

ABRAHAM LEFT HOME

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US



Hebrews 11:8-12

35th Message

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Forty-one years ago yesterday, on Valentine's Day 1985, I arrived at SFO on a flight from London. It was not my first visit to the US. In Fall 1982 I spent two months in El Centro surveying the Imperial fault line. In Fall 1984 I attended a wedding in Norfolk, Virginia, and spent two weeks cycling an 1100-mile loop around Maryland and Virginia. But this time it was different. I arrived here to start a new job the next day at SLAC. It was a job that had fallen into my lap out of the blue two months earlier, in the last week of a two-year assignment at CERN in Geneva. The job was expected to last 18 months so I was on a nonimmigrant J1 exchange visa. I had no intention of staying any longer. Instead, I anticipated returning to Europe. But I'm still here! I was 24 then; I'm 65 now.

Where am I from? And where do I belong? For any Third Culture Kid (TCK), these are usually difficult questions. One answer to both questions is often *Everywhere and Nowhere!* Being asked where I am from is still a difficult question. I usually reply with Edinburgh, Scotland. I was born there, and my mother's side had been living in the same small part of Edinburgh for 150 years. But I left the city of my birth when just a few months old: my parents took me by ship to Singapore and Bangkok. I have lived in Edinburgh in bits and pieces for about three years of my life. It is the only place in the UK that feels at all like home, though I have lived longer in other parts of the country.

So where was home? When did I leave home, wherever that was? This, too, is complicated. My parents were missionaries in Thailand for nearly forty years. For missionaries they had unusual stability: during 22 years they lived in three different houses within a 100-meter circle in a very small "town."

I was born on their first furlough. At the end of their second furlough, aged five, I was dropped off at the mission boarding school, located in a jungle clearing 5,000 feet up in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia. For four years the rhythm was four months at school then two months at home. Travel between the two took 2–3 days on multiple trains and buses.

At ten I started boarding school on the south-east tip of England; I was there 7½ years. Holidays were spent in a hostel south of London: 20 MKs packed into a house together. In the summer we flew out to Thailand or one or other parent would fly back. I finished school at 17 and had nine months before starting university. My parents had just come home on their fifth furlough. So I lived with them in Edinburgh, but by now I was quite independent. I got a job, opened a bank account, made Edinburgh my own city. Then back down to England for university and graduate school. Followed by the two-year position at CERN in Geneva. Since the lab straddled the Swiss-French border I had work and residence permits and bank accounts in both countries.

Then I came here, fully expecting I would continue my wandering lifestyle for a while longer. To my great surprise I settled down. My temporary job turned into a permanent one. I got an H1 visa granting permanent residency. And I got married: to Sue in

1990. She had moved here a year earlier to work at PBC. A few months later we went for six months to south-east Asia, mostly Indonesia. I felt I was back home; Sue did not! On our return we came to PBCC and settled in Cupertino. But there was one more move: 18 months in Vancouver BC at Regent College. Then, out of the blue in 1997, the PBCC elders invited me to join the pastoral staff here. We are still here. We even did something we never thought possible: we bought a house, in which we have lived nearly 27 years.

For 35 years I was a card-carrying Resident Alien. This is a strange term; it's an oxymoron. *Resident* implies that one is settled, at home. But *Alien* indicates that one is Other, not at home. It is a liminal status. I am no longer in this limbo because I finally became a US citizen almost a year ago. I still find this a strange concept even after being here forty years. I consider myself an accidental or unintentional immigrant. But in God's strange design, here I am. And I am delighted. This is home.

Where do I belong? I may not have a strong sense of belonging in the US as a whole, but I do have a strong sense of belonging in the Bay Area. It has been home now for 60% of my life. I feel very at home in the multicultural diversity. And for nearly 40 years I have been part of the PBC community, first in Palo Alto, then for nearly 35 years here in Cupertino. I belong here. But there is more to my identity than this belonging.

This has been a long introduction, but it helps explain why I feel a special affinity with Abraham and with today's passage. As a result of writing this introduction I changed the sermon title to *Abraham Left Home*. The former title in the e-news—*Where Do We Belong?*—is still pertinent, but the new title is much more evocative for me.

We continue our journey through the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11—this long list of people from the Hebrew Scriptures who lived by faith. The longest section by far is devoted to the Patriarchs (11:8-22), mostly Abraham, with cameo appearances by Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We will spend the next three weeks in this material.

The phrase *By faith*, which occurs 18 times in the chapter, occurs seven times in this passage. I assume this is not accidental. There are three occurrences in today's passage (11:8-12).

