

# Trusting God

## *“Longing for a Home”*

Genesis 13:1-4; 14-18

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The Reverend Fitz Neal

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This God is the God who calls. This God is the God earlier in Genesis who calls creation, the entire universe, into existence. This is the God who then eventually calls to Abram and Sarai together as the first family to be placed in a relationship with God through which God will seek to redeem the whole world. They answer that call and this God we've been learning from Pastor Bruce's first two weeks is not only the God who calls, but is the God who is faithful. And this is also the God who promises. In order to understand more about God and get to know God better as the God who promises, we need to step back and look at the context of this story.

Abram and Sarai move back from Egypt where they've gone because of a famine in the land of Canaan and they sort of seem to wander around when they get back. They go from the south of the Negev up into the hill country where Jerusalem is today, then they go over to Ai and Bethel where they had been before. It's as though they're rootless, homeless, moving around from place to place.

Originally they had left Ur, in modern day Iraq, had gone to Haran which is in modern day Syria—quite a trek. Then they had gone to Canaan—wandered around there a little bit, then to Egypt because of the famine, then back, now they're moving around a bit.

Now some of this makes sense, all of this moving around, because they were herdsmen who moved with the food for the flocks. But some of it, in fact maybe quite a bit of it, is *'rootlessness'*. They have no roots. There is no place for them yet, no place they can call their own. They're following God's call. God is faithful, but one of the promises God has made to Abram and Sarai hasn't been fulfilled yet. It's the promise of a home; of a place where they can settle and really unpack.

This is very similar to what a lot of people experience today. There is a lot of modern *'rootlessness'*. I know I'm supposed to say post modern rootlessness but post modernism is nothing but modernism gone to seed. There is a lot of rootlessness. It's rootless—placeless for so many people. People have no place they can ever really call home. We live in a time of un-rooted lives in which people are faced with endless

choices and few commitments along with very little accountability in life. Because of this we tend to hunger for a place where there can be historical belonging.

You see, there's no meaning apart from roots in life. Who we are and what life means comes from somewhere. But so many people aren't ever anywhere. So there's no meaning and little purpose to their lives. They're always moving, never settling anywhere. Going from one spot to another, from one city to another, from one neighborhood to another always thinking maybe there's another house, another place. That has slowed down a little bit in the last few years and some people have lost jobs and feel rootless and disconnected from the security they've had before. Sometimes people move from one church to another and never settle in. This rootlessness gets at the difference between empty space and the goodness of place. A lot of people live in a place for years but it's never a place for them. It's only empty space. Space is what a lot of people actually say that they want. You see, empty space or space in life is an area of freedom without commitment or any authority in a person's life; a space free of pressures and decisions. This is what a lot of people say that they want. They don't ever want to be tied down to any commitments. They want to be free to fill up the empty space of their lives with their own choices at all times.

Let me use an example here. This is a little bit—this empty space, this rootlessness is a little bit like a college student's apartment. A college student's apartment (not all of them, but many of them) are like space. Few of them are actual places. There is little on the walls, because that involves a decision with your roommate to actually settle in. What college students are looking for, for the most part is empty space where they can be free from the commitments and the need to tell mom and dad where they are and when they'll be home at night. They want empty space that they can fill up with their own choices. How many of those students have we seen crash and burn by the end of their first semester? Because they had empty space and they didn't know how to fill it.

Now I don't mean to pick on college students this morning—there are so many adults who are after exactly the same thing—empty space. They live—we live, some of us, for—the weekend! Because all week we're filled with a life of commitments and schedules and “do” lists and things we have to do. And if we can just get to the weekend (our culture says) that's empty space.

There are no commitments. We won't even go to church. We don't even have to tape the finals in the NFL. We can just take two whole days and fill them up with whatever we want. No commitments. No accountability. No schedules, empty space. We say we want that.

But here's the problem. Empty space never fulfills. It's always empty. The weekend, treated that way, seldom refreshes. You go into Monday still empty. The bare apartment feels meaningless after a while, the lack of structure gets boring.

Abram and Sarai and Lot are just in empty space in this point in their journeys. They are longing for a place that they can call home, and so do we all. A house is not a home. It takes something else to turn that empty space into place.

You see **place** is very different from **space**. A place has historical meanings—it's where things have happened and can be remembered—and it is that remembering that provides identity and it provides community across the generations. It's an incredible thing to have. It does take some time in one place to build those kinds of memories.

