

WHERE YOU PITCH YOUR TENT
GENESIS 12:1-9

June 8, 2008
University Church of Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

The chairman and CEO of Home Depot told the story of the lion and the gazelle at a business conference a few years ago: Every morning in Africa a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning the lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle: when the sun comes up, you'd better be running.

That's the kind of story you expect the CEO of a major corporation to tell, isn't it? It's a story runners respond to, a story that prods most of us to push a little harder, try a little more earnestly. It's a good story for a sales meeting or for a denominational executive to tell to those burned-out hulks one encounters at annual conference or district meetings. But life is not just about running and succeeding and trying a little harder to be good. You know people as I do who are incapable of running, who do get eaten by lions, people who live on life's margins. At one time or another we all get tired or slow down or suffer an infirmity that puts us on the sidelines. What then?

As Eugene Peterson has pointed out, "Any time we look into newspapers, or into our own hearts, and despair, we do well to remember that God's people have faced similar prospects, similar reversals, similar headlines, similar assaults on faith, and have recovered from the doubt, been rescued from the pessimism and foreboding and gone on to live in praise of God."

If I could sum up about 90 percent of the sermons that will be preached this weekend — as well as a lot of sermons I have preached—the summary would go something like this:

1. You have a problem.
2. Christ is the answer
3. God's grace is available. Take it and live.

The remarkable thing about that outline is that the same sermon is being delivered today by fundamentalists, liberals, evangelicals and social activists. Although it may be couched in different slogans, metaphors, stories and symbols, the sermonic pattern remains amazingly consistent.

Traditionally, the preacher begins by noting assorted evidences of the wretched state of humanity. She will say (perhaps) that “all have sinned and fallen short” or (another way of saying the same thing) “we are full of pride, false self-security and even self-righteousness” or (the way you are most likely to hear it in a typical middle-class North American church) “we have built a materialistic culture in America which ignores the world’s poor and powerless.”

To prove the case, the preacher throws in a few juicy examples of our utter depravity: divorce statistics, drug abuse, suicide, teenage pregnancies, the whole bit. The major part of the sermon relies on the same theory as the story of the lion and the gazelle. We have to keep running. We have to try a little harder. We’re almost lost but God has provided the answer. Grace is available. Take up your bed and walk.

And the people love it! The more you hit on them, the more dire the statistics, the worse the case you make about sin and human depravity, the more gleeful become the spiritual masochists who drove miles or took several busses to get to church. “You really stepped on our toes today, Pastor!” Or like the woman in a small church I once served in Oklahoma to whom I had preached as directly as I knew how about gossiping, came out, shook my hand and exclaimed, “I hope my neighbor was listening to you today!”

But there’s something missing in such sermons. Something that the writer biblical scholars call the Yahwist Writer in the Book of Genesis confronts directly: the reality of God’s demands on our lives. And the blessing that accompanies the demand. The twelfth chapter of Genesis gives us what the writer believes is the pivot point upon which history turns. That history concerns not just Israel but, ultimately all of human kind. Most important of all: it is a history of salvation.

A new history begins with the call of Abraham. It is identified as salvation history by the promises that accompany the call. We can recognize at the outset what becomes very clear as the story unfolds in Genesis: God sets history on a course that leads to blessing. As Walter Brueggemann points out, “Here we stand before the most incredible announcement in the tradition of Israel. The family of Abraham has derived naturally from historic antecedents,” as we have learned in the previous genealogies in chapters ten and eleven. But now the family faces barrenness. Sarah is old and unable to have children. But the marvel of biblical faith is that such barrenness is the arena of God’s life-giving action.

Barrenness marks the deep futility of Israel. But over against that condition comes the speech of God. Yahweh says to Abram, “Go from your country and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you...” (12: 1-2). So Abram and his kinfolds do what God commands. They go, and God appears a second time and promises: “To your offspring I will give this land.”

Wait a minute! What offspring? And that's one major point of the story: "God's speech asserts the freedom and power of God," says Brueggemann, "to work his will among the hopeless."

In a collection of essays entitled *Two Cheers For Democracy*, E. M. Forster tells about a man named Oakfield who took a trip to the Far East and wrote about his journey. Forster observes: "...he gives us a long description of his voyage with congenial companions up the river. But he ignores a description of the river. What interests Oakfield while he is in Asia is the state of the English Church, the Tractarian Movement, the position of Roman Catholicism and of Dissent. India is passed with a puzzled sigh. We are given glimpses of his home and the English lakes gleam in the pages of the book with a radiance denied to the Ganges."

