

Those of us with children probably remember their first steps, getting down in the floor with them, and cheering them to put those little leg muscles to work. At most, there were four or five steps between mother and father. But to the child, the distance may have looked impossible. So we parents gave encouragement, "You can do it." We threw in a promise, "Don't worry. We'll catch you." And then, we offered the call, "Come to Papa." Children often stumble and fall, but they have to keep trying. Life's a journey. Movement from one place to another required.

The history of Israel begins with God calling two of his children to turn loose and move. Abraham and Sarah had already lived a long time. Yet, God got down on the floor and beckoned them to start walking in a new direction. Actually, God said, "Go" as if pointing in that new direction, but God might as well as have said, "Come," because God was sending the couple where God already was in the future. God reached back with his voice to draw the listening pair forward. "Come along to a land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation."

It was a huge distance to cover, first because Abraham and Sarah were old. Abraham was pushing 80. No doubt arthritis had already set in. And second because they were yet to have any children. The closest kin they could find to hit the road with them was a nephew named Lot. Just how could they move from

barrenness to a great nation with descendants as numerous as the stars? It made more sense to stay planted in the land of Haran, file for Social Security and hang around the rest of the clan. Yet, when God called, they turned, put their wobbling knees beneath them, and went in search of a dream that might come true, moving from what was to what could be. And from that simple, though challenging act, the Jewish faith sprouted, as well as the faith of Muslims, even the Christian tradition. We all claim Abraham as our first father of faith.

I don't imagine for a minute that making the decision to leave the tribe was easy. Way back yonder and perhaps still today in the Middle East, the clan gave both security and identity. Wanderers were easy targets for mistreatment, not to mention the inevitable loneliness. So when God's call stirred in the ears of Abraham, I wouldn't be surprised if he tried to whistle his way through it. We don't know, but perhaps God had to knock several times before Abraham opened the door. Why would Abraham go after the two birds in the bush when he had one in hand? I can imagine that saying yes to God's call - heading out on nothing but a promise - was difficult.

But we can also imagine the thrill of it: chucking it all, and heading west to only God knows where. Several years ago before Greene Coach was sold to another company, they used to offer

mystery trips. Guests signed up for a three day adventure without a clue where they were going, only the promise that the trip would be worth it. How enticing for God to make his call a mystery trip, leaving the details open and our imaginations in high gear. Isn't this what we need, an open future that isn't limited to the present, God speaking a new beginning into this old, tired world? Not knowing the details of tomorrow may frighten us some. But it also compels us forward. "Come with me to a faraway place," says the Lord. "I promise the trip will be worth it." Don't we find ourselves leaning into God's promise?

Maybe tonight on the coast of northern Africa, a dozen dreamers will push their raft into the Mediterranean. As they look back, they may feel frightened and sad. But their chests also will beat with hope, joy and the promise of freedom. The refugees cannot know all the details of the next days and weeks. They only know they aren't stuck. Exactly.

I had a conversation the other day with someone who often does work in our building. She has high school kids at home, fairly settled. "You're not going to believe what I did," she said. "I might be half-crazy. Started a class at UT." What? Adding that to her already hectic schedule? She wants a degree. "What are you going to do with that certification?" I asked. "I don't know,"

she moaned, "but I know I don't want to do what I'm doing now forever." An open future. Exactly.

As I look around the sanctuary today, I see people on the move. Don't let the pews fool you. We're all on the go here, stopping only briefly to make our grateful sacrifices at the altar. Some of us are moving from young adulthood to adulthood, and we wonder if we have what it takes to build a life of our own. Some of us are being called out of the land of work into retirement. We're moving into a new stage of life with more freedom than we've known in a long time. A few maybe are close enough to hear the distant call of the city not made with human hands, that truest city whose foundations are made by God. From life to death to life eternal, the greatest mystery trip of all! But we're definitely not standing still. Life's a journey. Movement from one state to another required.

