

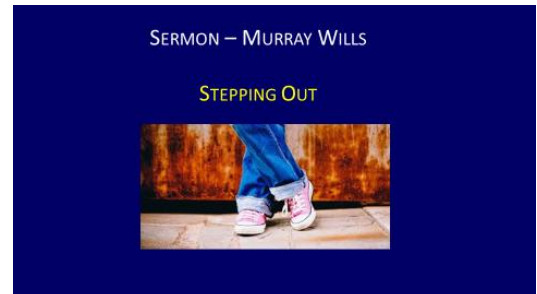
# Sermon

Genesis 12:1-4; John 3:1-17

Preached at St James' Church Lower Hutt, New Zealand, 12 March 2017

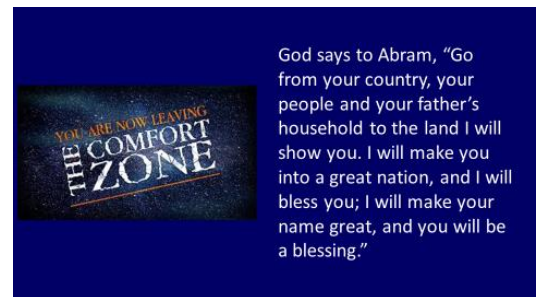
By Murray Wills

**May the words of my mouth  
and the meditations of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.**



Referring to our Genesis reading today, when we first meet Abraham in the Bible, he is Abram, the son of Terah, living in the land of Ur, close to the Persian Gulf. But Ur is not destined to be his home.

God says to Abram, *“Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.”*



The ultimate goal for Abraham is not to be at home. The shocking thing is that for him to be blessed and be a blessing to others, he must leave his home. He can't stay. He has to depart into the unknown. Nor can he hope or long to return.

Imagine the shock. Who is Abram going to be, now that he is no longer comfortable in the world he has built for himself and his family? God simply told him to go. And he does! “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him...” He was 75 years old.

As the Bible presents him, Abraham and Sarah live by faith in God. They trust that the place God directs them to, even if it is an unknown or terrifying place, is the place they most need to be. The story of Sarah and Abraham teaches us that a place of blessing is to be found by departing into the unknown.

- What's it like to depart and know that you will never return home?
- What's it like to go and not know your destination?
- What are you prepared to risk, what fears are you willing to face, to go?

The Bible is full of stories of people who, when asked by God to go, they go. Their going is not always a physical departure to a new address.

The “unknown land” can also be a new task, a new service, a new neighbourhood, even a new group of friends.

As scripture shows, sometimes people respond with resistance, or worry, or suspicion, but the mark of faithfulness is that people respond by going. God appears to Moses in a burning bush and says, go to Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go. Moses is doubtful, but he goes.



God instructs Joshua and the Israelites to go into the Promised Land. The people are fearful, but they go.

## The Promised Land

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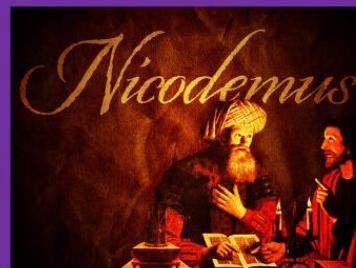
Joshua 1:1-5

Move, now, to the New Testament and think of young Mary's willingness to enter the unknown, even unimaginable, territory of unmarried pregnancy! Without her willingness to listen to the angel Gabriel and her trust in the power of the Holy Spirit would we even have the gospel as we know it?



In the gospels, Jesus approaches people like Matthew and Levi, tax collectors, and says leave the world you know and follow me. They go. Jesus is in a fishing boat with Simon and James and John, and then tells them to leave their boats so they can follow him and become fishers of people. Clearly frightened by the prospect, they nonetheless leave everything and go.

In today's gospel lesson Jesus tells Nicodemus that to enter into the Kingdom of God he must first be "born from above" and "born of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8). This is a strange way of speaking. What sort of place is the Kingdom of God, and why is it that you can only get there by means of another birth? Rather awkwardly, perhaps thinking about the biology or mechanics of it all, Nicodemus asks, how can a grown person be born again? Must they first re-



enter their mother's womb and make the journey through the birth canal again? A fairly terrifying prospect, I think, even for the nurses and midwives among us and the doctors at Hutt Hospital!

