

**Readings**

Genesis 12:1–9; Psalm 33:1–12 (or Hosea 5:15–6:6; Psalm 50:7–15)

Romans 4:13–25; Matthew 9:9–13 (and 18–26)

Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for [Abraham’s] sake alone, but for ours also. [That same righteousness] will be reckoned to us who believe in the One who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

(Romans 4:23–24)

The emphasis of the readings for today appears at least to be the sudden call and immediate response of faithful persons in the Bible. For historic understanding, it is significant that these persons – Abram and Matthew – are men because in the ages when the Bible was being acted out, remembered, written down, and compiled were considered to be fully participating agents in their fates. Today we understand that every adult, male or female, is able to exercise his or her rights as an agent in their fate. Men and women are equal in our modern society, and, we all may realize as Paul asserted in his letter to the Romans our full and equal participation as agents in God’s work in the world.

All of this is to say that, as part of his participation as an agent with free will, **Abram could have said, “No,” to God. The journey to Canaan, though at first glance a command from God, actually was an invitation.** Notice that what we may otherwise perceive as a command in Genesis includes the benefits to be gained from the journey: *“I will make of you a great nation” (12:2), is quite an incentive.*

Its invitational nature is made more apparent when one realizes that Abram was not the first to attempt the westward passage ascribed to him in Genesis. His father Terah was actually the first:

Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai... and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan... (Genesis 11:31)

But when Terah got as far as a land that he named for a son who had died before him (Lot’s father, Haran) he stopped. One presumes, Terah seized up from grief. He simply could not go any farther away from the place where his children had grown up, where his grandchildren had been born, from the place where the youngest of his sons had died.

That’s the thing about legal agency: you can say, “No more,” can’t you. You can make decisions, and no one has the right or the standing to contradict you, not even God.

There is no condemnation of Terah noted, no judgment from God or anyone else.

**Terah is one of the great tragedies of the Bible: life’s circumstances simply became too much for him. His intended legacy would fall to another.**

Yes, the Lord *called out to* Abram, and through Abram it would become clear how deep and broad and rich life could be for those who ally with God. (Mind you, for Abram the question would arise justifiably as to whether one should be able to expect God to act with any speed on behalf of the faithful, for that deepness and broadness and richness! It was another twenty-six years after the word of God came to Abram, by that time called “Abraham,”<sup>1</sup> to go and settle in

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<sup>1</sup> When God’s call to Abraham came, according to Genesis, he was still going by the name his father gave him, *Abram*, which means something like “great father.” When the

Canaan, that he actually got the pay-off of a child by Sarai, by that time called “Sarah.”<sup>2</sup> He was 101 years old by then, according to the Genesis narrative, and – quite frankly – I can attest to the questionability of the blessing of having a child in one’s advanced years. By contrast with Abraham, my first child came to my household when I was 44 and, now at 46, there are days when it seems a little cruel for God to have answered my and Corinne’s prayers for progeny so late in my life. I can only guess how Abraham felt with a son at 101!)

Abram could have acted as his father did, to have considered himself insufficiently prepared – physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually – for the journey to Canaan. He could have stopped. He certainly would have been justified in such a decision. But he elected, even in his advanced years, to give the promises of God a chance.

There are some similar invitations made to other biblical personages that indicate very emphatically to me, how **God is always inviting even the most unlikely of us to exercise our agency in the world, on behalf of the world.**

### **A case in point is that of Matthew the Publican.**

In the ninth chapter of Matthew, Jesus is in Capernaum, a fishing village at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus lived in his adulthood. This move is mentioned in the fourth chapter of Matthew as the fulfillment of a prophecy, but it is also pretty surely an historical fact. The four fishers were all from Capernaum, and so was Matthew.

It is interesting to note that the first five of Jesus’ disciples were comparatively wealthy, though on the fringes of society – the fishers presumably because of the odor that they wore, this tax collector because of his questionable business practices. A Jew who collected Roman taxes would have had to deal with his people’s distaste for a brother acting on behalf of an occupying government – much the same as Iraqi interpreters for U.S. troops nowadays may be viewed poorly by his or her fellow citizens. But Matthew had an additional disadvantage. His disrepute would have been compounded by his ability to charge taxpayers for his government services.

For Jesus the Rabbi of Nazareth to invite such a one as Matthew into his community of followers would have raised questions in the minds and hearts of his followers – even of his other four disciples, let alone of the Pharisees who actually challenged the Nazarene for the society he kept! Observe the fact in this story that, while Jesus was at dinner with Matthew and his houseguests, Andrew, Peter, James, and John were not at table with him, but somewhere outside with the Pharisees. Observe further that, when the Pharisees demanded of the fishers, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus did not allow his disciples to answer them, but answered them himself. From this evidence, **one can hardly doubt that the Four Fishers had as many misgivings about this newest addition to the Rabbi’s circle as those non-followers of Jesus did!**

Still, that is something of a side note to the curious judgment Matthew chose to exercise in going after this Rabbi. Every account that we have of this invitation to follow show him simply walking away from his booth. “Follow me,” the Savior said, and he did: immediately, unquestioningly. I presume that Matthew had been waiting for such an invitation for quite a while. What do you think? I presume that this tax collector had been finding life to be less and less tolerable, over time, had found that making ends meet this way was not entirely fulfilling.