A place is also when important words have been spoken—words which provide identity. I grew up in a small town in Colorado. Let me just give you an example of how this happened to me. Important words were spoken to me every fall and here's how they came (I didn't always like this at the time—I appreciate it now). Here's the way it would come: “So you're little Fitzy Neal. I've heard a lot about you. I know your mom and dad really well. I had both of your sisters in class, they were wonderful. I'm looking forward to you being as good a student as they were.”

I always disappointed. I never chaffed under that but the point was those were important words about who I was, that shaped me. That helped me know that I had a place; where words had the power to be able to tell me who I was. Important words are spoken when there's a place for people. Words that say you're good at something. I've seen your life, I've been around you. Thank you for doing this. Wow, have you noticed that you're good at that? We get a sense of call from being in a place where important words are spoken. And words are spoken in a place that envisions a future. There's something ahead of you in your life—something for you to do that's important, and it's good.

A place is where vows are exchanged; where promises are made. When a couple stands here before our congregation and face one another (I always have to tell them, you're not getting married to me, exchange vows with one another) and they say, “I promise to be your loving a faithful husband, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, so long as we both shall live.” Sometimes that doesn't work out but the promises that are made, the vows that are taken come because there is a community of people bearing witness to the vows who say, “We're for you.”

Or, when a mom and a dad say, “Yes, we want this child to be baptized. We will pray for them, teaching them the Bible, modeling that for them.” And then the congregation makes vows to those parents and says we will help you with that. It's a PLACE, not empty space, where things are remembered; important words are spoken, vows are taken, and demands have been issued that are good demands. They shape those who are in that place.

“A place,” according to Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggeman, “Is a declaration that who we are as bearers of God’s image cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.” It means we are made for belonging somewhere to particular people in a particular place that we shape because of our presence and that they shape us through their presence because God is present in that place. And we live in a time that longs for this; the same way that Abram and Sarai did.

Let me just say this morning something that we need to be reminded of often. This is your place. This is a representation of God’s household upon the earth. Not just when you are here on Sunday mornings, but when you are scattered throughout Vancouver during the week, you are lodged in a place where God knows your name, so do other people, where your heart and what’s going on in your life is precious to some other people because you are precious to God. And if you’re a visitor or a guest and you’re looking for a place to call your spiritual home, come join us, because this is what we’re about. And let me tell you why. Because we believe in the God who promises to give people a home and a place like this.

But here’s the challenge. Abram and Sarai were wandering around, were experiencing empty space and place for them had not yet happened. God had promised it, but it had not yet been fulfilled. How does empty space turn into place? We learned this from Abraham. It’s very simple. Here’s how it happens.

It happens through worship; through centering and focusing upon God. It says in verse 4 of this passage, chapter 13, that Abram called upon the name of the Lord. “There he called upon the name of the Lord when he got back to the Promised Land.” To call on the name of the Lord in that day was much more than saying Abe prayed. It meant that he turned away from calling on any other of the other myriad of Gods who were worshipped and to whom prayers were offered in that day. He turned away from all of those other practices and everyone around him throughout his entire history of his life. He had seen people (and he had probably participated in the worship of other Gods), he turned away from all of that and he called upon the name of the Lord alone, exclusively, as the only God.

A lot of people, even today are calling on other things other than God to center our lives around. We give our hearts to all manner of other pursuits and hopes and dreams as the center and meaning of life itself. And Genesis through Abraham is teaching us that is only by calling on the name of the Lord—only by centering our lives totally and completely upon the God revealed in scripture and through Jesus Christ, that we will ever find our true home. That’s how we do it. That’s how empty space turns into place, is through worship. This isn’t about just saying our prayers—it’s about casting aside belief that anyone or anything else—a person, a place, or a thing cannot give us what we truly long for. It can only come from God.

And this is as I've said, because God is the God who promises. As I've said before God is the God who calls, God is faithful to follow through on God's call and promises, but God is the one who makes promises to Abraham and makes promises to us. Earlier God has already made a promise to give the very land where Abe is wandering (to give it to him and Sarai and his family) as their very own. God has promised him a place, not space. A place to be and to live!—it hasn't come about yet—because of the famine they had to go to Egypt and now they're back and God finally makes good on the promise.

And once again the center of this story is not Abram and Sarai but the God who promises. The promise of God is the way God is present with God's people. Let me repeat that. **THE PROMISE OF GOD IS THE WAY GOD IS PRESENT WITH GOD'S PEOPLE THROUGH PROMISE.**

What's going on when God makes promises like this is that God is showing that God has the power and the will to make a new future which is sharply different from the past or the present. There's a future; there's a promise from God—it's the land in this story but it's so much more throughout the rest of scripture. This is bigger than you realize—this truth about God. That God is the God who promises. It means that this world—and your life as it is now, is not settled or fixed. That's what that means. It means that there is a huge difference between what is and what is promised by God.

