

and box out God's spirit? What are the conflicts and challenges of being in community that offer us deeper growth in love and understanding? Where are we being taught to forgive or to encourage or to affirm others?

No one can tell us whether God's call in our lives means changing our outward circumstances or our inward ones. We have to discern that for ourselves. It may be different at different times in our lives. Or it may be a bit of both at once. The important thing is that we listen to that call and begin or continue the journey every day of our lives. Abram was seventy-five years old when he "set out from Haran." Some of us are older than was Abram at that time. Some of us are younger, but not by much. We are beginning to feel the pains and limitations of aging. The temptation is to give up, settle down, and adopt a "been there, done that" attitude. The journey is never finished. The circumstances may change as to what we can or cannot any longer do. The Apostle Paul wrote, however, that "though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day." The same thing. The journey is always continuing, whether inward or outward or both together. We are never too old—or too young!—to be listening for God's call and what it means at each stage of our lives.

Abram finally gets to this mysterious promised land. God shows it to him and says it will not be given to Abram but to his descendants! And Abram journeys on. He doesn't even get to live there, settle down, buy a retirement home. Abram is part of something bigger than and beyond his own life. Following God's call in his own time and with his own years is his contribution to the ultimate purposes of God for the whole world. Sometimes we need to see this, that our own lives are part of something much larger. We may not see the ultimate fulfillment of God's dream for the world, but how we live our lives is very important to it. A small group of Tibetan monks was visiting the U.S. They were invited to take a hot air balloon ride. When they arrived, they discovered that there was room and time for only one of them to go. They chose one of their number. Off he went into the air, the others watching from the ground. Those remaining behind were asked if they were disappointed that THEY did not get to take the ride. "Oh no," they replied brightly, "He is going for all of us." (I think this story is told by Lama Surya Das in THE BIG QUESTIONS) The joy of selflessness. The joy of knowing that we are part of something beyond our own lives.

God says to Abram that as he leaves and goes, responding to God's call to be on a journey of faith and trust, he will be a blessing to the whole world. This is true of us, as well. When we live our lives on the basis of faith as a journey of trust in God and living out of our relationship with God for the sake of other people and the world, as small as we think we are and as little as we think we are doing, in God's great and deep purposes, our lives are a blessing to the whole world.

June 8, 2008/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Faith as Journey

Genesis 12:1-9

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to a land that I will show you." ...So Abram went as the Lord had told him....

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

...and [Jesus] said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

Out of nowhere, God calls to Abram: "Leave your country and your relatives, and go to a land that I will show you." No discussion. No details. No MapQuest. God calls Abram to go to an unknown land that God will show Abram when he gets there. Abram just picks up and goes.

Jesus walks along one day and calls Matthew, a Jew working for the hated Roman tax system, to follow him. Jesus says nothing about what they are going to do or where they are going. Matthew does not even ask; he just gets up and goes.

These little stories contain the whole shape and meaning of the life of faith. We are called to be on a journey of relying completely on God and our inner sense of direction. It is a journey of openness, trust, and the willingness to let the way unfold as we go. In Hebrew and Christian scriptures, faith is NEVER a matter of believing ideas about God or Jesus. That is what the church has tended to turn faith into. If faith is a matter of believing the right things, and the church claims the right to decide what is right, then the church can decide who is in and who is out. Then there is no problem burning heretics, killing those considered heathen or pagan, or simply filling people with dependencies, guilt, and fear so they remain committed to the institution.

However, if faith is a life-long journey of seeking and trusting God's call and guiding in our lives, then everything changes. Nothing is nailed down. Everything is open and a tremendous adventure. Questioning is valued. Letting go of cherished but deadening habits of acting and thinking is encouraged. Allowing structures die when they lose their vision and sense of mission is understood as necessary for new life to emerge. And learning to know and trust our own inner life and gifts and sense of direction makes what we call the inward journey both crucial and deeply fulfilling. The church becomes a community nourishing and encouraging persons to be on that journey of faith, discovering God's call and gifts in the uniqueness of their lives, responding to the needs of the world in the ways God gives them to respond.

Abram has no clue where he is going. The life of faith is precisely NOT KNOWING where we are going, but going anyway. That is opposite of everything our culture tells us is right and rational. Plan your life. Have a clear strategy to get what you want. Jump through the hoops and progress up the ladder. Fall for the little prizes that

are held out for you along the way—awards, recognition, ceremonial dinners, bigger salaries, longer titles...whatever. Anthony De Mello says we become little monkeys performing for the treats people and society throw at us (De Mello, AWARENESS).