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announcement came from God that the promise of a legacy through Sarai would be established, the couple’s names were changed ever so slightly to *Abraham*, which means, “father of a multitude,” and *Sarah*, which means, “princess.” (Genesis 17)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Maybe his conscience kicked in. Maybe, like the tax collector Jesus described in one of his parables, Matthew had been praying for God's mercy for a long time (*see* Luke 18:9–14).

**Maybe going back to work again and again was becoming more than Matthew could stomach anymore, and this Rabbi's invitation offered him the opportunity he needed... to escape.**

I picture Matthew like his ancestor Abram, knowing there was more to life than what he was living, knowing that there had to be more than the regular and constant fleeing he was doing (Of course, in Abram's case it was sheep he was fleecing, not people, but you get the point!). **Each had an inner longing, indeed dare I say, a certainty – that becoming fully invested in their servanthood of a loving God whose desire is for a once-blessed Creation to become blessed once more could not be achieved by sitting placidly in their familiar places.** Matthew, when called like his ancestor Abram, would rise up from a no-longer-tolerable existence and follow after a God with some pretty ephemeral guarantees about life becoming deep and broad and rich. Matthew would leave the fringe of society, where at least he was comfortable, in order to walk into the wilderness of the promises of God.

For myself I can say, as the Beatles once sang, “Yeah, I’m the tax man...” In American society, as I’ve said, we have more than just men who can claim for ourselves that full agency for deciding whether or not we will respond to the divine invitation. The call to Abram is the call to Matthew as well, only Matthew's invitation is much more simply put: “Follow me.” And “Follow me,” is the call Jesus makes to us, too.

**The Christ is the Christ primarily because he leads us into the true servanthood of God, with all its deep and broad and rich implications for us.**

Sadly though, over the years that the Church has existed, we have done a bad job of communicating the full depth and breadth and richness of that invitation. When we first thought we understood the insistence of the Messiah at the end of the gospel according to Matthew, that we “go into the world making disciples of all nations, baptizing,” we assumed that he meant for us to do it nation by nation, empire by empire. And so we appealed to kings and emperors and other government leaders, converted them so that they would convert their peoples. First Armenia became a Christian nation, Rome became a Christian empire, and so on from there. But that would come to mean that the rank and file practiced compliance as faithfulness rather than agency. The real Christian was always the priest, the bishop, the monk, the nun, or even the prince, but not the average citizen.

We tried to transition away from that attitude in the Protestant Reformation, but for the most part we only ever changed the names of the players. Ministers, preachers, missionaries, and our democratically elected leaders became the real servants of God. It was the obligation of the rank and file to do what these higher-ups had understood God to be telling them to do, to follow their lead, but never to realize our own agency.

But that is pretty clearly *not* the way the Lord intends for things to be. Jesus did not call the high priest Caiaphas, did not call Herod or Philip, the tetrarchs of the regions in which he traveled most; Jesus did not call Pilate, then governor of Palestine, to come and follow. He, like the Deity whom he embodied, called people who were living on the fringes, people who understood the precariousness of living that they could ill afford any longer... like Matthew who was invited out from his discomfiting comfort, much in the same way that the Lord called

Abram out from his father's grief.

And each of us is here for very much the same reason as they were. The very word "church" in the Greek language *ekklesia* means, "those who have been called out." Unfortunately, in English the word church means, "a house of the Lord," seemingly indicating a place rather than a people. But it is the people who are called to agency, not the buildings and structures.

And how shall we exercise our agency? How shall we be actors, how shall we be active for God? I ask this not rhetorically, but seriously, because our legacy is and our tradition has been to let leaders do our work for us... as if our sacred societies were culture clubs and philanthropic organizations that we could contribute to, and occasionally show up for meetings... and that would be enough.

The most disappointing outcry against Dr. King in the late 1950s and early 1960s came not from a government determined to fight him and the civil rights movement down, but from moderate church men and women who asked him not to make such a fuss, who thought that time would bear out his dreams if he would simply allow history to take its course. In *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr., answered his complainers

There was a time when the Church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed... They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest. Things are different now. The contemporary Church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice... so often the arch-supporter of the status quo... The judgment of God is upon the Church as never before.

**If the Church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early Church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club**

**with no meaning** for the twentieth century. I am meeting young people every day whose disappointment with the Church has risen to outright disgust... Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Maybe I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual Church, the church within the Church, as the true *ecclesia* and the hope of the world.<sup>3</sup>

We have to become the agents in our lives and the principal actors in our world, the way it became for our spiritual forebears, Abraham and Sarah and Matthew and Mary. We are the ones who can do this. **We have to support our spiritual God in this very material world. And the first and clearest way that we can do this will be to support ourselves sufficiently in the pursuit of the ends to which we wish to lay claim.**

Not to sound too much like a tax man, but with the intention of sounding the way that the Tax Man must eventually have sounded in his own preaching: we have to keep up with our own

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<sup>3</sup> King, Martin Luther Jr. *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1963, p. 12.

promises, to exercise our agency. **God has done great things for us, as the psalm says, but we in turn must now do great things for God.** We have to be ready to pay for what is required of us, by the sweat of our brows and by the contents of our bank accounts.

