

Easy or Hard?

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Genesis 12:10-20

Sermon Series:
A Journey of Faith –
A Study on the Life
of Abraham

*Life may be a
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Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Life is a journey, not a destination.” So did Aerosmith. I get it—we can be so focused on the destination that we forget to enjoy the ride. But like any slogan, it has its limitations.

Chris and I traveled over the Christmas holiday to celebrate my dad’s birthday in Ohio. Our son, Andrew, daughter-in-law, Becky, and grandson, Luke, followed in the car behind us. We traveled one of my favorite highways—the PA Turnpike. We had planned to break the trip with a stop at my brother’s home in western PA. I’ve made the trip hundreds of times, so when Chris asked if I wanted GPS help, I said with some bravado, “No thanks, I know where I’m going.” I was on the lookout for the exit to my brother’s home, state highway 60. But when we came to the exit, it wasn’t marked highway 60; it was identified as I376 instead. I panicked; perhaps I was mistaken and it was the next exit. So I continued. Now, mind you, a pregnant woman is traveling in the car behind us with a toddler about to eject from his car seat. It’s nighttime, everyone is tired, hungry and needing to find a restroom. I called my

brother, who gently reminded me that the highway exit was changed years ago from state highway 60 to Interstate 376. Then he broke the news—there were no more exits for 25 miles. How do I tell my road-weary family I just added an hour to the trip? I thought of citing Emerson’s sonnet, “Life is a journey, not a destination,” but I decided against it. They weren’t the least bit interested in the journey; they just wanted to get there. Life may be a journey, but the destination matters also. We can laugh about it now, but at the time it wasn’t so funny.

We introduced, last Sunday, a sermon series called “A Journey of Faith.” Our destination in this journey is discovering what it means to live by faith. Father Abraham learned how to live by faith. Be forewarned, it was a struggle for Abraham to learn how to live by faith.

Father Abraham looms large in Scripture. Three major world religions each claim a direct lineage to Abraham. Jews consider Abraham to be the great patriarch of Israel. They trace their lineage through Abraham’s son Isaac and his son Jacob. Muslims trace their lineage through Abraham’s son Ishmael, born of Sarah’s

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servant, Hagar. Islam reveres Abraham as the father of the Biblical prophets. Christians share the same lineage with Jews through Isaac and Jacob, with the added caveat that Jesus is physically descended from Abraham.

We examined Abraham's call last Sunday in Genesis 12. God says to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred 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, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2-3).

Abraham calls his family together—his wife, Sarah, and nephew Lot—to pack their bags and head to God-knows-where. Abraham is put forward as the epitome of faithfulness. There is no hesitation or ambivalence in Abraham's response. He simply does what God tells him.

That's why I find the following story rather baffling. Abraham and his family travel as far as Egypt. Abraham becomes fearful that Sarah's beauty will attract unwanted attention, so he says to her, "You are a beautiful woman and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife;' then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you" (Genesis 12:12-13). This is the same guy to whom God

said I will bless you and make you the father of a great nation, but here we find him taking matters into his own hands. Abraham is willing to jeopardize Sarah's well-being to protect his interests. If this is a test of Abraham's faith, he fails!

When the Egyptian Pharaoh learns of Abraham's plot, he runs them out of town. However, Abraham and his nephew Lot fare well in Egypt; they are now wealthy and prosperous. In chapter 13, they journey to a land called Canaan, which is part of the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East. This arc-shaped Promised Land hugs the shore of the Mediterranean Sea and stretches eastward along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to a region called Mesopotamia. This Fertile Crescent is a virtual oasis in a broader landscape of desert-like conditions.

Abraham and Lot don't live happily ever after. Their herdsmen quarrel over grazing land, so Abraham gives Lot first dibs in the Promised Land. I'm struck by the absence of any maneuvering on Abraham's part. It's certainly within his right as the eldest to choose first. Yet he graciously defers. In the prior story, Abraham schemes and fails, but here he does nothing, yet comes out on top. In the first story, he lives in fear; in the second story, he lives by faith. In the first story, he doubts the promise; in the second story, he trusts the

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promise. In the first story, he appears faithless; in the second story, he proves faithful.

