

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE



**PRINCE
OF PEACE**
Called to Connect



Called from People, Places or Situations

January 26 & 27, 2019

When you think about the biblical story, it's surprising how often God calls people from people, places or situations. He calls Abram to leave his home and journey to an unknown land. Moses is called from the pastures, as is David. Jesus called his disciples from their jobs and from their families in order to follow him. We cannot be called to something new without leaving something familiar, which means that living into our callings means learning to let go, grieve and trust.

SCRIPTURE TEXT : GENESIS 12:1-4

Read the scripture text together as a group.

BACKGROUND INFO

This is such a seminal story the arc of Israelites history, and perhaps the first example in Genesis of a vocation, a calling. There is certainly a sense in which God's call mandates dependence upon God, especially when we consider that God never clearly stipulate where Abraham is to "go" to! But there is also the theme that sometimes one cannot be obedient to God's call until one leaves what one has known. In the first week of this series, we said that one of the ways in which we experience God's call is as a path, a journey, something that we discover and something that unfolds "along the way." Abraham's story is certainly an example of this experience. It is also an invitation to see the story of our lives through the lens of Abraham's life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Abraham responds immediately to God's call. How do you think he was feeling? Would you be able to respond that quickly? Why or why not?
- When has God called you from people, places or situations as a way of initiating a new journey or phase of life? Did you know that it was God at the time, or did you only realize it in retrospect?
- When have you felt "called" without really knowing where you were being called to? What was that experience like?
- What have you learned about God and about yourself through the experience of being called from?

APPLICATION: This week, notice when you feel a nudge to "go," even if the destination is unclear. To what (people, place, priority) might God be calling you? Why not go?

*Additional Resource: The Stories We Live by Kathleen Cahalan**

**This sermon series is based on concepts from Cahalan's book. This week's sermon and study guide following along with Ch. 4.*

CALLED

Called from People, Places or Situations Genesis 12:1-4

Jeff Marian

Sometimes I wonder how I got here. I don't mean how did I get from my house to the church today. I mean, how did I get to this place in my life. Growing up in Philadelphia I could never have imagined in my dizziest daydreams that I would be here – a pastor, living and working in Minnesota, loving life this much. How did I get here?

When I reflect on the pathway of my life, I can see that there were critical intersections when I turned *from* one thing *to* another. My family moved *from* Philadelphia *to* Tucson when I was in High School. Then I transferred *from* the University of Arizona *to* the University of North Dakota after my freshman year. Then I felt called *from* pursuing a career as a lawyer *to* being a pastor. And after seminary I felt called *from* one congregation and *to* another. And here I am. And because I believe that God is at work in every moment of life, I believe God was with me at every one of those intersection, calling me from one thing to another.

The ancient Roman writer Seneca once wrote, "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end." That's a convoluted sentence, but it's true. In order to move into what will be, we are called from what has been. So often God calls us from places, people or situations as we move into something new. That's true in our lives and it's true in the stories of scripture. God called Moses from being a shepherd to being a leader of God's people. The Israelites were called out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. David was called from being a shepherd to being Israel's greatest king. The disciples were called from being fishermen and tax-collectors to following Jesus. But perhaps the greatest biblical example of this pattern is today's scripture reading from Genesis 12:1-4 [NLT].

There is so much packed into those four verses, but I want you to notice two things in particular. First, notice what God called Abram and Sarai *from* – their

native land, their relatives and their father's family. Each is highly significant. The land was one's economic security. If you had good land for crops or pasture your future was bright. And your clan was your core identity, the social fabric into which the tread of your life was woven. In other words, God was calling Abram and Sarai to let go of everything that gave their lives a sense of being rooted. The thought of leaving all of that behind must have broken their hearts.

Second, notice that while God was very clear about what Abram and Sarai needed to leave behind, God wasn't quite as clear about what God was calling them to – "a land that I will show you." God also promised to make from Abram and Sarai a great nation, but that seemed unlikely for a childless couple that had received their AARP cards a couple of decades earlier. Let me put this simply: *God called Abram and Sarai from something both concrete and secure to something vague and uncertain.* Why? Because that's the way life so often is. The journey of life is so often a movement from certainty to uncertainty, from trusting in familiarity to trust in God. From the grief of letting go of that which we know to the adventure of embracing what is yet to come. Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.

