

Abe sat at the picnic table in his back yard, sipping a cool lemonade his wife Sara had just brought him. He wiped his brow with the torn T-shirt he was wearing, and looked out over his freshly mown lawn.

Sara was of the opinion he shouldn't push the lawn mower himself, at the age of 75. They could certainly afford a lawn service, she'd pointed out on more than one occasion. But, truth be told, Abe enjoyed pushing the mower up and down, tracing the same familiar patterns around the trees and shrubs. He loved the smell of the grass clippings. Even more, he loved the sense of accomplishment that came with that smell: one more job completed, and completed well.

For Abe, life was good. He'd had a successful career, a long and happy marriage of over 50 years, money in the bank — always more than they'd needed. Abe and Sara owned their house, free and clear. It had belonged to Abe's father before him.

If Abe had any disappointment in life, it was that he and Sara had never managed to have children — although they did see a lot of the nephews and nieces who lived in town (especially that fine young man, Lot, who lived around the corner).

Sara was seated at the kitchen table, leafing through a pile of real-estate brochures. Each of them depicted one of those gated adult communities. Maybe this was the year, she told herself. Maybe this was the year they'd actually do it: put a "For Sale" sign on the front lawn, and simplify their lives. Those glossy photos in the brochures looked awfully tempting, she had to admit, showing a golf course, swimming pool and clubhouse. Why, all the outside maintenance is covered by the monthly membership fee! Yes,

Sara said to herself. Maybe this *was* the year they'd make the move.

Sitting at the picnic table in the back yard, tracing patterns with his finger in the frost on his lemonade glass, Abe hears the Voice. "Go!" says the Voice. That's all it says: just "Go!"

The Voice doesn't say *where*, exactly, he should go — although Abe is quite sure this has nothing to do with retirement. The only detail the Voice gives him is to say where he's to depart from: "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."

We've been having a little fun, today, imagining Abram as a retiree in an old T-shirt, pushing a lawnmower around his back yard. It's time, now, to shift the scene and reflect on the way it really was.

Sometimes we forget just how old Abram was, in the context of his own culture. Few of us would consider 75 extremely old, today — but, by the standards of his time, Abram was positively ancient. Few people back then lived past 40 or 45. The Bible tells us Abram had achieved nearly twice the life span most adults of his time could expect to see.

Abram hears the Lord's voice say, "Go!" The Hebrew verb-form translated as "Go" is the most emphatic possible. It's like writing the word in block-capital letters, with a half- dozen exclamation marks following after. God isn't making a gentle suggestion. This is a stern and solemn command. Ignore it, Abram, at your peril!

When Abram hears the command of God, he's living in the city of Haran, in the southeastern corner of present-day Turkey. He's lived in Haran a long time, but not all his life. As a young man, Abram had traveled with his father, Terah, on an epic journey from their hometown of Ur. (Ur was located near Baghdad, in present-day Iraq.)

So, Abram is no stranger to long journeys. Yet, when Abram undertook that trek with his father, he was a young man. Now, at his advanced age, no one would expect him even to consider such a thing! Travel, in those days, meant walking — or, if you were lucky, riding a camel or ox cart. Quite apart from the dangers of the road — the bandits and wild animals — the walk itself would probably kill him.

What's more, God gives Abram only the sketchiest of instructions. No GPS for him! God simply says, in that super-duper, triple-imperative tense: "Go ... to the land that I will show you."

Sounds like a grade-B spy novel, doesn't it? "Your mission, Agent 12 — should you choose to accept it — is to go the railway station in Bucharest. There you will await further instructions."

You have to wonder, too, what Sarai thinks of all this. The scriptures simply relate that when it comes time to go, she goes, too — along with all the "possessions" and "persons" (meaning slaves) Abram has gathered over the years.

A little later in the story, Sarai shows her independent streak. By now, God has made a covenant with Abram — a procedure that's resulted in a couple name changes: from Abram to Abraham, and from Sarai to Sarah. The Lord tells Abraham Sarah's

going to have a baby, at her advanced age! When Abraham passes on this astonishing message, Genesis 18 tells us, “Sarah laughed.” (You can hardly blame her.)

The Lord overhears her laughter. “What’s so funny?” God wants to know.

Suddenly, Sarah realizes it may not be wise to laugh at the all-powerful Creator of heaven and earth. “I didn’t laugh,” she insists, putting her hand to her mouth to cover her smile.