Now, maybe I am over-estimating what is possible. I offered evidence in *First Chronicles*, this month, from data supplied to me by Melia our Office Manager, that First Congregational Church is maxed out. Roger Lehman's treasurer's report for the month of May was pretty glum, showing a \$67,000 deficit just in the first five months – mostly due to some severe over-spending for natural gas to fuel an antiquated boiler in the Church House and further money to repair it, but also due to the challenges of keeping a parking lot clear of snow and young people's programs up and running. Granted, as Development and Finance Team members assured me when we met on Thursday night, donations will go up when we get started again in the fall. Still, just to make sure we all know where we stand in our commitments, because we failed to send round first quarter giving statements and I think we cannot wait any longer, I'm having Melia distribute our second quarter statements a couple of weeks early.

Listen, I understand. We see here a median donation of \$1,500 or so per year and an average donation of \$2,000 a year, and all but about fifteen households contributing between \$500 and \$5000 per year. Knowing how much all of us value this community, and furthermore how impossible it would be to attach a pricetag to it, I realize that any of us will give no less than the absolute limit we can afford to keep things running. Knowing furthermore the thankfulness with which we approach our Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer when we gather here on Sunday mornings – and any time we assemble as the Church – we will offer back to God as full a presentation of our appreciation as we can. And knowing ultimately that there are those little things like organ keyboards and pastoral housing initiatives that pop up unexpectedly during our life together, those numbers \$500 to \$5,000 a year, with \$1,500 to \$2,000 the median and the mean, indicate that *this is what we can do*. It is not as though any number of pastors and lay leaders haven't stood before the congregation and asked for enough to make ends meet better, or even to exceed the ends in order to restore some borrowing that's been done, *this is what we can do*. In my case, I just want to make sure we know what we're doing!

Just over ninety households (in our 200-member or so congregation) have pledged to combine their gifts with others' here. With the facilities we own and try to maintain, and the simple complement of programming we seek to sustain, **one hundred or so households cannot pay our bills without us necessarily dipping into reserves that exist thanks to numerous of our forebears who remembered the church in their wills. It is a fact of our life together, right now. It is a matter of economic necessity.**

But ol' Matthew the accountant would tell you that this kind of economic necessity can only keep us afloat for so long. We cannot afford to continue existing, this way.

We don't want Grandpa and Grandma to be paying our bills, especially when they're dead! It's nice that they can, but there is no honor in picking the pockets of dead people... even when they have sort of said we may.

Many of us live house rich (or at least mortgage rich) and cash poor; it costs a lot to live in Evanston and its suburbs of Wilmette and Winnetka, Glenview and Skokie, and that quaint, little 'burb to the south, whatever its name is. We're maxed out. We're doing what we can do. We are like Terah in Haran, weary. We might even be praying something like he surely did when he found he could go no farther: "We don't long for a place to go to; we need a place where we can just sit down and assess. Thanks, Lord, for not judging us, for letting us exercise

our agency by admitting our limitations and pausing. We've heard the invitation to the land of milk and honey, and we're grateful, but we're going to rest here at this wayside station for just a little longer, just to catch our breath."

No.

No.

No.

No. Though I will not pass judgment on Abraham's father, neither will I accept his decision to stop on the way to the Land of Milk and Honey. And neither should you! *Those who wait upon the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.* (Isaiah 40:31, slightly adapted)

**There is a day awaiting, as God invites us into a new and better country.** It's time now to be the Tax Man, to get up from our tables and follow wherever Christ leads us.

Some can remember when this sanctuary housed not only a choir and small gathering sounding the strains of heaven, but hundreds and hundreds of people joining their voices with the angels to sing the praise of God. Charles Wesley in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century wrote our own prayer for today, "O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise!"

I tell you what: **If you will not sit and fret any longer, if you can find your way forward to give to the church not what you can afford but what the God deserves, or if you have already committed to what you can afford and might simply catch up...** if you – as moral and spiritually inspired agents exercising your powers of treasure, time, and talent – will accept a challenge to get up and walk with your sisters and brothers in the light of God toward a new and promised land, **if you will accept the promises of God for yourselves, as did Abram and Sarai and Matthew and Mary, and step away from the old land of commiseration and grief, and stride toward the land of milk and honey, I will gladly lead you.** I will work with your other servant leaders – Deb and David and Melia and Joe and Laima and the small host of Team and Committee members – **to combine our strength and to invite and recruit others to join us.**

And we will come to that Promised Land, we will become the place and the people we have heard about and seen in our dreams: God's people restored to purpose and homeland, in Christ's name. Amen.