You see, the story of Abram and Sarai is also our story. It isn't just something that happened long ago; it's something that continues to happen in your life and mine. God is constantly calling us from people, place and situations and to the next adventure, the next place where our trust in God will be deepened and our service in God's world will be expressed.

We learn pretty quickly, however, that if we're going to walk this journey of heeding God's call from what is familiar to what is unknown, we're going to encounter a formidable obstacle called fear. We fear the discomfort of letting go. We fear that what we're being called to won't be as satisfying as what we're being called from. But the truth is, this is a journey we've been taking all of our lives. Called from the warmth and security of the womb and into the uncomfortable chaos of the world. Called from the familiarity of home to the unknowns of school. Called from training wheels to the freedom of two wheels. Called from the edge of the pool to the joy of swimming. Called from grudges to forgiving. In a thousand ways we've been letting go throughout our lives, responding to God's call from

one thing to another. It is the only pathway forward. And it's a pathway that we can walk boldly because we dare to believe that nothing, neither death, nor life, nor things present nor things to come will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. No matter where we are, God is with us. And that faith is what gives us the courage to press through the fear, letting go of what has been to embrace what will be.

But here's the big question most of us wrestle with: *how do we know when God is calling us from one thing and to another? How can we be certain?* And the answer is...we can't. Unless God goes back to speaking through burning bushes, or gets technologically savvy and starts sending texts, discerning God's call in our lives isn't an exact science. It's an art, and one that we learn and practice over time. While I'm no expert, let me share a few things I've learned along the way about discerning God's call. You can think about these as four signposts on the pathway.

Pay attention to restlessness. In my experience a persistent sense of restlessness, or even a vague sense of discontent, is often on the front end of God's call. I remember experiencing that sense of restlessness while serving a church in Illinois. It was a place I loved, and things were going well, but I noticed that I'd lost my passion for ministry there and I couldn't figure out why. Looking back, I believe it was just the prelude to moving from that congregation to another. It's a pattern I've noticed over and over. Pay attention to restlessness.

Take note of nudges, those internal pushes in a certain direction. It's that internal experience that leads you to say things like, "I get the feeling that I'm supposed to...". When that feeling stays with you for a while and grows into a sense of conviction, don't ignore it. I've often been asked how I knew that I called to donate a kidney to someone in need. I didn't get an e-mail from God, but I did feel a strong and persistent "nudge" within.

Immerse yourself in Scripture. The Bible paints a picture of the kind of people we're called to be, and the kind of lives we're called to live. And the Spirit often uses Scripture to call our lives into alignment with that picture. Scripture calls us from self-centeredness to selfless service. From greed to generosity. From bitterness to forgiveness. From anxiety to peace. Immersing yourself daily in scripture, really listening to what the Spirit says through these living words and prayerfully responding...there's no

better training for discerning God's call in our lives. But just as you don't start training for a marathon the day before the race, you can't just pick up a bible when you're struggling to discern God's call. It takes practice, and now is the time to begin training.

Finally, **listen to trusted community.** So often I find that God speaks through the faithful friends in my life. For instance, remember that church I told you about in Illinois, the one where I started to experience a sense of restlessness and discontent? At just about that time a friend of mine said to me in passing, "You should think about being a church planter and starting a new church." That's something I had never considered before, but once those words were out of his mouth I couldn't get them out of my head. And one year later I was planting a new church. I believe that God spoke through that friend, calling me to a new adventure that scared me to death, challenged me greatly and blessed me immensely.

I have no idea how God called Abram and Sarai, but we do know that they left everything behind, trusted God's promise and began an adventure that ultimately blessed them and the world through them.

And so I wonder – what is God calling you from? What people, places or situation is God calling you from? And what is it that God is calling you to? Maybe you know, but fear holds you back. I want to encourage you to trust that no matter where you go, God goes with you and will never leave you. Or maybe the idea that God is calling you at all is news to you. Then I want to encourage you to heed the signposts. Pay attention to restlessness. Take note of nudges. Immerse yourself in Scripture. Listen to trusted community. Here's what I believe: no matter where you are in life, no matter what stage, God isn't done with you. God has a purpose for you, something that matters. But in order to step into what God is calling you to, you need the faith to step out of what God is calling you from. Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.

