

## **RISK AND HOPE**

**A sermon by Joe Hoffman**

**June 8, 2008**

**Genesis 12:1-9**

I have learned that when I say a particular word in the presence of my dog Betty Boop, she gets very excited. She barks, she gets right up in my face, she gets between me and the door. She almost can't control herself she is so giddy with joy. The word is "go." Do you want to go. Let's go. I am going to go. I may be talking to her – but often I am just using the word in conversation with someone else – even someone on the phone – but Betty Boop has ears only for herself, and she just goes crazy with excitement.

The word is go.

Now, it isn't that way with everyone who hears the word. Go do your chores – when we say those words, the kids don't jump up and run with utter glee. Go get a bath. It's time to go to school. You know how it goes. And sometimes there is excitement. Let's go out to eat. Let's go play soccer. Let's go see a movie. It all depends on how we hear the word and what follow the word.

In our text today, Abram and Sarai are new characters in the story. This story follows 11 chapters of pre-history, which includes Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, and so forth. Lots of beginnings and endings. Lots of mistakes. And chapter 11 ends by Abram and his family arriving in the land of Harah. You see, Abram's father and mother were nomads, they were on their way to the land of Canaan, but they came to Haran and settled down for a bit. We don't know why. There are no details to the story. But these nomadic people settled in the land of Haran, and that is where the story begins today.

And the word of God comes to Abram and says – go. Now, Abram doesn't offer any resistance. We have no indication if this was difficult for him to comprehend or to do. The text doesn't tell us. I can imagine the conversation between he and Sarai had some passion to it though. Lots of concerns. Why should we go? We've been here a while. It's a good place. There is plenty of land. Plenty of food. No

complaints. Why should we go – and where again did God say we were going. Just to a land God would show us. That’s not much information to go on.

We know the story. We have told it over and over- and to be honest, most of us probably can’t imagine ever being asked to do such a strange thing as this. To leave what is familiar, what is well known, to go somewhere unknown.

Somehow or other, I think Abram and Sarai understood that this command to “go” was something they had to do. Now, I don’t believe God has scripted our lives for us. I think we get to make our own choices. In the gospels, it says Jesus had to go to Samaria. He didn’t have to go there. There were other routes he could have taken. He didn’t have to go there, but he had to. When he said he had to go to Jerusalem, his disciples said – why do you have to do that. That will be trouble. There are plenty of places we could go that would be very welcoming. Jesus knew he didn’t have to go, he just had to.

Do you understand the difference?

A little over 2 years ago, I preached a sermon about marriage equality and I said I would no longer legalize heterosexual marriages until the day I could legalize all the loving, just, and mutual relationships of the people in this church. I had come to see that in being an agent of the state, I was participating in the discrimination and injustice of the state. My signature on the legal document meant that I was helping give some people over 1100 rights and privileges that others did not get. And it just got to me. And I became very clear. I had to do this. No one told me I had to. No one would have gotten angry with me if I hadn’t done this. But I had to do it. That’s what I am talking about.

Have you ever had to do something. Go somewhere. Make a decision that didn’t seem reasonable? But you had to. Many times people who feel called to ministry have this experience. They tell their parents – I am called to be a minister, and I am going to seminary. And our parents know that ministers don’t make much money, they work long hours, they have to deal with all kinds of people. And they also know their children are smart – could be a doctor or a lawyer. Could find the easy life. Why in the world would you go to seminary and become a minister. And do you know what we say – Because I have to. I have to go.

Back in the early 80's I was an intern at ABCCM, working with the jail and prison ministry. Ellen Clarke was one of its directors. The more Ellen worked with those in the criminal justice system, the more she became convinced that we needed an alternative sentencing program and an emphasis on restorative justice. When the state of North Carolina offered a grant to design such an alternative, ABCCM said they did not want to do this work. But Ellen could not let it go. She had to do it. So she left her job with only a small grant in hand, and she formed Western Carolinians for Criminal Justice. She risked a secure position for the hope of a better future for those burdened unfairly in the system. Last Friday night she was honored for 25 years of doing this work. Why did she do it? Because she had to.

Last Monday there was a letter in the mail that had the look of another application for our associate pastor position. It came from Florida. I opened it, and was surprised to find not an application, but instead a check from a former member of the church who recently has died. Ruth White left our church in the late 1990's to move to a retirement home in Florida. But she had put us in her will, and the enclosed check was in the amount of \$60,000! We might wonder – how could a woman whose job in life was a librarian have that much money to give to the church. And why would she do this?

The truth is, her estate had almost \$500,000 to be given away. We were one of 8 agencies to receive a part – and all of them social justice groups. How did she do this? Why did she do this? Well, I never talked with her about this, but if I could do that now, I bet she would say – I had to do this.

It's not that we have to do something. It's just that we have to. Do you hear the difference?

We in the church are an alternative community that chooses to live in the ways of Jesus. That means we see the world differently. We live in the world differently. We do not make decisions based on how much money we will make, or how important we might be, but instead we seek to do that which Jesus would do. IT's a whole different angle of vision.

I want our children and youth to be around people who have found they have to live their lives as best they can in the ways of Jesus. This is not easy to do. Our children and youth need to have strong role models, visible and viable examples to follow. You and I are called to be that for each other. We are the ones who do what we do because we have to. Not because we have to, but because we have to. There is a difference!

We are all learning how to risk our lives in order to live the hope of our faith. There is no map given. Abram and Sarai just have to go. They have to trust. And yet, there is a map. The map is found by listening to where God calls us to go – and following. That is a way of life we share together. To risk what we cannot see in order to live the hope we long for.

What is it that you have to do? Where is it you have to go? Whatever it is, may God be with you! Amen