

Just Don't Look Back

A Sermon for June 11, 2023 Second Sunday After Pentecost, Year A*

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Have you ever had a trip planned that you really, really didn't want to take? It was something you had to do, or thought you had to do – you'd made all the arrangements well in advance – but as the day of departure drew near, you felt almost queasy at the thought of actually going. In my days as a business owner and writer, I had that feeling many times. There was existential dread at the thought of three, five, or seven days away from home.

Our patriarch Abram must have felt something similar as he answered God's call to travel into totally unknown lands. Picture it: a man "as good as dead" packing up his extensive household, including lots of people and livestock, and uprooting himself and his family from everything they'd ever known. And when people asked him why, he would have to say, "Because God told me to."

I can picture the raised eyebrows from the distance of many centuries! And I'm imagining what Abram's wife, Sarai, thought about the whole endeavor. I'm guessing she wasn't crazy about it.

Nevertheless, Abram led his people and livestock beyond the limits of the known world to answer the call of God. Paul tells us in Romans that this was "reckoned to him as righteousness." God was pleased with Abram's willingness. That willingness to obey God's call is why Abram is revered as a patriarch and a model for faithful living.

We are all called by God in some way, or rather, ways. I'm not talking just about the call to ordination, which is often what people assume when we talk about being called. Every single one of us is called by God. God has a project for each of us. It might be a big, crazy undertaking like Abram's. It might be a more reasonable-seeming invitation – something like, "Will you please accept the call to serve on vestry?"

I've always pined for the big, dramatic calls. But as I've continued down the path of Christian living, I've begun to think our calls could be small, even minute. Maybe our calls – at least in certain seasons of life – have more to do with fighting the daily battle to live in line with Jesus' teachings: To bite our lips rather than speak ill of our neighbors; to be more generous in our giving; to take the time to pray and give thanks. Nobody else will know about those "little" calls. You can't brag about them and you won't win any awards. But they add up to a holy life,

*You can find this Sunday's readings at [Proper 5, Year A \(lectionarypage.net\)](https://www.lectionarypage.net). We are using Track 1.

a life in line with God's dreams for us. There is nothing more important.

What gets in the way of saying "yes" to God's call? A lack of faith that God actually is calling us. Distractions coming at us from every angle. The conviction that doing life "MY WAY" is imperative (ask me sometime how I feel about Frank Sinatra's song of that title). Sometimes a deeply cherished idol is the big stumbling block in our path.

One of the idols that has held me back is the conviction that I must be liked by everyone. Now that is simply ridiculous. I don't know where I got that idea. But it was firmly implanted somewhere along the line. Expecting and trying to be liked or approved of by everyone will definitely get in the way of answering God's call. Just look at the life of our Lord to see how frequently people did NOT like him and eventually set about to have him killed.

If so many people didn't like or approve of Jesus, why in the world would everybody like or approve of me? Especially since I function in a leadership position. Look at any organization from a small church to a big university to a branch of the military -- leaders can easily become targets for people's anxiety, fear, and just plain cussedness. It's no fun when that happens, and that's putting it mildly. But the minister of God -- and that title applies to you as well as to me -- must not be hamstrung by devotion to idols, whether the idol is the need to be universally approved of or a warped devotion to amassing money.

We must be free enough -- and we must have enough longing for a deeper response to God -- to say "yes" when Jesus says "Follow me." Picture Matthew sitting at the tax collectors' table, getting ready to go twist the arm of some poor dude to pay not only his taxes but a bit of a nice bribe for Matthew. This was how tax-collecting worked, and that's why tax collectors were so despised by the Jewish community. They were Jews working for the Empire -- the oppressor -- to wring money out of Jews, and they often made a nice profit for themselves in the process.

So Matthew must have been shocked to be called away from that life by Jesus. But he did not hesitate for a minute. I want to be like Matthew and get up from my lassitude and sinfulness as if I'm springing away from a predator. I want to say "yes" and not look back.

When Jesus calls us, whether the call is large or small, public or private, it might take a while to clearly understand what is happening to us. And then, if we say "yes," we'll find out that God's method for ministry preparation is often sink-or-swim and definitely on-the-job training. I think this is so we can learn to trust God more and more, to walk out on a limb when the saw is halfway through the branch and to expect God to rescue us. That is how ministry has been for me, over and over again. And ministry is whatever you do in response to God's call.

You may recall the story of Lot's wife, which comes a little later in Genesis. Lot is Abraham's nephew who is accompanying him on this wilderness journey. The group gets into trouble in a town called Sodom. Two angels appear and tell them to get out of that town RIGHT NOW and do not look back. Everyone obeys except Lot's wife. She glances back, maybe just to

check whether there are stragglers who need a hand, who knows? Whatever the reason, she is turned immediately into a pillar of salt, presumably by God. It's a harsh punishment indeed, and I would argue with the validity of this tale as an aspect of understanding God's way with us. But symbolically, it is valuable. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Looking back can have its value if it helps clear away the inner obstacles that restrict our ability to respond to God. But it can also be a trap. Nostalgia, regret, longing for things past – these are natural things but they are also dangerous.

We need to live in the graced present moment where we will find God and God will find us. To be ready to spring into action not just in obedience but in eagerness for all that God has in store for us. To keep putting one foot in front of the other on God's sometimes crazy path.

And always remember: Don't Look Back. AMEN.