⁸By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. (Heb 11:8 NIV)

Abraham was called. The account begins very similarly to the account of Noah in the previous verse. Noah, being warned, built an ark. Abraham, being called, went. In both cases, being warned and being called, are what we call divine passives: God is the unspoken actor. God intervened in their lives, privileging them with his counsel. Both were responsive and obedient to God's word: Noah, being warned, *built an ark*; Abraham, being called, *went*. Both Noah and Abraham lived by faith.

The call of Abraham marks a major turning point not just in Genesis but in the entire Bible. We need to understand the context for

this call. Why does God call Abraham? After the great Flood, the three sons of Noah had descendants who spread out across the earth “by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations” (Gen 10:20, 31). Seventy peoples are described in the Table of Nations, each a people in its own homeland. The world was a diverse place.

The account of the Tower of Babel or Babylon (Gen 11:1-9), though placed after the Table of Nations, is set in a time when humanity had one language. Humanity gathered together:

“Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” (Gen 11:4)

The setting for this is undoubtedly Mesopotamia where cities were first built. Each major city had a ziggurat at its center; archaeologists have discovered the remains of about three dozen of these.

Both the Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel form the backdrop for the Call of Abraham. God calls him to start a new people who will be at the center of all the other nations. He will make Abraham’s name great, in contrast to the builders of the Tower who sought to make a name for themselves. The Call of Abraham marks such a major new beginning that the whole of the rest of the Bible is the fulfillment of this call.

God called Abraham to leave everything behind and venture out into the unknown:

“Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.” (Gen 12:1)

Abraham’s departure from home was in two stages. With his father he had already left Ur and journeyed up the Euphrates River to Haran. Ur was a sophisticated city. The British Museum contains some of its treasures, excavated by Leonard Woolley. These date from just before Abraham’s time. The remains of Ur’s ziggurat still stand today in southern Iraq. In Haran God called Abram to a second departure.

Abraham obeyed God’s call. He left home. He set out for a *place*, an unspecified place. It was the place the Lord would show him. He had to trust God and he did. He set out “even though he did not know where he was going.” He took God at his word. It was by faith that he obeyed. It was by faith that he set out and left home. In due course he arrived in the place (9):

“By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Heb 11:9-10)

When he got there, to the *place*, he “made his home” there in the Promised Land. We are so familiar with that phrase, Promised Land. But this is the only place it actually occurs in Scripture. The *place* has become a *land*, the Promised Land. He “made his home” there but he was a migrant, a sojourner. He lived in tents, the dwellings of nomadic people, not in a house. He lived as a sojourner in a foreign land. And Isaac and Jacob lived this same sort of life with him. All three were coheirs of the promise, and God would repeat the promise to each of them. Abraham was going to receive the *place* as an inheritance and Isaac and Jacob are designated coheirs. But their reception of this inheritance was rather sketchy. The only piece of land Abraham took possession of was a cave as a burial place for Sarah, and this was much later. Today that cave is in the town of Hebron,

deep in the West Bank, where it is bitterly contested between Jews and Palestinians. Abraham would eventually die without receiving the whole land as an inheritance.

How could Abraham live a contented life if he didn’t have the usual accompaniments for belonging? He didn’t have a settled home. He didn’t really have a settled family life. He was able to live this way because he was looking “further up and further in” to borrow a phrase from C. S. Lewis. He lived in anticipation, in expectation of a city. He had left a city behind; a city built by mankind living in autonomy from God. Abraham was looking for a city with foundations, a city that would be solid and lasting. A city whose architect and builder is God. The *place* (8) has become the *Promised Land* (9), which points towards a future *City of God* (10). City implies community, where people live together in security under the reign of a benevolent ruler. An ancient city had two important features. It had a wall for protection, and a ruler for wise governance. This is the first mention of city in Hebrews. It will be an important theme in the last three chapters of the book.

Abraham was on a pilgrimage. He had set out from home, responding to the call of God. He had journeyed, sojourning. And he was looking ahead to the destination. We, too, are on a pilgrimage. For us, too, there is a departure, a journeying, and a destination. Our destination, like Abraham’s, is the city of God, the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem. Our destination is God himself. We shall dwell with him and he shall spread his tent over us. God and his people dwelling together.

By faith Abraham obeyed God’s call and set out into the unknown, knowing that it was known to God. By faith he lived a nomadic life in a foreign land.

