

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

You Can't Go Home Again, or Can You?

Genesis 12: 1-6

Murray Haar

May 9, 2005

Last year when I visited my brother in NYC we rented a car and went to look at the old neighborhoods that we used to live in when we were kids. As we drove we began to reminisce and became quite nostalgic about the old places, Shef's bakery, Epstein's delicatessen, Thompkins candy store, the stickball courts at Dewitt Clinton high school, Yankee Stadium, and of course the old songs from the 60's (Puppy Love, Blue Moon) But when we got to The Bronx and looked for the old neighborhoods, they weren't there. The stores had closed; the high school had built an addition and taken away the stick ball courts, Yankee Stadium was there but Mickey and Roger and Yogi and Moose Skowron and all the rest were gone and indeed the old songs had been replaced with a new music. I discovered that Thomas Wolfe was right when he wrote "You Can't Go Home Again." I suppose it all centers around what you mean by the word, "home."

I was 18 when I left home. How old were you? Have you left yet? There is something that feels very safe about the word "home." Home is the place where you can be yourself, you can walk around in your underwear, you can slouch, lay on the couch, listen to your music, be crabby, have gas, just plain relax. As the cliché says home is the place they have to take you in. At home you can finally relax. If your home is a safe home it may also be a place where you experience peace and joy and some moments of quiet. It is a place where you feel that you belong. This description may sound too idealistic for you either because you did not grow up in such a home or you do not now live in one. So maybe it is better to say that we all yearn for a place where we can stop running, we can be safe and at peace. A place to belong that is called home. But this yearning to return home seems to be in stark contrast to the life offered to the biblical character, Abram. In Jewish tradition this part of the book of Genesis is called Lech Lacha which simply means, Go! Abram is told by God, "Go from your home, your family and your land to the place that I will show you." In essence, go from your home to a new home and I will be with you. And the text says, Abram went.

The midrash (which are the rabbinic commentaries on the biblical text) asks certain questions: Why did God ask Abraham to go to another land? What was wrong with the land he was presently in? And why did God not tell Abram where the new land was? Why did God choose Abram and no other human being? What made Abraham so special? We are told that Noah was a righteous man and that Moses cared about the suffering of his fellow Jews, but there is no lauding of Abram? And why did Abram go and not look back?

The midrash answers all these questions with just a few words. It says, Abram heard, he went, and he trusted. And then the midrash tries to understand what it has just said. Abram heard the

words of God: Go from your family and land to the place that I will show you. The rabbis ask, How did he know that the voice he was hearing was from God? Was the voice so convincing? Did the message come to him in a dream or a vision? Or did he hear its call as a sudden inspiration or had he been planning to leave for a long time? How did he know that what he was doing was from God? The midrash teaches that he did not know and only later discovered that what he had done was part of what God wanted him to do. But the midrash asks if he was so unsure what made him so resolute that he took his wife, his nephew all his cattle and belongings and went? Like the ancient Buddha he could have left his family and gone looking for God and truth but he did not. The midrash is convinced that he heard and heard correctly but they are not sure why and Abraham was also not so sure. Whatever he heard he could not confirm as coming from God. At least the text does not tell us how he heard but only that he did.

He heard and then he went. And Abram went as the Lord had commanded him. He didn't just hear but he acted. The midrash asks, How did he know whether his actions were what God wanted? What if he was really acting out of his own selfishness, his own ego? Maybe his actions had less to do with following God than running away from a family that was crazy or as we would say dysfunctional. Was he right to pack up and run away without knowing for sure where he was going? Was he right to cut himself from his family in order to follow a voice that he was not really sure about? What about loyalty to family and tradition? After all, let's be honest, he ran away from home. He abandoned his tradition. He acted, yes, but wasn't he just being impulsive? The text does not answer our questions. It only says that having heard he went.

He heard, he went, and he trusted. The midrash asks how do we know that he trusted? The text does not tell us about his inner feelings or thoughts. How can we say what he really believed? Maybe he was really tired of all the rules within his father's house and he just wanted to get out? What if the story of the voice telling him to leave was a ruse? How did the rabbis conclude that Abram trusted? They said, rather cryptically, one finds faith through the feet and not the mouth. What does that mean? They said, if you want to know what a person believes do not listen to the mouth but follow the feet. The rabbis taught that what you do determines who you are. For them the fact that Abram went meant that at least on some level he trusted. I suppose it's similar to Jesus. When Jesus called people to trust he did not say, trust me, he said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and follow me." The secret resides in the following or the doing. The rabbis also taught that when Abram went, the act of going created his trust. That leaving home, whatever his motivation, compelled him to trust.

