

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock am

The Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, WA

“Beginnings: Journeys”

Genesis 12:1-9

In Oregon, there is a general sentiment that the newcomers, you know, those *Californians*, are moving in hordes to take over our beautiful state. All of Portland's troubles seem to come from the newcomers. Rising rents: newcomers. Ugly buildings being put up: the newcomers. Overcrowded hiking trails: the newcomers. You'll be inching down I-5 behind a car with Texas plates, and all you can think is, "The newcomers did this."

Now, what's so funny about all this is that it's not like any of us have lived in the Northwest all that long ourselves. My paternal grandpa, for example, came out from Illinois only after WWII, and while on my mom's side we go back to the Oregon Trail that *still* is only like 150 years ago!

So here's all of us complaining about the newcomers when let's be clear: *we're* the newcomers.

The only people who probably *do* have the right to complain about the newcomers and all of these changes are the Duwamish Tribe and the Chinook Tribe and all of the other Native American tribes who have lived here in the NW since before Christ was born and before King David ruled and before Abraham was called by God to leave Haran and go to the land of the Canaanites.

We, you and I—all of us who are not Native Americans—are the newcomers. We're the ones who have changed things, altered the landscape, and made life look differently. It's crazy to think that we're newcomers, but it's true.

Being a newcomer means that each one of us has had a journey to get here to Issaquah,

Washington, the United States of America.

Perhaps your family's journey was through Ellis Island. Or maybe it was through customs at SeaTac International Airport. My family's journey came via one Swedish great-grandpa jumping ship outside of Tacoma, swimming to shore, and becoming an illegal immigrant.

Our journeys and our families' journeys can be more or less honorable. We have come as newcomers to this land for better and worse reasons. But there are probably almost none of us in this room who have come for reasons like Abram's.

See, Abram didn't go to Canaan because the heavies were coming after him for unpaid taxes. He didn't go because he was getting antsy living with 40 other men aboard a ship and wanted to see land like my great-grandpa. He didn't even go because he was escaping religious persecution. Abram left Haran and began his journey to an unknown land simply because of the call of God.

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you," says the Lord.

Think about that. It wasn't a go from your country and do a summer-long mission trip. Or a leave your family to go to school, but you'll be back in four years. It was simply go. That almost makes my knees weak. It's so absolute and unrelenting. That's the call of God on our lives. It's the same call that Jesus will describe once again in Luke chapter 14, verse 26: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

God's call is an all-consuming call. And here's the thing: Genesis says that Abram picks up all of his worldly possessions and goes. Not by his own will. But by the will of the Creator of the heavens and earth.

But the Lord does not stop with just the call. "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." The call is absolute, but the call is followed up and surrounded by blessing. That is what God's call looks like. It requires everything of us, but it's also filled by joy.

We have been called—and it's hard, it takes more of us than we had to give—but it's also joyful.

You all might know this, but I LOVE the Northwest. I love the Northwest. My family might be relative newcomers out here, but the trees and the air and the water run through my blood. My family is here. My friends are here. It's my home-land. Which is why it was so hard when God called me to North Carolina for seminary. I was leaving all that I loved behind. Everything I knew. Everything that was dear to me. I can remember praying around that time, "God I will go to the South for three years but I'm coming straight back afterwards." The call was undeniable and it was demanding all of me.

But here's the thing. The call was also marked by joy. There was so much joy in having God make a way and then getting to walk in that way. There was so much joy and delight in getting to receive what God was doing—even if that meant I had to leave everything I loved behind.

It was a falling in love of sorts. It was the call that contained and was sustained by the promise of a blessing.

Because God's call is blessing, we have the courage to pack up our things and travel to lands

we've never seen before. Because God's call is joy we have the strength to go forth from our Harans, from our Issaquahs, from our life-as-it's-always-been, to the places where God is calling us, be it serving at Tent City 4 or walking over to invite that new neighbor whose English isn't great over to dinner, or deciding to practice love when we've often felt fear or hate.

God's call demands our entire beings. Love the Lord with your whole heart and your whole soul and your whole strength. Perhaps a poem says it best. Listen to the words of Pedro Arrupe:

Nothing is more practical than
finding God, than
falling in Love
In a quite absolute, final way.

What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination,
will affect everything.

It will decide
what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you will do with your evenings,
how you will spend your weekends,
what you read,
whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.

Fall in Love,
stay in love,
and it will decide everything.

God's call decides everything for us. And as Arrupe points out the call is remarkably practical. Our journey of faith directly affects how we see the world around us and how we act in the world that we see.

I wonder if the practicality of God's call is where we could learn from our Jewish neighbors. When I lived in Dallas, my church had a close relationship with the local synagogue, Temple

Emanu-El, and so every year I got to go to the high holy day, Rosh Hashanah. Now I honestly know only a very little bit about Judaism, but one thing that struck me in their services was how Jews identify with newcomers. More than in Christian churches, I've heard Jewish congregations talking about immigrants and the need to welcome and serve them. They take seriously Leviticus 19:34 which says, "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." The Jews remember their own time as aliens in Egypt, they remember that God called their father Abram to be a stranger in a strange land, and so they keep God's commandment to respect and accept those who find themselves strangers today.

But, we too are children of Abram by faith because of God's grace. We in Jesus Christ say that the history of journeys and exile is in some way our history too. In fact, as Gentiles, we are **the** newcomers! We Christians think we are the first ones to know the Lord, but God first came to Jews. In the words of the apostle Paul, God's salvation is to the Jew *first*, and *then* to the Gentile. When you think about it, we are the ones who were lucky to get inside the borders of salvation, the ones lucky to have our citizenship transferred to the kingdom of heaven. We of all people should be aware of God's command to welcome those who are newcomers today.

We need to remember our identity as newcomers—both as newcomers to the beautiful NW and as newcomers to the household of God. We need to remember the grace given to us because there are a lot of people today who are calling us to forget that grace and to put up more walls and strengthen more borders. Our answer to walls and borders needs to be no. No because our citizenship is not primarily in the United States of America or the state of Washington or the city of Issaquah, but our citizenship is in heaven—whose boundaries have opened up to

bring us in—and our leader is Jesus—who made us who were newcomers, full heirs of the kingdom.

This is our call: to receive those who are newcomers like us, to make easier the journeys of those who wander as strangers in a strange land.

We do this because we have fallen in love with God. Falling in love with God, saying yes to God's call, has decided everything. It's makes us strangers and aliens even if we stay in the same town we grew up in. God's call pulls up the anchors of our lives—the things we never thought we could let go of—and it sets us out sailing on the open waters of faith. It's a call that makes us all beginners. God's call on each of our lives is constantly uprooting us, taking us back to the beginning, to the garden, to the one who is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. See all of this journeying, all of these beginnings and beginnings again are all to take us toward God. And not just us but all of humanity. I have blessed you so that you may be a blessing to the whole world.

I have blessed you so that you might take in the stranger. I have blessed you so that the whole world might know the love and power of God.

Our call is our blessing. Our call is absolute and sometimes hard, but it also is our joy. So newcomers. Gentiles. Strangers in the strange new world of Gospel living. Blessed are the people who know their beginning is in God. Blessed are the ones who sail on the seas of faith. Blessed is Jesus Christ, who overcomes our boundaries, who leaps over our walls, who loves us with an everlasting love. Amen.