The third instance of *By faith* applies to Sarah:

“¹¹And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹²And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. (11:11-12)

Abraham’s wife Sarah was barren and well beyond the age for bearing children. “Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive” (Gen 11:30). But by faith she “was enabled” (NIV). More literally, she “received power” for something that was otherwise impossible. Again we have a divine passive: God is the unspoken actor who gives her this power. What is the power for? There is a considerable range across the English translations. The power was for the “laying down of seed.” Normally this applied to the male; he was the one who deposited seed. But Abraham had no need for any special power. He was still virile despite his age. He had impregnated Hagar, from whom was born Ishmael. Later he would take another wife Keturah, whom he would impregnate yielding six sons. The power was needed to overcome the barrenness of Sarah womb; to enliven that womb to receive the seed and bear it into life. The conception of that life was miraculous.

The word “deposition” is used ten other times in the NT, always in the phrase *the foundation of the world*. It is as if the deposition of the seed in Sarah’s womb marks a new foundation, the foundation of a new world, a new creation. This is certainly true on a cosmic scale. The seed of Abraham miraculously implanted in Sarah’s now fruitful and receptive womb would grow into the new people set in the midst of the seventy peoples.

This happened because Sarah considered the one who promised

to be faithful, reliable, trustworthy. She lived by faith. Therefore, because of this faith in the power of God to do the impossible, from one man, Abraham, who was himself effectively dead, came a people as numerous as the stars in the heavens and as the uncountable sand on the seashore. We are all familiar with this language, which is repeated several times in Genesis. The Hubble Space Telescope and now the James Webb Space Telescope reveal how vast is the number of stars in the heavens.

In the midst of seventy nations the seed of Abraham would increase. By the end of Genesis it had attained seventy males, who went down to Egypt (Gen 46:27). There in Egypt God multiplied them greatly and they filled the land (Exod 1:7, 20).

God brought them up out of the land of Egypt; this was the great act of salvation for Israel. He brought them through the wilderness to meet with him at Mt Sinai. There he took them to be his people, sealed by covenant. “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” He put his presence in the midst of the people in the tabernacle, and invited the people to draw near to himself. Together they set out on pilgrimage to the Promised Land. But the people grumbled along the way, until they rebelled outright and demanded to go back to Egypt, the land that they redefined as flowing with milk and honey. They failed to heed God’s voice, so they fell in the wilderness. They failed to complete their pilgrimage. They failed to finish. These are the rebellious people of Hebrews 3, the wilderness generation. They serve as a warning: Today, if you hear his voice, do not be like them! They are the opposite to the many listed in chapter 11 who did live by faith. They heeded the word of God and acted on it. The wilderness generation did not complete their journey; they did not attain their final goal.

The faithful saints of chapter 11 did finish their earthly journeys in faith. But even they did not attain the final destination. The chapter ends:

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Heb 11:39-40)

They are waiting for *us*, so that together we attain and receive the promise. Nevertheless these faithful saints of old form a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (Heb 12:1-2)

They inspire us to remain faithful as we continue our pilgrimage. What is the connection between *them* and *us*? They were physical descendants of Abraham. Most of us are not. How do we fit in?

The NT starts, “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1). Jesus is the son of Abraham. He is ultimately the seed. There is another miraculous conception: the deposition of seed into virgin Mary’s womb. This is accomplished of the Holy Spirit as both Matthew and Luke affirm. With the implantation of the seed, Mary’s womb becomes the “container of the uncontrollable.”

Paul writes to the Galatians:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs accord-

ing to the promise. (Gal 3:28-29)

Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, are united together in one family, the family of Christ. If we are in Christ then we belong to Christ. And we are heirs of the promise to Abraham all the way back in Genesis 12. This means we are family. The NT describes us as brothers and sisters. The Roman world understood brotherly love. The strongest love was that between siblings. The fact that a master and a slave, that a Jew and a Gentile would consider one another as siblings, as brothers and sisters together in Christ, was radical. How could such different people be bound together that strongly. How could you feel deep sibling love for someone to whom you are not closely related? But in Christ we are closely related. We are all the children of Abraham. Through the Spirit of adoption we are adopted into God’s family, with Christ Jesus as our elder brother. Adoption is about becoming sons and daughters, becoming brothers and sisters. With the Spirit at work in us we experience, first, a strong affection for Christ, and thus, secondly, a strong affection for those who are in Christ. The ancient world had never seen anything like this.

