

"Go . . . and Be Blessed"
Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent
Lectionary Year A
February 17, 2008
Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
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When my son, Matthew, was growing up, his favorite board game was Risk. I was quite fond of it when I was younger, and I still like to play it when there is plenty of time for the game. You are probably familiar with it. The goal is simple enough, total world domination, and the game progresses by each player pitting his army against that of his opponents. The winner of each attack is determined by the roll of the dice, not unlike modern warfare, no matter how sophisticated and technical it has become. You can see how the game got its name. With every strategic move, with every battle plan, with every actual attack, there is risk involved. Generally speaking, those who win the game most often seem to be those who are risk-takers, those who aren't afraid to take a risk.

I believe that those who "win" in life are also those who are risk-takers, those who aren't afraid to take a risk. As a Damon Runyon character might have put it, "Life is a crap shoot, so you may as well put your money down and roll the dice." Even those who advertise the state lottery know this, and so they remind us weekly that "you gotta play to win." I recall not too long ago reading a sign in front of a car wash that stated, "The turtle only makes progress when it sticks its neck out." No matter how you phrase it, the message is the same: in order to

experience life in any sort of meaningful way, you have to be willing to take a risk.

To live is to take risks. We take them every day. Driving a car is risky business; choosing a career involves risk; investing your money, especially in a market as unstable as ours is these days, has a huge amount of risk accompanying it; getting married is taking a risk; being a parent requires a great deal of risk-taking. Everything we do puts us at risk, so to speak. We risk failure, we risk loss, we risk hurt and pain, we risk disappointment. Not much happens in life without some measure of risk. As Erica Jong has stated, "If you don't risk anything, you risk even more" [*How to Save Your Own Life*]. Very few things in life are completely safe and secure, with no risk attached to them.

So it is with faith in God. It, like all of life, involves risk. In fact, I think *risk is synonymous with faith*. To have faith is to risk, to take a chance, to step out into the unknown. To trust in God is to take a risk.

Nowhere in the Bible is this made more clear than in the call of Abraham, whose original name was Abram, as narrated in Genesis 12 and as commented on centuries later by the Apostle Paul in Romans 4. It is obvious that Paul considers Abraham to have been the pioneer of faith, the model of faith, the example for all of us to follow. According to Paul, we are to have the faith of Abraham, because it was Abraham's faith, and nothing else, that caused him to be considered righteous by God. If we want to be seen as righteous by God, as Abraham was, then by faith, Abraham's kind of faith, we can be.

And Abraham's kind of faith involves a great deal of risk. Look closely, please, at our passage of scripture from Genesis. Do you see the

risk there? It should be obvious to you. God says to Abraham, "Go, pull up stakes, get a move on, pack your bags, relocate, hit the road, get out of town." And what does this going entail? Risk. In order to go where the Lord wants him to go, Abraham, Sarah, and their family have to leave behind all that is familiar, all that is safe and secure, all that is comfortable.

God realizes the risk involved and acknowledges it as a part of his command to Abraham. "Go *from* your country and your kindred and your father's house *to* the land I will show you." There is no going *to* without a going *from*, and that is where risk comes in. Abraham is asked to go from what he knows well—his country, his kindred, his father's house—to a place only God knows—the land God will show him. From the known to the unknown, that's the going God is asking Abraham for. And Abraham goes. And in so doing Abraham has faith. And his faith, his willingness to go from the known to the unknown becomes the standard, the model, the example, the kind of faith we are to have, because it is this kind of faith and no other that saves.

We have trouble exhibiting this kind of faith, don't we? And we have trouble exhibiting this kind of faith precisely because it does involve risk. We would rather be conservative. We would rather play it safe. We would rather stick with the familiar, the comfortable, the secure. We prefer the known to the unknown, and so we cling to the known like Linus does to his blanket, and it is not always appropriate or even in our best interest to do so.

One of my preaching professors, Fred Craddock, tells the story of being sent by his wife to the grocery store to get one thing, peanut

butter. For someone rather unfamiliar with a particular grocery store, that can be like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. After a few unsuccessful trips down what he thought to be the appropriate aisles, Dr. Craddock, in desperation, asked a woman he encountered on the aisle he was on. "Can you tell me where the peanut butter is?" he asked. The woman promptly wheeled her shopping cart around and headed in the other direction without responding. It took Craddock a while, but he finally tracked down an employee of the grocery store and found his way to the aisle which contained the product he had been sent by his wife to get, some forty-five minutes earlier.

When he got to the check-out counter, the woman who had ignored him pulled up behind up. She looked at him and said, "So, you were looking for peanut butter after all." "Yes, ma'am," replied Craddock. "What did you think I was after?" "I thought you were hitting on me," the woman responded. "You can't be too careful." "Yes you can," said Craddock. "Yes you can."

We can be too careful, and when we are, we may not be having the kind of faith we need. Perhaps the reason we are often overly cautious is that we are so afraid of failure. Since we live in a culture that worships success, it is the unpardonable sin to fail. So we don't risk, because we know that to risk is to invite the possibility of failure. Yet *there can be no success without failure*. If you have read so-called success stories, time after time the successful person testifies to the number of failures there were along the way to the success that person eventually enjoyed.

One of my favorite stories from the world of academia is about the final examination in a philosophy course. The exam consisted of one

question, "What is courage?" All the students but one filled out their blue books with quote after quote from famous philosophers about what they believed courage to be. As I said, all the students but one did so. The one student, as her response to the test question, simply wrote two words in her blue book. "What is courage?," asked the professor on the exam. "This is," wrote the student and turned it in. The student received an A+ for the course as a result. Why? Because she didn't simply define courage; she demonstrated it. And that is risk.

We can avoid risk by being overly cautious. We can be too careful when it comes to our jobs; when it comes to our relationships; when it comes to how we express our thoughts and show our feelings; when it comes to how we spend our time; when it comes to our attitudes, viewpoints, and tastes; when it comes to practically any area of our lives. And when we are too careful, too cautious, too conservative—we stop growing and developing as persons. *We're in trouble when we ask only "What are the chances?" instead of asking "What are the possibilities?"* A lack of faith leads to the decay and death of our minds, our hearts, our souls.

But God has something else in mind for us, something wonderful, something rich and rewarding, something stimulating and fulfilling, something that makes our living worthwhile. God has for each of us a blessing, just as God promises to Abraham. For God doesn't just say "Go." God says "Go . . . and be blessed." God promises that Abraham will be blessed and that all those who bless Abraham will be blessed and that somehow the blessing God gives to Abraham will spread to all the families of the earth. That's a big-time blessing. But that is the very same thing

God promises you.

As Philip Gulley has stated, "Fear can keep us up all night long, but faith makes one fine pillow" [*Home Town Tales*]. So set aside your fear of failure and step out in faith, venture into the unknown with God at your side, take the risk of complete trust in the Lord, and you will be blessed. And all who relate to you will be blessed. *God stands ready and willing and eager to bless you.* All it takes is going from where you are to where God would have you be. All it takes is faith—faith that makes one fine pillow.

My all-time favorite comic strip was Calvin and Hobbes. I still miss it. I believe that faith is like the very last installment of Calvin and Hobbes which appeared on December 31 of 1995. Perhaps you saw it. I saved my copy in case you want to look at it; it was sent to me by a member of the church I served at the time enclosed in a sympathy card. I was touched by this particular parishioner's compassion.

The cartoon begins out in the woods with young Calvin in the lead, followed by a sled-toting Hobbes. Calvin remarks to his tiger friend, "Wow, it really snowed last night! Isn't it wonderful?" "Everything familiar has disappeared! The world looks brand-new!" replies Hobbes. Calvin continues, "A new year . . . a fresh, clean start!" to which Hobbes responds, "It's like having a big white sheet of paper to draw on!" Calvin observes, "It's a magical world, Hobbes, ol' buddy . . ." And in the last frame of the cartoon, as the two friends are gliding down a hill of pure, virgin snow, Calvin yells out, ". . . Let's go exploring!"

Can you muster up the courage to go exploring with God? Can you do so individually, as families, and as a church? Can you let go of, put

behind you, and leave the familiar, the comfortable, the safe and secure? Can you face forward toward the future instead of backward toward the past? Can you have this faith that Abraham models? It involves risk, to be sure. It means going, sometimes at breakneck speed, from the known to the unknown. But at the bottom of that hill of pure, virgin snow, there is the blessing God has for you and for all those who ride in your sled on the journey with you. So be willing to go. Go. Go . . . and be blessed!