Wherever we're headed, the story of Abraham and Sarah has good news: God leads toward blessing. God wishes to bless us and through us to bless others. "I know my plans for you," says the Lord much later through the prophet Jeremiah. "They are plans for your welfare and not your harm; to give you a future with hope."

James Farmer, Jr., grew up in Marshall, Texas. Since James was black, his options seemed limited in the segregated

South of his youth. James had a few things going for him. His family loved him, and took him to church. And his father was the president of Wiley College, an all black school connected to the Methodists. James hit the books hard as a youngster, and entered Wiley as a freshman at the tender age of fourteen. Can you imagine, fourteen and in college? Talk about a daunting journey! There he met Professor Tolson in the English Department. He was fortunate that his life took this turn.

Tolson was the academic sponsor of the famous Wiley College debate team, a team that eventually became national champions, more than holding their own against teams from Michigan and Southern California. A tiny, historically black college debate team, taking on the big boys. And James, young and brilliant, went to school on their techniques. He became one of the so-called, "Great Debaters."

With his intelligence and rhetorical skills, Farmer went on to help spark the civil rights movement. Folks in Marshall, Texas, drink out of the same water fountains thanks in part to a native son who one day took a turn toward a new future. Who would have thought Farmer would be a key leader in the cause and bless so many people, black and white? God, that's who.

God has plans, and however we get there, we can trust the plans are for good, not for evil; to bless us, and through us, to bless

others. Unfortunately, we have to recapture the meaning of the word 'blessing' because some have broken into the Bible and stolen it. God's promise to bless Abraham included material prosperity, an abundance of herds, flocks, children and land. But the abundance was meant to overflow, to become a gift to all people. God intended the covenant relationship with Abraham and Sarah to be a means of enriching everyone. You might pick up in popular religion that God's blessings dead end with the receiver. Oh no, we're blessed to be a blessing, receiving with one hand and giving with the other.

You may not believe this, but I heard God speak in a church committee meeting not too long ago. A leader was commenting on the generous gifts that members have left to the church at their deaths. That leader said, "These folks didn't leave us these gifts for them to do nothing but collect interest." That's right. They gave so that their gifts might be put to work, giving scholarships, caring for God's house, helping people in need, reaching out to share the love of God in Jesus. And that's what we've done. Blessed to be a blessing, you see. Hand up to receive the gift and a hand out to share. The church is not a dead end for God's grace. Blessed to bless.

You know what I think? I think a bunch of folks out there don't know what we know, that fullness of life comes when you

share the gifts you have been given. So we have to show them.

We have to be the kind of community that walks into the future, ready to bless. You may remember what the early disciples of Jesus called themselves. They called themselves "followers of the Way," like they were sent somewhere once they were baptized; not sitting still, but going with the One who called himself the Way and sprinkled the love of God down every road he travelled.

That's our future, called forward in a new direction, to bless as we have been blessed.

And God can make this happen for us, no matter how bleak our future currently appears. Your fate is not sealed. Tomorrow is not destined to be a photo copy of today. God is able to move us from one place to another. Years ago, someone from Colombia opened a business here in Greeneville. Greeneville is a long way from Colombia. What a trip, especially the route this person took: through New York, through a marriage that fell apart, and many days wondering how she would provide for herself. But she kept trusting, praying, putting one foot in front of the other. A church took her under wing to help her get started. Greeneville has taken some getting used to, so much smaller than any other place she has lived. But her business thrives, continues to grow. Her work is creative and meaningful. And talk about a blessing. Her story and

her person enriches everyone she meets. Who would have thought her future could turn like that? God, that's who.

God's promise to Abraham and Sarah was bigger than one generation. They didn't get to see the whole of it come true. But the promise was strong enough to get them moving beyond mere survival. Are you ready to be drawn, also?

There's an etching, black and white, of Abraham that shows him from the back. So, we're looking over his shoulders to see what he sees: a million stars in the dark night sky. Is the promise for us, too? To those on wobbly knees, God's voice beckons toward the future. Come on. I've got you. You can do it. Up on your wobbly knees. What needs to be your next step?