And we tend to live (even people of faith) as though what is now is what always will be in our lives and in the life of the world. This passage is saying, "No." Because God is the God who promises and because God is present with his people through his promises, what is now is not the way it's always going to be.

The rest of the world and some of us, live in the following way: We either get into pride or despair about this. If I want to drive Laurel crazy here's what I say. This just makes her go, "Oh, don't say that!" I say, "It is what it is." OOO! It's not just that it's bad grammar. That's what I say (and I say it to tease her). I do it when we're having a bad day, I'll say, "You know, it is what it is!" "OOO," she says, "That's not true; that's not the Gospel." She actually says that in the kitchen when she's upset with me. "That's not the Gospel!"

But a lot of us believe it is what it is, it's never going to change. So we live according to pride thinking that it's up to us to deal with things that we can create. What we want; we are the captain of our own fate!—right? Wrong. No, we're not. Only God is. Or, we fall into despair, saying things will never be better in my life or in the life of the world. Oppression, suffering and the lack of justice, that's permanent—right? Genesis 13 says, wrong—that is not permanent. God is the God who promises and because God promises the future God retains the gift of newness; of new life, to give it constantly through Jesus Christ. God calls things that are not as though they

were. He gives in this story the promise of land—which is about place, and new life, and goodness and hope.

And so the question for us this morning from this text is, “Do you live for the promise, with the Great God of Promise? Do you disengage from the barren state of things as they are—the way Abraham and Sarai did? Relying on the promises of God for the land and for a son or do you live against the promise—holding grimly to the present state of things?”

What’s fascinating about this story is that Abraham, (Abram who later becomes called Abraham) in this story because he is living into the promise of God is able (in the middle of the chapter) to be generous with Lot—a big conflict arises between Lot and Abram and their herdsmen because there’s not enough land—there’s never enough land, there’s never enough food, there’s always going to be conflict—and so they say, “Let’s part ways.” Abram, the older has every right to say, “I go first.” But because he lives into the promise of God he’s able to be generous and he says, “No Lot, you go first. I’ll step out of the way. You go first. God has promised. I believe it, I’m living into it. Things will not always be the way they are now. God will give a land. There will be a place, there is a future. There will be new life.” And so, “you go ahead.” Lot chose one spot and then, before God, Abram is given a challenge by God. Look up, look north, look south, look east, look west. All that you can see, I’m giving you. This is your place. Walk through it; bless it with your presence.”

How do we live? “Look up,” God is saying. “Look ahead.” Do you see the life God intends for you in Christ? It’s good. It’s promised. We follow the God who brings new life out of what ever barrenness might be present. Live into that God and into that promise.

This truth has come home for me in the last week in ways that I have never seen before. One of them for Laurel and me is obvious. Two months ago our home was destroyed by a broken pipe and we’ve been living out of suitcases and boxes ever since. Our condo, which we rent, is still being repaired. We’ve been looking for ten months for a house. We’ve been in over 100 homes and none of them have said, “Welcome home.” We are longing for a place. We already have a place—we love it here, we love you, we love Vancouver—love this city. I love these people, this is our place, this is our church, but a place to call home hasn’t been there yet. By the way, we just put in an offer...it was rejected...you need to pray for that couple, that they will see REASON. But we’re not worried. Do you know why? Because we know we follow the God who said, “There will be a place.”

And then there’s Haiti...all of these hundreds of thousands of people who have so little to begin with and have had what little they had taken away. And have you watched what they’ve done, what the Haitian people have done as they’ve been rescued—pulled out from underneath cement? For the most part, they immediately start

singing. Have you noticed? And when they sing they don't sing, "God how could you?" They sing praise and glory to God in the midst of their suffering. Do you know why?—because they are living into the promise. They believe that things will not always be the way they are now—because the God of promise is in their midst. That doesn't mean that we can fail to help. We help them and ourselves and the world in which we live because we follow the God of promise.

This passage ends where it began with Abraham building an altar to the Lord and worship—as do we. Let us worship the God of Promise. Let us pray.

*Oh Lord, if we could, we would each one get on our knees before you in praise and wonder that the hope of the Gospel is always in front of us and it's true; and you will do it. We believe in you. In Christ's name we pray, amen.*