We are called to observe what is going on around us. We are not separated from the world, we do not live apart from it. We are called to live fully in it. We are those who follow the One who knocks on doors, talks about the beauty of God's creation, enjoys life's simple pleasures, goes to parties—and suffers. And dies. We can live like Forster's friend Oakfield if we want. God gives us the choice to live like that: to ignore reality until it irritates us, comparing everything to our own previous experience, never seeing the possibilities God puts before us every day.

Chicago has had many sports heroes. To name a few: Michael Jordan and Scotty Pippen immediately come to mind, as do Walter Payton and Jim McMahon and Sid Luckman. Hack Wilson and Ernie Banks up on the north side—although I am an unreconstructed fan of the White Sox. I don't put much stock in those chardonnay-sipping, limousine-riding snobs who go to Wrigley Field. The wrongly-accused and remarkable Shoeless Joe Jackson is one of my major heroes. But my all-time favorite is Zeke Bonnar.

Zeke Bonnar played first base for the White Sox in the late forties and early fifties. He won the American League's Golden Glove award three times for having an error-free season. Zeke lived by what I call the "Bonnar theory of chance." That is, you cannot make an error if you don't take any chances. If the shortstop or the third baseman would throw one of those one-bouncers across the infield to Zeke, he would simply ignore it. Similarly, if a left-handed batter would zing one of those fierce line drives at him, Zeke would let the right-fielder take care of it. You cannot make an error if you don't take any chances.

That's one way of living, isn't it? I get the feeling that was the way Abram and Sarai were living—in a kind of comfortable, potential-free existence—when God spoke. The power of God's summoning word is without analogy. *The Lord said*. That's the beginning of the story. The speech of God contains imperative and promise, summons and assurance. And the barrenness of human reality is overcome, overpowered.

Robert Coles tells of drawing blood from the arm of Karen Horney, the famous psychiatrist who wrote one of the most important books about neurosis and who was dying of cancer. She had on her bedside table George Meredith's nineteenth century novel, *The Egoist*. She had decided in her last days on earth not to read books about psychiatry but to read fiction and poetry. When Dr. Coles asked her why she was reading a novel which was one of his favorites also, she replied, speaking to herself as much as to him: "A patient of mine, a woman, kept mentioning this novel; she said it described her former husband 'to a tee.' I kept telling her I'd read the novel—I wanted to, but I never had the time. Now I do!"

In a subsequent conversation about Meredith's novel, Karen Horney remarked about the protagonist of *The Egoist*: "In this novel we are told about someone who is completely alone in the midst of all the company he keeps. That is what happens when you are an Egoist—you are deaf to anyone's avowal of love, and you have no voice of conscience addressing you. So, there is only silence."

The three most frequently occurring words in the Bible are not about commandments and rules, not about oughts and shoulds. The most frequently repeated words in the Bible are "Be not afraid."

If we consider Abram and Sara not as stick figures who easily condescend to God's call and simply launch into a new venture but as people like you and me who face anything as momentous as leaving everything we know, then we have to believe they had some fear about answering God's call. This pivotal story calls us beyond our easy self-containment, our egotism and the ways we shut others out of our lives but also even God is excluded. We are called to the ultimate faith, to trust God's call and anticipate God's blessing.

Fred Craddock tells about visiting his niece in Arizona who loves greyhound dogs. Greyhounds, when you really look at them, are pretty ugly dogs. People bet on the greyhounds as they chase a mechanical rabbit around the track. When the racing dogs get to the point that they can no longer race, the owners put a little ad in the paper to see if anyone wants to adopt one for a pet. You can have these dogs free; otherwise, if no one takes them, the dogs are destroyed.

Well, Fred's niece cannot stand the thought of those dogs being destroyed, so she goes out and adopts them. She has several of these big old greyhound dogs in her house. When Fred was visiting her not long ago, he struck up a conversation with a big spotted greyhound that was lying in den.

"I said to the dog, 'Are you still racing?'"

"'No, no,' the dog said, 'I don't race anymore.'"

"I said, 'Do you miss the glitter and excitement of the track?'"

"'No,' he replied."

"'Well, what was the matter? Did you get too old to race?'"

“No, I still had some race in me.’
“Well, what then? Did you win?’ I asked.
“I won over a million dollars for my owner.’
“well, what was it? Bad treatment?’
“On, no,’ the dog said, they treated us royally when we were racing.’
“Did you get crippled?’
“No.’
“Then why?’ I pressed.
“He said, ‘I quit.’
“You quit?’
“Yes,’ he said, ‘I quit.’
“Why did you quit?’
“I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit, and I quit.’ He looked at me and said, ‘All that running and running and running and running, and what was I chasing? It wasn’t even real.’”

The voice of God calls us to what is ultimately real, to a life of obedience and blessing.