



ON THE MOVE

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the Second Sunday in Lent, February 17, 2008 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Genesis 12:1-14a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; and John 3:1-17.

According to the Akron Beacon Journal, "Americans move to new homes about every five years." (October 29, 1998). The Census Bureau reports, "Homeowners tend to stay put longer, averaging 8.2 years, while renters relocate every 2.1 years. Nationally, the median time people lived at one residence was 5.2 years, meaning half moved sooner than that and half remained in their nests longer.

In my family, we have averaged three years per residence. I have lived in twenty different homes, made eight local moves, and twelve out of state. When we moved to Maryland in 1989, we were so tired of moving that we promised our kids we would not move again until they were independent and on their own.

Census Bureau statistics tell us *what* is going on, but they don't tell us *why*. Why are people moving every 5.2 years? What are the underlying reasons? Are people being transferred to new locations by their employers? Are they upgrading their homes? Are they restless, and looking for a change of scenery?

In a sense, this is nothing new: Americans have been on the move for years. Walt Whitman wrote "Song of the Open Road," Jack London penned "The Road," and then in the late 1940s, Jack Kerouac took a roaring drive across America, and wrote the classic novel "On the Road."

Kerouac's love of the road has inspired a generation of nomads, sold millions of books, stimulated a scholarly conference, and graced advertisements for cars and clothing. The film rights to his book have been tossed around for years, and are currently held by director Francis Ford Coppola.

It seems clear that we, as a nation, are determined to be "on the road." But when we move constantly, we sacrifice our sense of place and belonging for a time. When we moved to Rochester, NY in the mid-eighties, Brian, our eldest, had a tough time adjusting. He summarized his difficulty one night by saying, "I just want to go home, only I don't know where home *is* anymore."

Home is a concept that goes back to the dawn of humanity. It gives us a sense of peace, safety, stability and belonging. People have been on the road since long before the time of Abraham and Sarah, and the value of home and family have endured.

Making changes in our lives can be a blessing. What makes a transition good or bad is how and when we do it, and the call of Abraham gives us some hints about how to make the right moves.

Move when God is calling. This message may not come in an audible form. Most of us do not hear a voice from the clouds saying "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house ..." (Genesis 12:1), as God said to Abraham and Sarah. But word will come in the deep inner sense we have that a change is going to be right for us, right in the sense that it gives us new challenges, new responsibilities and new opportunities for growth. God never calls us to new places only for more money, greater luxury, a bigger nest, or additional acquisitions.

Move when the new land is a land of promise. God wants Abraham and Sarah to move, not because there is anything wrong with their present land, but so that they will be in a place where the promise will come true: "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" (12:2). God is determined to bless them and make them a blessing to others. This can be our destiny as well, if we move to a place where we can fulfill our potential to be a blessing to others. But we must move only when we've made peace with the place we now inhabit.

The grass is seldom greener on the other side. In the case of Abram and Sarah it was likely to be worse for a while. They were giving up their language, their kinship group and reputation, their knowledge of home and their skills for surviving in that place. Abraham and Sarah moved, but they didn't lose their "sense of place." Centeredness came from being in the right place with God, and from building sacred places in a new land of promise.

We, too, can retain our sense of belonging if we build sacred places through faithful living wherever we may be. We can have a certain centeredness if we consider each new home, new school, new job, or new stage in our journey to be a "Bethel" – meaning a House of God. When we are in touch with the God of Abraham and Sarah, we can be on the move and be a true blessing to others wherever we are.

In many ways, if we depend upon our "roots" to define us, we create a rigid outline of what our relationship to God is. We take on the attitudes, and accept the priorities of the communities in which we live. But what we gain in physical comforts we lose in spiritual fulfillment: It is far easier to grow lazy and complacent when we are rooted in a place, whether that place is geographical, spiritual or emotional.

Joseph C. McLelland, in *The Clown and the Crocodile* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1970), 56, says "Once you settle down in your new land, turn the humble tabernacle into a great temple, and exchange nomadic customs for agricultural and urban ways, it seems peculiar to pattern your life after a pilgrimage. Since you are not really going anywhere, you begin to think that God stays put, too."

But God is always on the move, and God is calling us to get moving! God may not be asking us to move from the particular location we call "home," or to a new job or a new ministry, but God does ask us to recognize that we are on a spiritual pilgrimage (see Hebrews 11:8-16). We are called to journey toward new horizons. Growth is not an option for children of God.

Craig Barnes writes, "Have you ever noticed how often people in the Bible are changing their addresses? It is hard to find anyone who is in a serious drama with God who is not on the move. No one ever finds God by nailing life down, or staying in one place. Faith is always discovered along the way.

"You certainly cannot follow Jesus without moving, and you can't move without leaving something behind. Some disciples were asked to leave behind their families and professions. Others were asked to leave their sin, or their wealth or even their grief over the dead. Jesus is always moving on, and he expects his followers to travel pretty light." ("Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," reNEWS, October 1997, 23).

A geologist studying the strata of rock under St. Paul's Cathedral in London reported that the church building is moving down Fleet Street at the rate of one inch every 1,000 years. A reader of the report commented, "The church ought to move faster than that." (Gnanaraj Kore, How can the church grow? Ministry, February 2001, 23.) And so it should!

Hal Brady, now pastor of First United Methodist in Dallas, Texas, once brought his family all together to give them some new, yet familiar, news -- the bishop was moving them. Those of you who are former Methodists know that in the Methodist tradition clergy are appointed by the bishop, not called by congregations. Concerned about the impact this move might have on the kids, Brady asked how they all felt about it. The youngest child, Jason, responded with perfect ease, "Dad, I was born to move!" That child was wise beyond his years. All Christians are born to move!

The 1969 British film *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* tells the story of Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro and his small expeditionary force as they searched for Incan treasure in South America. As they marched through the mountains of Peru, they came to a chasm spanned by a flimsy rope bridge. Even the bravest in the ranks looked at the swaying bridge, then down at the jagged rocks below and trembled with fear. Pizarro surveyed his troops, all trying to move back from the front ranks. At the rear were the clergy. Pizarro called out, "The church goes first!" and so they did. We must never be afraid to go first.

Billy Graham likes to tell the story of a time when Albert Einstein took a train to an out-of-town engagement. The conductor stopped by to punch his ticket. The great scientist, preoccupied with his work, began to rummage through his coat pockets and briefcase to no avail. With great embarrassment he explained that he couldn't find his ticket.

The conductor said, "We all know who you are, Dr. Einstein. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it. Everything is okay."

The conductor walked the aisle punching other tickets. Before he moved to the next car, though, he looked back and saw Einstein on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor walked back and politely said, "Dr. Einstein, please don't worry about it. I know who you are."

Exasperated, Einstein looked up and said, "I, too, know who I am. What I don't know is where

I'm going!" (Chaplain Dave Deppmeier, Touch of Grace, afneurope.army.mil/Chaplain/word.htm.)

Abraham and Sarah did not know where they were going either. Abraham was seventy-five, we're told, and yet he didn't say, "O God, I am too old." Instead, he and Sarah, together with Lot, gathered their possessions, servants and livestock and set out into a new future. And because they did, Judaism, Christianity and Islam were born, the three great Abrahamic faith traditions of the world. Because they did, the promises of God were fulfilled. And because they did, their faith was reckoned to them as righteousness.