Why are these two stories of faithlessness and faithfulness juxtaposed to each other? They certainly portray faith the way it really is. This unvarnished portrayal of Abraham depicts him as a curious amalgam of faith and fear. One moment, he is hustling to get what he wants. The next moment, he's willing to trust the promise. Faith doesn't come easy to Abraham. It doesn't come easy to us, either. We move in and out of faith continuously.

There is a chapter in C.S. Lewis's book *Mere Christianity* entitled "Is Christianity hard or easy?" Lewis points out that sometimes Jesus describes the Christian life as hard, such as his words, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Yet, there are other times when Jesus almost makes it sound easy, as evidenced by his words, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Lewis claims the Christian life is both hard and easy at the same time. He likens it to two students in geometry class; one who is lazy and the other who is diligent. The diligent student takes the trouble to try to understand a geometry problem while the lazy student doesn't even bother. But months later, when they are preparing for an

exam, the lazy student is miserably trying to understand the same geometry problem that the diligent student has already mastered. Teachers will tell you the laziest students in class have to work the hardest in the end.

Lewis writes, "It may initially seem like a hard thing, an almost impossible thing, to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call 'ourselves,' to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be 'good.' We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way—centered on money or pleasure or ambition—and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short, but I shall still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be plowed up and re-sown."

It may seem like an impossibly hard thing to do to entrust your life to Christ. Before you take this step, it may seem like an enormous leap of faith. Yet it's far easier to entrust your whole self to Christ than to

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- Sheldon Vanauken

attempt to hold onto your life and yet give it away simultaneously. That’s why Lewis says we need to be plowed up and re-sown. Yes, faith is hard, insufferably hard at times. But keep at it. With time, it will come easier to you.

I referenced Sheldon Vanauken last month in a sermon. Sheldon and his wife, Davy, became Christians while studying at Oxford University in England. They began a life-long correspondence with C. S. Lewis, which is referenced in Sheldon’s book *A Severe Mercy*. Sheldon and Davy came to the states so Sheldon could take a teaching post at Lynchburg College. Sheldon writes about Davy pouring herself into her newfound faith. He writes, “I, too, was serving him, going to church and the like....Christianity was first in my concerns. Intellectually, I was wholly committed to its truth. And yet I was holding something back. What did I want? I wanted the fine keen bow of a schooner cutting the waves with just Davy and me....Well, there was nothing unchristian about that, as long as God was there, too, and as long as we were neglecting no service of love. But, though I wouldn’t have admitted it, even to myself, I didn’t want God aboard. He was too heavy. I wanted Him approving from a considerable distance. I wanted to be free. I wanted Christ now and then, like a loved poem I could read

when I wanted to. I didn’t want us to be swallowed up in God. I wanted holidays from the school of Christ.”

I can relate to what Vanauken writes. There are times when I don’t want to be swallowed up by God. I, too, want holidays from the school of Christ. I don’t always want to be reminded of my duty to take up the cause of the poor and disenfranchised. It’s dispiriting to speak the truth to power. I find it incredibly hard to turn the other cheek or walk the second mile or to practice forgiveness 70 times 7 or to love my enemies. It’s easier to live entirely for yourself. But you can only watch so many bowl games or play so many rounds of golf before you become bored with life and yearn for something more.

Sometimes, following Christ will confound you. God, what are you doing in my life? Can’t you make my life a little bit easier? Why don’t you answer my prayers? Can’t you give me a sign? I’ve lived life both ways: with faith and without faith. I can attest: living with faith may be harder at times, but it’s better; way better.

The primary reason we come together like this is to encourage each other in the things of faith. There are times when I don’t feel like preaching, and you don’t feel like hearing me preach. There are times when these prayers we recite fall flat on the floor,

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and the songs we sing make liars out of us all. We encourage and draw strength from one another in Christian community.

Twenty-five members of staff and Session spent this weekend with a consultant looking at the results of the survey that 825 of you completed last fall. We scored low as a church in the area of Christian community, no doubt affected by the aftermath of sexual abuse that occurred here six years ago that we dealt with head-on last year. This year, I want us to become more intentionally a genuine Christian community of faith. People today aren't looking for slick worship or glitzy programs; they are yearning for authentic Christian community. They are looking for a place where people encourage one another and talk straight with each other.

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