

+ October 14th, 2018 + Founder's Day + Pr. John Petersen

Genesis 12:1-4: *Now the LORD had said to Abram:*

"Get out of your country,

From your family

And from your father's house,

To a land that I will show you.

²*I will make you a great nation;*

I will bless you

And make your name great;

And you shall be a blessing.

³*I will bless those who bless you,*

And I will curse him who curses you;

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴*So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.*

WE ARE CALLED TO WALK IN THE GOOD WAY

This morning the churches across our Evangelical Lutheran Synod are observing Founder's Day, as we celebrate the synod's 100th anniversary. In doing this we would like to consider our text from Genesis 12:1-4, and the message based on those verses delivered at the opening convention, held in June of 1918 at Lime Creek Lutheran church in northern Iowa.

The sermon on that occasion was delivered by the Rev. Bjug Harstad of Tacoma, Washington, who was elected at the first president of the synod. We should point out that Pres. Harstad was the grandfather of our MO members, Herman Harstad, and the late Prof. Mark Harstad.

The little assembly gathered in Lime Creek had refused to go along with the much larger group of congregations and synods which merged into the Norwegian Ev. Lutheran Church.

Our forefathers declined to go along because they realized that this new merger church was unable to answer the question: "How do I come to faith?" It's hard to imagine a more dangerous weakness, since the Bible clearly tells us that it is by faith we are saved. Is that faith which saves a good work on the part of the believer, or is it, along with salvation, also a gift from God? The founders recognized a sad and distressing reality, that the larger Norwegian church had departed from that ancient and comforting truth, that God is the sole source of our deliverance from sin, death and hell, and of the faith which accepts it.

In His opening remarks, Pastor Harstad stated:

We have, dear friends, gathered here by the liberty which we enjoy in Christ Jesus. We are, as it were, clustering around the old building site which is storm swept and waste. A destructive hurricane has swept away the dear old mansion, even taking with it most of them that dwelt there. Discouraged, looking around, we discover only the bare ground with wreckage and dangerous crossroads. Yet let us not be too much alarmed nor

discouraged. Worse things have repeatedly happened to the church before this, without its being destroyed. Let us remember and follow these words of Jeremiah, the prophet "Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." (Jeremiah 6:16)

With that he began his explanation of the text before us today, 100 years later. As we look at it we note this theme: **OUR CHRISTIAN CALLING: A WALKING IN THE GOOD WAY.**

Our text begins, "Now the Lord had said to Abraham, 'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you.'" We see first that walking in the good way, as Abraham did, means walking away from certain places and things. The command given to Abraham was simple enough, but not so simple to obey. Abraham had lived for many years in the country of Haran. He and his parents and family had put down roots and prospered there. It was there he met his wife. He was content in that place. But in calling him to leave, God was being gracious, since that place and its citizens were devoted to the worship of idols.

In departing, Abraham would also leave behind his people, that is, his friends and neighbors. We find comfort and security with familiar faces and old friends, the people who are with us and around us every day. To leave them is not easy.

This command to get out meant also that Abraham would now have to leave his family members and other relatives with whom he lived at home. Abraham was given no assurance that he would ever return, that he would ever see his father again. His only companions for the journey would be his wife, Sara, and his nephew, Lot. All the rest of his siblings and dear friends would be left behind. So we see that this command God gave Abraham to leave involved a total separation from his previous surroundings and relationships.

In his sermon at Lime Creek, Pastor Harstad explained: *"In order that our journey and labors may be pleasing to God, the first and most important step is that we by the Lord are called out of our original condition, our natural flesh, in sin conceived and shapen... and turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. This the Lord did graciously do to us all in our childhood by baptism, which is the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost."*

We should not expect to hear God's voice in the same way Abraham did - telling us rent a u haul, to pack up and leave everything to go and live in a strange place. Yet God does speak to us in His holy word, and there He tells us that our relationship with Him is more important than any other. We should be willing to depart from anything that would threaten that relationship. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me and the Gospel will save it."

How appropriate for the founders of our synod to hear this message in their day following the merger. By refusing to go along with the merger and establishing their own, much smaller synod, they were leaving behind the familiar and setting out for parts

unknown. Doing this meant that old friendships and even some family relationships would be strained and possibly lost. But they saw in the word of God a calling to walk in the right way, even if that meant going through a sad and difficult departure.

Pastor Harstad said, in his own sermon 100 years ago: *“If we would not follow God’s word until we have the masses along with us, what could we then believe or do? ... His word is the plainest and His will is the best thing we know of in this world. That word is full of promises to us. The only trouble is, that we in our flesh have a big part of the world which is inclined to all evil. Our sinful nature has a keen sense and great cunning to make even disobedience and rejection of scripture to appear reasonable... Therefore we must help each other to hear and keep His word. Otherwise we will surely go astray.”*

But the Lord, who called upon Abraham to take such a journey, also equipped him and strengthened him for the journey. He did so by His great and gracious promises. He said to him: “I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.”

Though Abraham was taken from his known family in Haran, the Lord promised to cut his loneliness and to give him a nation of descendants.

And for his strengthening in faith, to that promise God added this: That salvation from sin and hell would come to everyone through Abraham’s nation. Jesus would come from his people, the Redeemer who has now come and blessed every person by His own life of obedience to the Father’s will, and by His sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the world. Through that promised Savior, you and I today enjoy the greatest blessing and comfort: the forgiveness of all our sins against God!

God directed Abraham to leave the security of his father’s home in Haran. In exchange God promised to be his Father. He promised Abraham: “I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” By that promise, God elevated Abraham to the status of His child. Just as any father will protect and defend his children, so God offered and gave Abraham His divine protection and care. And so we live each day with this promise of God’s presence in our lives and His loving guidance and protection.

Near the close of his sermon in 1918, Pastor Harstad summarized, saying: *“Such are the blessings, flowing from strict obedience and adherence to everyone of God’s words, even though it should call down upon us the curse and persecution of the world, and to us only seem to bring only defeat and destruction... Yet we will not swerve from the truth, for the Lord is on our side.”*

Today we here at Mt Olive, along with our brothers and sisters in the other ELS churches are gathering for this important purpose: to give thanks to God for the bold faith of our synod’s founders and their sturdy reliance on all that God promises us in His word. If the world should still be standing 100 years from now, may that boldness before the world’s laughter and contempt, and that strong and faithful obedience be our legacy to future generations! May God grant that to us for our Savior’s sake. Amen.