And the Rabbis asked one more question, How was it that Abram was able to trust? After all, he did not have all the supports and structures that we have. He did not have the Torah, the scriptures, the prayers, the hymns, the clergy, or the long tradition of faith. He had no creeds or hymns or confessions, How could he trust? Surely his life was as precarious as ours, reasoned the rabbis. What was the secret that allowed him to trust without knowing for sure that he was not deluded? Another rabbi sharpened the issue, he said, look at all that happened to him; he was attacked and went to war to save his nephew Lot; he tried to get his wife pregnant for 50 years without success, when he finally did get a son God told him to take the son and kill him, and when he was ready to die, the promise that God had made him about taking him to a promised land and giving him a new home, that promise was unfulfilled. So why did Abram trust and what did Abraham know that we do not know, asked the rabbis. They answered, he

knew "because and despite." He knew that sometimes you believe in God because so much good has happened to you or because you have experienced so much beauty and love, or because you can feel the presence of God but he also knew that sometimes you believe despite what is happening to you, despite cancer, and despite rape, and despite abuse, and despite depression and of course, despite The Holocaust. The rabbis teach us that to believe in God is to trust when God is present and when God appears to be absent. They say Abram knew that and that is why he trusted. The rabbis seem to have anticipated Martin Luther. For they proclaimed that when God appears to be most absent that is when God is most present. Abram found that he had no choice but to trust in God because and despite God.

So it is that Jews and Christians in their histories, have seen their lives reflected through Abraham. For Jews he was the one who heard, who went, and who trusted because and despite. For Christians he is the one, as Paul writes in Romans 4, the one who is a model for what it means to have Christian faith because Abraham was the first who hoped against hope.

MONDAY WORSHIP

Monday, May 9, 2005

Prelude Sinfonia from “Wir danken dir, Gott” J.S. Bach

Call to Worship Psalm 111
LBW p. 270 - *Read responsively*

Hymn *“All People That On Earth Do Dwell”*
LBW #245 vv. 1, 2, 4

Scripture Genesis 12: 1-6

Sermon *“You Can’t Go Home Again, or Can You?”*
Murray Haar
Dept. of Religion

Hymn “O God of Every Nation” LBW 416

Prayer

Benediction

Postlude “Old Hundredth” Healey Willan

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

“CLAVINOVA CHAOS” - Please join Network Ministries for food, fun, fellowship and music at the Cornerstone House, 29th & Prairie (big white house across from Valhalla House) on **Thurs., May 12th at 9 pm.** \$2 cover charge - proceeds will be donated for the St. Dysmas (SD prison congregation) electric piano project.

ALL CAMPUS WORSHIP on **Friday, May 13th.** All staff, faculty, students and friends are welcome to give thanks for the gifts school year.

Resound Outreach Band will be playing in Bergsaker Rec. Room on **Fri., May 13th, at 8 pm.** All are welcome!

ALL ARE INVITED to Father Mike’s First Ever Viking/Cougar 1K run. **Wednesday, May 19th at 4 pm.** **Christ the King Catholic Church** at the corner of 26th and Lake. Wear your most authentic running outfit! Numbers will be provided! \$10 entry fee for t-shirts and refreshments. Sign up on the chapel narthex table and leave your entry fee with Carol.

PENTECOST PAPER BURNING - In a spirit of ‘tongues of fire’, Students and Faculty are invited to offer their (least) favorite paper as a burnt offering, at worship on **Sun., May 15th!**

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

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| Monday | Worship, 10 am - Murray Haar, Reli. |
| Tuesday | Koinonia, 10 am |
| Wednesday | Ascension Worship, 10 am - Pr. Paul; Faculty/Staff choir |
| Thursday | Chair of Moral Values - Joel Johnson, Govt. |
| Friday | All campus worship, 10 am |
| Sunday | Pentecost Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul |