

Genesis 12:1-4

God said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people, and the home of your parents, and go to a place I will show you.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

In June of 1977, following his graduation from South Knox High School in May, my brother, Stew, packed up his earthly belongings, well, packed a suitcase and his guitar, loaded them into his car and moved to Pennsylvania. He was leaving home to take an apprenticeship of sorts, with our Uncle Pete Wheeler who owned an auto body shop in the little coal mine town Lily in Western Pennsylvania.

I was so happy to have him finally moving out of the house. Throughout our teenage years, we had fought as brothers sometimes do. So, I was surprised at the tears I cried as he drove away that morning.

A few short years later, I would be the next one to move out of the house. And in time, after having served for over 25 years at the Indiana Presbyterian Church, living in the manse and calling Vincennes home, my parents retired and moved away.

Mom and Dad packed up the manse we knew as our childhood home. What had been our home since my childhood through the time I was a young adult heading off to seminary, was no longer our home.

I felt a great deal of sadness as I walked through the manse for the last time. Actually, it was a sense of grief over the loss of something that held so many special memories.

God said to Abram and Sarai: "Leave your country, your people, and the home of your parents, and go to a place I will show you."

Leaving behind one place for a new one, while offering someone the possibility of new experiences, new opportunities, new relationships and in new environment, you are also losing those very things from your old life, even if you were ready to let go of them.

When this happens, we can be overwhelmed by an array of strong emotions, and a sense of grief.

I thought about this type of grief when I was having a conversation with a teacher in McFarland. A few years ago, McFarland had passed a referendum to build a much needed primary school. It was a beautiful new building, much like yours here in Cambridge. The staff and students were excited about moving into it.

After years of teaching in the old school building which actually had been the original school building in McFarland, she now had this new classroom. Yet, as excited as she was, there was this sense of sadness as she talked about the old room where she had taught in for over 20 years. As we talked more, what I realized, she was she was grieving. The district had torn down the old building to make space for the new building and parking lot.

There had been no type of ritual to help her and the others process their goodbyes to a place that had been so special, even as they were excited about moving into the new school.

The grief is real in our moving from one place to another in our lives.

In the blog "The Grief Recovery Method" they write: "What most people never think about is that moving can generate feelings of grief. Grief is the result of any change in familiar behavior patterns. Whenever you move, it involves change! It's not only a change in actual home, but change in the way you go to either familiar or new places, simply because it's a new route you have to travel."

Some of you haven't had to make a move like Abraham and Sarah, where you have had to leave your parents, your hometown and a familiar area, and move to a totally new place in Wisconsin or another part of the country. And some of you have had that experience.

Yet, whether we have experienced some form of a physical move from one place to another, I wonder if we all haven't experienced another form of move in our lives?

This one being more of a spiritual move of sorts. One that has taken us from a place of comfort and familiarity in our worldview and personal belief system, where we have surrounded ourselves with things, and daily rituals, and beliefs about people and life and God that have made us feel safe and at home in our lives and world.

We took all these things for granted, but then something made us rethink our lives and the way we view ourselves in the world, and in that way, how we understand God's presence in others and in our own self.

Sometimes that happens over a period of time and sometimes it happens in a shorter amount of time, but it makes us question everything we thought we knew about faith and life, Jesus and God. And in those moments, of change, we find ourselves called by Jesus to leave our comfort zones, to step out into a larger, unknown world, to suffer in love and with compassion for others, because we have discovered God's presence fully in them, as God is fully present in us.

In our being called to make this type of move, or as we speak of it in our faith journey, a death in order to experience the new life in Christ, we have to deal with the grief that this type of change brings with it.

This is the movement of the heart, the new birth Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, who had come to under the cover of darkness to talk with Jesus. Jesus was inviting him to be born anew. This is a spiritual death of sorts, of moving from all you have come to know about God through the traditions and rituals and doctrines, and be open to the Spirit of Love that helps you see the Kingdom of God around you, in others, and in yourself.

Just as God was calling Abram and Sarai to leave everything they knew behind, and trust God on a journey into new life, so Jesus was inviting Nicodemus to do the same, and in that way us, to do the same.

Moving from our childhood home or the place we have lived most of our lives, to some place new is not easy. As exciting as it can be, if we are honest, it can overwhelm us with emotions, as we grieve what we are leaving behind. Some of our grief is tied to our uncertainty about the future before us, yet, we are called to trust, the presence of Love in the midst of the grief.

The same is true of our being called by Christ to follow him, time and again in our lives, leaving behind our childhood Sunday School beliefs about Jesus and God, so we might mature into a new understanding of fullness of the One who is Love, and those who love abide in God and God abides in them.

I titled this Lenten sermon series, The Road of Sorrow as we follow Jesus through these Sundays in Lent. Our journey with him is one that finds us constantly on the move, leaving one place for another, as we follow him on a path of tears that will eventually lead us into Jerusalem, suffering, sorrow, and death.

Along the way Jesus invites people to leave behind their old lives, including their families, their homes, the comfort and security of their beliefs, and take up their crosses and follow him, into the promise of a new life, a kingdom in our midst, a kingdom of Love for all.

"And then there are times for leaving; times when—as Jesus counsels his disciples—the holy thing to do is to shake the dust from our feet and leave behind a place that is not meant for us. This blessing is for those times."

### **BLESSING IN THE DUST**

You thought the blessing would come in the staying; in casting your lot with this place, these people; in learning the art of remaining, of abiding.

And now you stand on the threshold again.

The home you had hoped for, had ached for, is behind you— not yours, after all.

The clarity comes as small comfort, perhaps, but it comes:  
illumination enough for the next step.

As you go, may you feel the full weight of your gifts gathered up in your two hands, the complete measure of their grace in your heart that knows there is a place

for them, for the treasure that you bear.

I promise you there is a blessing in the leaving, in the dust shed from your shoes as you walk toward home—

not the one you left but the one that waits ahead, the one that already reaches out for you in welcome,

in gladness for the gifts that none but you could bring.

—Jan Richardson

from *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*