



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

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The Fourth Sunday After Trinity, July 17th, 2011

**✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN. ✠**

Today's Communion Epistle is a bit of a "downer." St. Paul's opening words set the tone: "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

Some of us, doubtless, associate the word suffering with the physical aches and pains of encroaching age. Younger folk probably dismiss physical aches as trivial in comparison with the emotional pains they suffer – heartaches of broken love affairs; trying to please both parents and peers; pressure to succeed in school, college or the work place.

But to see real suffering, just take a look at a reading from the Book of Genesis appointed as one of the lessons for the Morning Office. It begins: "Now the Lord said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee . . ."

Most of us are so familiar with the story of Abraham, as he was later called, that we seldom bother to think about him as a human being. Some of us probably think of him as a mythical figure – or at least as someone who lived so long ago, his story has no relevance to our own lives.

But if you read the Genesis account of Abraham's life as straightforward biography, rather than Holy Scripture, you will see nothing "mythical" about him. He was a real flesh and blood human being. Just like like us, he had hopes, dreams, fears, strengths and weaknesses. He was no hero – just an ordinary person, trying to do God's will.

It is his constant effort to do God's will that sets him apart from the rest of us. Genesis doesn't tell us how many people God called on before he spoke to Abraham. But, judging by the fact that he tries to speak to everyone of us today, we can reasonably infer that he spoke to an awful lot folks before he got around to Abraham. And what makes Abraham different from the rest of them was that he not only listened to what God had to say, but he responded.

Genesis describes the way Abraham and his wife Sarah lived only in very general terms. They were born in a city called Ur of the Chaldees. But eventually, Abraham's father, Terah, relocated the family's trading business -- and, of course, his entire family – to a town called Haran.

Archaeology fills in the blanks: Ur was

vast with fine government buildings, magnificent temples, and a vibrant cultural life. It was a major commercial center and business tycoons, like Abraham's father, lived like princes in Ur of the Chaldees. Haran was quite unlike Ur. It was a frontier boomtown, a bit like St. Louis or even Deadwood in the mid-nineteenth century. And there was a whole bunch of money to be made there.

Ur's trading companies dealt with the world beyond the frontier through Haran's export firms. By moving there, Abraham's family business had cut out the middle man – thus keeping much more of the profits for themselves. It was a very astute commercial move.

After the death of his father, Abraham took over as chief executive of the family firm, and was, doubtless, enjoying life as one of Haran's most influential citizens when God gave him his marching orders: "Now the Lord said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee . . ."

Now consider the implications of what God was telling him to do: Abraham, we must remember, was a hugely successful businessman, at the very height of his career. Hundreds of people depended on him for their living. He exerted major political clout in the city of Haran and, less directly, in Ur. And Sarah, his wife, was president of the Women's Club of Haran (Haran's equivalent of the Women's Club of Roland Park), not to mention the Daughters of the Chaldean Revolution.

God was asking this man and woman to give up everything that they had worked for and dreamed of – everything they knew and cherished. And not only was he asking them to do that, He was also asking them to take a huge step into the unknown; to leave the civilization and culture of one of the world's great city's, and to head off in a pioneer wagon train into a wild and untamed land of which they had only the sketchiest knowledge.

In return, God promised them the one thing they the one thing they really wanted: direct descendants – not just children and grand children, but a whole slew of descendants; a "great nation" in which "all the families of the world" would be blessed. It was a tremendous offer, but one could forgive a guy of 75 and his middle-aged wife for being a bit skeptical. Indeed, this might explain why Abraham was the first person to respond to God's call.

More than four thousand years have passed since Abraham and Sarah gathered their employees together, loaded their possession on to donkeys and camels and headed off on the trek that would eventually lead their descendants to the Promised Land. Their's, however, has not been an isolated experience. In the intervening years, God has continued to call people to serve him by undertaking extraordinary missions.

Some might be called upon to exchange a magnificent palace and a retinue of servants for the austerity of a monastic cell. Others might be called to leave home and family and travel to strange and dangerous parts of the world to preach Christ's Gospel to people who are barely civilized.

Most of us aren't put to such stringent tests. For most, God's commission will be rather more modest. Some he will call to serve as priests, deacons, teachers and lay readers; some as acolytes, altar guild workers, wardens and vestrymen. But the majority will simply be asked to bear witness to their faith in their communities.

Every call, however, has one thing in common: God always asks us to do more than we think we are capable of doing. But no matter what task God sets, no matter how inadequate we think we are to it, there is only one answer to give Him. It is found in the fourth verse of the 12th chapter of Genesis: "So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him."
AMEN.