The modern world needs to see this among Christians: a very diverse group of people bound together by a deep sibling love. Unfortunately, there has been a powerful idea, first in missional outreach, then in the church growth movement, an idea called the Homogenous Unit Principle. The argument is that missional work and church growth is more successful when you focus on people of similar type. It may indeed be the most effective way if you are wanting to report positive statistics. But a homogenous church is a denial of fundamental NT principles. God’s vision is not for a group of people who are like one another to learn how to love one another. It is for a group of people who are very different from one another to learn how to love one another as brothers and sisters. God intends for his church to be very diverse. John the Revelator saw in heaven

a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. (Rev 7:9)

God wants his church in Christ through the Spirit to be a very diverse body. I grew up with a powerful illustration of this. Both my parents worked with lepers, back in the days when leprosy was highly feared. When missionaries went into central Thailand in the early 1950s there were no known Christians. In the first twenty years half of the converts were lepers. They had nothing but two important things: a lot of time, and profound gratitude that God should pay attention to them, that the gospel should apply to them. My father taught a Bible school for those who were residents in long-term rehabilitation. Two churches developed: the leprosy church and the well church. It took a long time for the “well” Christians to fully accept the leprosy Christians. But finally the two came together.

I am delighted that PBCC has become more diverse as Cupertino has become more diverse. Many have come because we are a Bible-teaching church. Every Wednesday afternoon during school sessions, when it isn’t raining, we hold Tea on the Patio. We serve snacks and a drink to kids on their way home from Collins Elementary School and Lawson Middle School. Over a hundred kids come by every week and gather. They are a very diverse group. These are our neighbors.

The church is the temple of the living God. In an individualistic culture it is easy to think of this in an individualistic manner: *I* am the temple of the living God. This is true, but the NT focus is that

the church as a gathered community is the temple in which God is present in the midst of his people.

Paul wrote about the implications of Christ making the two, Jew and Gentile, one through his Spirit, reconciling both together to God:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Eph 2:19-22)

All the verbs, all the nouns, all the pronouns, are plural not singular. And the more diverse this plurality the better it embodies God's design.

Christian nationalism ought to be an oxymoron, especially because in practice it often implies white Christian nationalism. But the merging of race, nationality, and Christianity is an offense to the gospel. It is an offense to what God has done in Christ, breaking down the dividing wall of hostility and making the two into one. It is an offense to what God is doing through his Spirit, filling his people with genuine, deep sibling love for one another among those who are very diverse, those who in other society would not belong together as brother and sister.

Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil 1:27), where the verb *conduct yourselves* is to *live as a citizen*. Later he writes, "our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20). I fear many Christians misunderstand what such citizenship means. Philippi was a Roman colony where Rome settled many retired soldiers who had served twenty years in the army. Philippi was in the province of Macedonia, but legally it was an outpost of Rome, where the laws of Rome applied. It also served to spread the influence of Rome into that province.

When we are in Christ, our citizenship is in heaven. But we are here on earth as a colony of heaven. We have the privilege of extending the life of heaven here on earth. The church is an outpost of

heaven on earth. This does not mean that we withdraw from the world. Rather, we extend heaven's influence into the world. We are present in the world as a fragrant aroma of Christ, spreading his influence throughout the world.

Who does God want in his heavenly colony on earth? Our call to worship, Psalm 87, described the glorious things that will be said of Zion, the city of God. The psalm lays out a daring vision of who would be included in the register of peoples as citizens of Zion. Of whom will it be said, "This one was born in Zion"? Rahab (that's Egypt), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, Cush (that's Ethiopia). All the enemy peoples! All the descendants of Ham! The Lord intends to record them in the register of the peoples, as those who acknowledge him. This is a breathtaking vision.

How can this possibly happen? Only in Christ and through his Spirit, can the walls of hostility and enmity be broken down. But in Christ and through his Spirit the unthinkable can happen. Those whom we might say do not belong together, find to their great surprise and great delight that they do belong together because they belong to Christ. We discover that we are brothers and sisters.

Where do I belong? Because I belong everywhere and nowhere I have long had a strong conviction that where I belong is in Christ, and I belong with his people everywhere. The diverse, multicultural body of Christ is a beautiful thing, where brothers and sisters in Christ live together in deep love.

The deposit of seed in Sarah's barren womb is indeed the foundation of a new humanity, birthed in the midst of the Table of Nations to draw people together. The miraculous deposit of seed in Mary's virgin womb, through the Holy Spirit, is the foundation of a new creation. God himself sent his beloved Son into the world to become like us, sharing our flesh and blood—this is the thrust of Hebrews chapter 2. In Christ we become one big family, brothers and sisters together, with Christ Jesus as our elder brother.

Abraham left home. Through him God founded a new people, which we all are together in Christ Jesus. For this people God has provided a new homeland: the city of God.

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