“Oh yes, you did,” says the Lord.

It seems God loves a good joke — looking kindly on a woman in her 70s who finds it difficult to wrap her mind around the disturbing idea that she’s pregnant.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is the tale of a journey — one of the greatest journeys in all of scripture, let alone world literature. When those two set out, for the second time in their lives, on an arduous trek to an unknown land, somehow they journey for all of us.

Life has often been likened to a journey. It’s a theme that’s fascinated novelists and storytellers the world over. Centuries ago, the Greek poet Homer wrote *The Odyssey*, tracing the Trojan-War hero Odysseus’ 20-year return home. One of the earliest surviving works of English literature is Chaucer’s famous *Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories told by pilgrims on their way to the holy city of Canterbury. In more recent times, Mark Twain has given us *Huckleberry Finn*, a journey on a homemade raft down the Mississippi. Jack Kerouac has published the semi-autobiographical novel, *On the Road*, the tale of Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise, two young men roaring across America in an old

car. “Beyond the glittery street,” writes Kerouac, “was darkness, and beyond darkness, the West. I had to go.”

Abram, too, feels he has to go — but it’s more than mere wanderlust that propels him. Abram and Sarai set out from Haran for parts unknown because God has called them to do so.

Yes, this is a story for all of us. The fact that Abram’s 75 when he first heeds God’s call lets none of us off the hook.

Robert Raines, in a little book called *Going Home*, tells of how he received a call from God when he was in his 40s:

A call may come as a nudge, glimpse, touch, glance, fresh insight or tearing sorrow. It may come in the earthquake of anger, grief, sexual energy, or in a still small voice. However it comes, the initiative of an alien/friendly power strikes us with surprise and disruption. I was taken by the scruff of my life and shaken loose from the securities and identities that had served me or that I had served for 44 years. I was mugged in the night by a strange inner assailant!¹

There are more Abrahams and Sarahs in our midst than you may think.

Lots of times, in the church, we talk about our need for volunteers. You’ll hear some of the old-time members talking about it, with special vehemence: “Why is it, when we ask for help with something, we see only the same old faces? Why don’t more of these new members come out and help?”

The story of Abraham and Sarah teaches us these are the wrong questions to ask. The church, you see, isn't a volunteer organization. Now, the Rotary Club — that's a volunteer organization. The Hospital Guild, the Little League, the Women's Club — all those are volunteer organizations.

The church is different. The church is *not* a volunteer organization. The church is a *called-out* organization.

If, when something needs doing in the local church or to support the church's larger mission, we ask for volunteers, we're really asking the wrong question. Rather than prodding and cajoling and encouraging Christians to cough up a little of their precious leisure time for a worthy cause, maybe we ought to frame the question a different way. Maybe we should say, instead, "Here is good work that needs doing. Do you suppose God may be calling you to do it?"

Do you sense the difference? What's more, do you hear the Voice?

What's it saying to you? Is it, perhaps, that little word, "Go"?

But if God gives us the opportunity to say yes to the vision and the promise, God is also willing to let us say no.

There's a marvelous scene in the novel *The Lord of the Rings*: The two hobbits, Sam and Frodo, on a seemingly impossible and hopeless quest, have forced their way to the edge of the evil land of Mordor. They are taking their rest before the final hopeless push, when Sam muses aloud that in some ways they have found themselves in a story of the sort he had enjoyed listening to when he was younger. He says at one time, he thought the people in great stories went out and sought such great adventures. Now, he

admits: “I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten.”³

Implicit in this scripture is that Abram also could have said no. As could Mary when she was approached by Gabriel, or Elisha when called by Elijah, or Isaiah or Jeremiah if they’d stuck to their guns when arguing with God that they were too sinful or too young. But the ones we know about, the ones that made the cut and are in scripture, weren’t perfect, or perfectly handsome and beautiful, or even admirable 100 percent of the time.

But they saw the vision, and they said yes.

God is still creating a future through speech. It was by a word that the world was called into being. God’s word created a future for Abram where none had existed before. God’s Word made flesh came to save the world. God promises life!

Say yes to the vision. You are one of the descendants of Abram and Sarai, through whom God means to bless all the families of the earth. God’s story includes an ending of wonder and joy and peace, incorporating the paragraph each of us writes into this great saga, with an ending to cap all endings.

Let your soul clap its hands and sing! Let your light shine before all people! Say yes! Get up and go!