Not knowing where we are going means learning to trust our relationship with the living God and learning who we really are as persons unique and precious in God's love. We have to get to know ourselves more deeply, pay close attention to our inner life, in order to listen for God's call and to sense the leading of God's spirit. We grow in the spiritual courage to trust more and more that God will show us the land only as we are on the journey.

This is why people sometimes do strange things. Like at mid-life or beyond deciding to go to seminary. Or giving up a high-paying, prestigious law practice to work with children at a summer day camp. Or resigning a banking career to direct a program for homeless and addicted men that has barely come into being. Or deciding to reduce one's income and hours of work to give more time to one's own spiritual life and to be open to what one really feels called to do. Or picking up one's life and moving to become part of a small spiritual community, with no job or place to live. Or leaving big church/big salary to be part of and work with that same little community as pastor. These are, in brief, stories of some who are part of this place and the ministries we are involved with. None of it makes any sense when you look at from the perspective of our culture. Yet it makes this strange and wonderful sense when you know that life, at its core, is a spiritual journey that we take from birth to death and beyond. It is getting used to the idea that we do not know where we are going, but trust that everything is revealed along the way.

I have come to the realization that the life of faith is not beliefs, not knowledge, but EXPERIENCE--the experience of learning to trust God's reality, presence, and leading in our lives. It is learning to trust our deepest self, the self created to live in partnership with God. Psalm 34 says, "Taste and see that God is good." The literal meaning is, "Find out for yourself that God is good." Don't take someone else's word for it. Don't turn the most exciting and meaningful adventure of your life into a head-trip. And don't let yourself become just a cog in an institutional machine. Jesus means the same thing when he calls us to follow him. Don't just sit there. Follow me. Leave behind anything that would keep you from traveling light enough to experience the fullness of God. Join me in this journey of faith your whole life long. Oh, how we deaden people, especially children, when we fill their heads with religious ideas, opinions, and doctrines, and with institutional loyalties and liabilities! We fill their heads and empty their spirits! We do it to ourselves, too. But God's call in Jesus continues to awaken us to the journey.

One thing I wish, however...that the scriptures and Jesus himself said a little more about STAYING PUT. Most of the imagery about the life of faith is expressed in physical, geographical terms. Getting up and going. Leaving home and traveling to unknown places. Leaving family and job to follow Jesus. This has led many people to do

amazing things, literally leaving home and family to give themselves to persons and needs in other places and countries and cultures. People giving up physical and geographical security to go somewhere else where they do wonderful things for people and the world. But I wish Jesus had said more about staying put AND being on that journey.

Maybe he did. Maybe everything he taught was to awaken us to who we really are where we are, living as people of God's kingdom, transforming relationships and institutions, including religious ones, right where we are. I think that everything Jesus was about has to do with what we call the INWARD JOURNEY. It is our inner life awakened by God's call, when we start looking at ourselves truly as God's beloved children, created good, pronounced good, loved eternally, and gifted to live in the service of life.

Being on a spiritual journey while being part of and committed to a particular place and community of faith can be the most powerful and meaningful way of life imaginable. We can confuse Jesus' call to follow him as always meaning a change in the outward circumstances of our lives. We then become susceptible to leaving relationships and situations and challenges that offer us the opportunity to grow, mature, and deepen as spiritual persons. The Church of the Covenant has seen itself through the years as a community of persons committing themselves to Jesus and at the same time to a spiritual community in a particular place. The inward journey to which we commit ourselves then opens in outward journeys, or ministries, that enrich and touch the needs of people and the world right around us. We also learn that to be in community means continually learning how to love one another as Jesus has loved us (Gospel of John).

When we are involved in a mission group, beginning to work on a particular vision for ministry, we begin to learn what these stories of Abram's and Matthew's call mean. When a mission group begins, it has little but questions, and perhaps no clue as to how the vision is going to take on flesh and blood. You begin meeting together, praying together, sharing one another's lives, talking about the vision and the mission, and learning how to detect together where and how God is leading you. That's the group inward journey--being in one place, with one tiny little group of people who share the excitement and the fear of giving themselves to this journey of being an instrument of God's will and work.

I think we always need to hear these stories and teachings of call and journey in an inward sense, as well as outward. What are the things in ourselves that we need to leave behind, that inhibit our living fully as God's beloved people? What are the fears or attachments that keep us from being the persons we feel most deeply God has called us to be and doing what we most deeply feel God has put us on this earth to do? What are the ways that we have hunkered down and fallen into patterns of thinking that box us in