

## Getting to the Promised Land

Genesis 12:1-7

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There is an old saying about gardening, and about life. I wonder if you have heard it: a young gardener, they say, plants annual flowers; a middle-aged gardener plants perennials; and an old gardener plants trees?

This has certainly been true in my life. As a young adult, I wanted the instant gratification of annuals – the bright splash of color from pansies and petunias all around my yard. Somewhere in my middle years, it occurred to me that I was spending a lot of time and money every year to replant the same plants, so I began investing in daisies and day lilies and hydrangeas that bloom again, year after year. Now I only use annuals for a few containers near the front door. But my time and effort go into weeding and watering the perennials that I planted years ago. And now that I am a senior member of the population, having passed my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, I find that I am particularly proud of the maple tree we planted when we moved into our home, and I wonder who will gaze at its beautiful leaves on some autumn day after I am gone. I am content to have provided that gift to an unknown future.

All this leads me to wonder, if middle-aged gardeners plant perennials and shrubs, and old gardeners plant trees, what does God – the ancient and timeless gardener – plant? On what timeline do God's flowers bloom?

Today's scripture answers this question in an unsettling way. Abram and his wife Sarai (people we will know later in the story as Abraham and Sarah) are living in Haran, in modern-day Turkey. Abram is 75 years old, and Sarai is a much younger 65, just a spring chicken. God appears to Abram and says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.... And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Now, I am 75 years old, like Abram, and I am ready to slow down. I want to stop working and take a nice long nap. I am not sure what I would say if God came to me with a call like this.

What about you? Are you ready to uproot everything you have here in this beautiful corner of God's creation and replant your life in some place that God won't even name before you make the commitment? Are you willing? What if I told you, you couldn't take your car; you have to walk the whole way? Are you ready to go?

Fortunately for our story and for the history of our faith, Abram says "yes." He leaves his home and his father's house and packs up his family and everything he can take with him, and they head out to follow God's call. After they have walked about 400 miles to the land of Canaan, God says, "Stop. Look around you. This land - everything you see here – I will give this to your descendants." This is the first mention in the Bible of the Promised Land.

Let's set aside for a moment the fact that Abram and Sarai are really old and childless, so they don't have any descendants. That is a problem for God to solve separately. Let's think instead about the timeline of this promise. Abram and Sarai have just walked from Haran all the way to Canaan, 400 miles, and God rewards them, not with land that THEY can settle on, but with a promise of land for descendants who don't even exist yet. Abram and Sarai, themselves, are going to have to keep walking. The seed of God's promise is planted with Abram and Sarai, but the fruit of the promise is given to descendants many years into the future.

Let's think about the timeline. These are proto-mythical stories of our faith, so I am not claiming historicity at this point in the narrative, but we have some hints in the text that we can follow, so let's sketch out the broad strokes of the story from the promise of the land to Abram to the claiming of the land by his descendants.

Abram and Sarai would have lived maybe 2000 years before the birth of Jesus. Their great-grandson Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt and then rises to become the chancellor who saves the nation in the great famine. Let's place him maybe 100 years after Abram and Sarai, so about 1900 BCE. Joseph's family, who are the whole people of Israel, move to Egypt as honored guests of the pharaoh to be sustained during the famine, and they settle there. Then a long time passes – maybe 400 more years. And the Bible says that a pharaoh arises who did not remember Joseph. Pharaoh notices this group of long-settled immigrants and is, I guess, unsettled by their presence in Egypt. Also, he wants to do a lot of public works construction – building new cities and fortifications, for example. So, he begins to enslave the Israelites, in order to have their labor for all this construction. Now we're at something like 1500 BCE, 500 or more years after the time of Abram. Something like 100 years later, God calls Moses to free the people from slavery and lead them to the land that was promised to their ancestors so long ago. So now, we are at maybe 1400 BCE. And then the people wander around in the wilderness for 40 years or so. Let's say we are at 1350 BCE when the descendants of Abram and Sarai finally enter the Promised Land and begin the long fight to claim that promise from the Canaanites who inconveniently live there already. So, there you have it. From the original promise to Abram and Sarai to the entry of their descendants into the land was maybe 650 years. God plants promises that take longer to mature than most of the species of trees that live on earth. God the gardener takes the VERY long view.

What does this mean for us? What does it mean for our church in this time of turning? I would say that getting to the promised land is a task for many generations, not just for one. We are living in a story with a very long timeline, and we can trust God to get us there eventually.

God planted this church nearly 200 years ago. God envisioned our ancestors in faith who built this sanctuary and who sang in the first choir, and God foresaw every generation of worshipers and workers who have gathered here over the years. God knew WE would fill these pews and sing these songs and do God's good work in our part of the world. But God's vision for this church extends far beyond us, long into the future, to the children who will grow up here and learn the story of our faith decades and decades from now. It is not given to us to participate in that future, but we are growing toward it, and God is tending this little garden of faith every day, looking forward to the harvest for many years to come.

Young gardeners plant annuals, that bloom brightly and then die away. Middle-aged gardeners plant perennials that reward us with beauty year after year. Old gardeners plant trees that will be enjoyed by others years ahead. And God, the ancient and timeless gardener, plants churches that blossom and bear fruit for generation after generation.

May God bless OUR part of this story as we grow toward that future.

Amen