Nicodemus is being called into a life of faith. He is being asked to be "born again," which means he is being asked to leave what he knows and the womb-like home he has built for himself, all the familiarity and security and comfort that have given meaning to his life, and trust the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus alerts us to a profound truth about human existence. For life to flourish, people must first leave the safety and warmth and nurture of the mother's womb. You cannot stay. Think what that would do to the poor mother! That seems obvious, but then upon further reflection we may discover that we spend a lot of time as adults creating surrogate wombs that protect us from the harsh realities of the world.



Change is hard. Sometimes it's really hard. Sometimes it hurts.

This is why we need to hear the promise of God: God does not call anyone to go anywhere without also committing to go with them every step of the way.



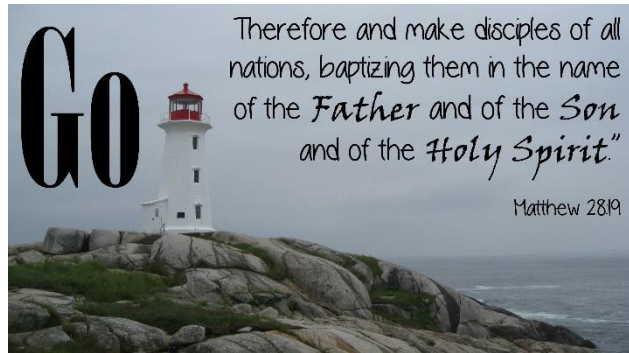
Long before the days of Google Maps and GPS, God showed Abram where to go by being present to him in covenantal relationship. God promises to the Israelites that he will cross the river Jordan before them and that they should have no fear: "Be strong and bold ... because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6). He does not abandon them.

Though there may be plenty of times when we feel we have been abandoned, the story of Jesus Christ is that God will be our companion even when we enter the darkest and most terrifying and most lonely places of our world.

Our theme today is 'stepping out'. In our Genesis reading today God calls Abram to growth and discovery. We are called to step out, just like those I have mentioned. We are called to grow in faith and in relationship with God throughout our lives. We are called to discover, to learn, to watch, to love, to trust. We are also called to help others come to faith to be disciples. We are not called to retreat back into the womb or our comfortable place. We are called to carry out the Great commission.



Matthew 28:19-20 *“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (NIV)*



The diocese is going through a journey of transformation with God. This might have started when Tom Brown chose to ordain +Justin as a Priest, or it may have started when +Justin was chosen subsequently by the Diocese, by us, as our Bishop, and this transformative movement of faith communities is happening in our parishes as well. It is happening in this parish. The Diocese, and this parish is at a crossroads. We are lucky as a large parish to have been sheltered until now from worst of the storm, but we can see the clouds approaching. Sadly, for some parishes it is too late.



We have discerned a new form of worship (this service). It is new for those from the tradition of the 10.30am Service, and it is new for those from the tradition of the 9am Service. Some of the music is currently familiar to those from the 9am Service and some to those from the 10.30am Service. And this will be the case today. The music today has been specifically chosen. Some will know all of it, some will know some of it. It is not 'new'. I for one look forward to the introduction also of the occasional new piece to our repertoire.

I really want to say at this point a big thank you to Eliza for stepping up to showcase her musical gifting today.

This is a new service, it is change. It is evolving. It will continue to change and evolve. We all have a part to play in its evolution, but God does too. It is us stepping up, and I really hope it is also a sign of us stepping out into the community as disciples to spread the good news, fulfilling our commission.

Starting with lunches after Church, creating disciples, entering into wonderful Lenten studies, and seminar series, fantastic youth activities. I feel a new vitality in our community, which I for one am totally committed to. There are things I like and things I don't but I am here for God!

I look forward to God showing me, and us the way, and I look forward to the Holy Spirit being present with us as we try new things, and we glorify God in unexpected ways. As we allow space in the service for new things, perhaps surprising things. As we invite the community into this place, to share with us, and add other dynamics to our worship life here, but also as we take the Gospel out as we have so faithfully promised to do.

As Christians, our home is not the place we build for ourselves, the place where we can be comfortable and secure, knowing that we have done everything we can to be masters of our own fate. Our home is the Kingdom of God, a place that we enter under the steam and companionship of the Holy Spirit.

For me it is time to step out, to grow the Church, to do what we are called to do as disciples and to invite people into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

What about you?

### **References**

*Part of this sermon is based on a sermon entitled "Time to Go" preached in Duke Chapel by Dr. Norman Wirzba on March 16, 2014. It is used with permission.*