

"Is God in the Moving Van?"

TEXT: Genesis 12: 1-9

by Rev. Mark Strothmann

When I was living in South Dakota, I once told a Bible study group of older ladies I had never lived anywhere more than 6 ½ years. One lady, in particular, was very surprised. She had lived in the same town for over 50 years. It was hard for her to comprehend the fact that I really don't have a "hometown." Even when I was growing up, we moved like clockwork about every six years. I have never lived anywhere long enough to establish deep roots.

I am a member of a very mobile generation, especially when compared to previous generations. Many of you have lived here all your lives. Your hometown is Overland; being from here is part of your identity. On the other hand, many of your sons and daughters have moved elsewhere. They may still consider Overland their "hometown," but they have careers and families elsewhere, in West County, St. Charles, even other states.

Migration to find better jobs or a better life has always been part of human experience. The immigration of our ancestors from Europe to America created our country. I am sure that most of us know the story of how your grandparents, or great grandparents, came here from the "old country." My great-grandfather Strothmann came to Missouri from Germany by himself in 1871. Although he was a cabinet maker, he became a farmer when he married into a local farm family. For immigrants like my great-grandfather, this transition to American was very difficult. The voyage across the ocean was very strenuous. Once they arrived here, they were isolated and separated from family and friends back home. Many of them would never go back home. This is the price they paid for the opportunity to live in a new land of freedom and promise.

Mobility for us is not so difficult. We can jump in our cars, or fly away in big jets, to new vistas of opportunity. We are not as isolated from family and friends as were our ancestors. In case of emergency, we can go anywhere quickly to be near a relative in need. With a telephone call, we can reach out and talk to friends in far away places, or even see them face to face with Skype.

We pay a price for these conveniences. Airline travel is becoming more strenuous and nerve wracking, especially after 9/11. It's easy to ring up a large long distance phone bill talking to relatives across the nation. Modern mobility also exacts a very high price on the very fabric of our society. This is perhaps the biggest price we pay. People become rootless. Even though family reunions are only a plane ride away, people in our mobile society are abandoning traditional institutions. Family, churches, and civic life are no longer at the center of our lives. We pay a high price for our mobility. The very existence of our families, churches, and small towns is threatened.

And yet, mobility has always been a fact of life. We cannot stop human migration and its effect on the fabric of society. We cannot turn back the clock and suddenly make our towns and churches prosperous again.

Even if we yearn for the good ol'days, there is a more important issue: Do we still trust in God's promises? Are we still faithful to God? This is the key question, not only for you who continue to live in the town where you grew up, but also for other people who are on the move. Does God move with us? Is God in our moving van?

Our Old Testament lesson today is the story of God's presence with Abram, even as Abram is on the move. Indeed, God commands Abram to go on a great journey, or migration, from Haran to Canaan. God said,

***"Go from your country and your kindred
and your father's house
to the land that I will show you."***

(Genesis 12: 1.)

This migration is the beginning of our religious history and our salvation.

God also said to Abram,

***"I will make you a great nation,
and I will bless you,
and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."***

Genesis 12: 2.)

The rest of the Bible is the history of how God offers salvation to humankind. God begins with one man, Abram. God promises to give him and his family new life in a new land. This promise is the beginning of a blessing which extends across the centuries as the people of Biblical faith hear words of hope and salvation in every generation, from Moses to David to Jesus and beyond. All of this began when God told Abram to make the move from Haran to Canaan.

It's important to underline that God gave Abram this promise and blessing in the context of a migration. God was giving Abram and his family salvation as they moved from one location to another. This was surely very difficult for Abram. He was an old man of 75 years. If you are age 75 or older, can you imagine packing your bags and moving to a new location far away? Nonetheless, God had given Abram his instructions. It would be a difficult journey to a country far away. Abram and his family undertook this trip because they trusted God's promise. They believed that God had a purpose for their lives. They were willing to endure the hardships of a difficult migration because they knew that God would be with them.

The younger generation is always on the move, but I wonder if they move with real purpose. Of course, people have their reasons for moving, most often for a new job with better opportunities. I still wonder: Do people move with the assurance that God has a purpose for their lives? Abram made the move because God told him to go and because he believed God's promises. When people move nowadays, is God in their moving van? Do people move because they trust God's promises for their lives?

Many people today don't think about God when they move. People can be strong and faithful members of their hometown church, but if they move to another community, new church ties are not always established. Their relationship with God begins to slip away. There are many excuses: There isn't "*my kind of church*" nearby. The nearest church isn't as friendly as the church at home. The time of worship is too late, or too early. These are some the excuses you hear when God isn't in their moving van. The challenge before us is to always believe God has a purpose for our lives. When we do this, we will be faithful to God and the church, even as we move from town to town, or state to state.

What about most of you who continue to live in Overland? Your children may have moved away, but you are still here. The challenges of our mobile society affect you too. If your children and their families are not active in a church in their new hometown, you worry about their relationship with God. All of us are worried about the declining membership of the church, as our children move away and older members die and are not replaced by new members. What can we do about these concerns?

First of all, we can teach our children to take God with them wherever they go. I am sure that we have all endeavored to do this, but sometimes people still have the idea it's okay to leave God behind in their hometown. Remember that it is important to take God with you wherever you go. This includes active involvement in the church wherever you are. Teach this to your children.

Secondly, we can pray for people who have moved away and not found a new church home.

Thirdly, we can also pray for our congregation. You have been in a period of decline for several decades, as have many other congregations. It is easy to be discouraged about the long-term future of this congregation. However, God has a purpose for our church and God will lead us into the future.

Long ago, Abram undertook a long and difficult journey because he had faith in God. He took a risk and went on this trip because he believed God had a purpose for his life. God has a purpose for us too. Pray to God so that we might see more clearly God's promise for the future. It is easy to become discouraged and anxious about what will happen to us or our congregation. But, God has a purpose for us where we are. Pray that this purpose might be revealed to us. Pray for God's spirit to renew and guide us on our journey through life.

Also remember that through Jesus Christ, God gives us the gift of eternal life. Whatever happens to us here on earth, God will always be with us offering the gift of eternal life. We have entered into the season of Lent when we contemplate the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. In spite of the hardships he suffered, Jesus was given the gift of renewed life and that through him this life inspires and guides his church. Because we trust in this promise, we live our lives here and now, confident of God's promises for the future of this congregation.

Let us pray.

"Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we ask or think,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus,
to all generations for ever and ever."
AMEN.