiped them out. That's where God sent Abram to live. That's where he kept his promises. We will always live in the real world, surrounded by unbelievers, in a world full of temptation and sin. Abram sinned on more than one occasion and we too will wrestle with weakness and sinful desires. But God calls us to live for him even when we're surrounded by unbelievers. God promises to forgive our failures and to strengthen us in our battle against temptation.

When Abram got to this new land and discovered that it was inhabited by unbelievers, he could've just quit and gone home. But he didn't. God strengthened his faith by renewing his promises. That's what God does for us, too. I don't know where life will take any of you. Some of you may find yourselves in situations where every person you work with is an unbeliever. You may go to a college where mockery of Christ reigns. You may find a spouse that turns out to be an unbeliever and your faith may be tested over and over again. How will you stay faithful? By hearing the promises of God over and over again. Christ lived for you. Christ died for you. Christ rose for you. He will never leave you or forsake you. Every time you hear of his love and forgiveness, God will strengthen your faith. He will bring you home to heaven.

Between here and there, Abram shows us what we're supposed to be doing. When he got to the Promised Land, he built an altar and called on the name of the LORD. Certainly, the altar reminds us of church. But the Hebrew word translated as "called on" can also mean, "called out." Abram called out the name of the LORD. In a land of unbelievers, by his life and by his words, Abram pointed to the one true God. That is the life that God sends all of us believers out to live. In our words and in our deeds, we show Jesus who lived and died and rose for us. We live in his kingdom when we proclaim his love.

The book of Hebrews talks about Abraham and the rest of the patriarchs. It points out that all of them were looking forward to new country. It says that if they had been thinking of their old homes, they could've gone back. But they were looking forward to a new and better life. They were looking forward to eternity with Christ. That is what all of us here are looking forward to today. The truth is, God isn't calling you to leave behind your native country today. You all left it years ago when you baptized, when you heard the good news about Jesus and God gave you faith. Today God is calling us to live as citizens of heaven. Show the change God has made in you with a life that proclaims your faith in Jesus. Amen.