

My favorite John Steinbeck book is “Travels with Charley in Search of America.” This book is an account of Steinbeck’s three month long odyssey across the US with his poodle, Charley, to rediscover his country. One of my favorite quotes from that book is: “We do not take a journey; a journey takes us.” Meaning that we like to think we are in control of the journey, but the most memorable ones, the ones that have lasting impacts, are the ones where we relinquish control and respond to the surprises we find along the way.

Right now, in our journey through the desert of Lent, the church has given us a little surprise with its selection of readings. What does the first reading about Abram (soon to be called Abraham) have to do with the gospel account of Jesus’ transfiguration? Wouldn’t it have made more sense for the first reading to mention Moses or Elijah or even a mountain? That would be too obvious, like taking the freeway, which although it is relatively fast and direct, is also incredibly boring and often too crowded. By selecting the first reading from Genesis, not Exodus or First or Second Kings, the church is encouraging us to get off the freeway away from the crowds, slow down, and maybe even stop and look around for a while.

In the first reading, Abram, like us, is setting off on a journey of faith. He is leaving the well-known home country of his ancestors and trusting that God will lead him into an unknown land of promise. What was the promise that God made to Abram? This is what Genesis says: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great.” That is a pretty cool promise. Who wouldn’t want to be blessed and be great and famous? If you were paying attention, you know I left something out. God said I will make your name great...so that you will be a blessing. God wasn’t going to make Abraham and his descendants great for themselves, he was doing it to make them a blessing for others: “All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.” What does that mean? It refers to the purpose for which humanity was originally created. As I warned you might happen last week, we are now back in the Garden of Eden.

Genesis chapter 2 says: “When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the Lord God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the field...then the LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed...The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it.” This passage is hugely

important for far more reasons than we can go into now. One of the many things it is telling us is that God gave human beings the privilege of participating in his own work of creation—that is what “care and cultivate” mean in this context.

But God’s purpose was even bigger than creating coworkers. The center of the garden is analogous to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple where the high priest would go to offer sacrifice. Genesis is presenting humanity as a royal priesthood whose role it is to lead all of creation in worship of God. Stated most simply, God put humanity in the center of the garden to teach the rest of creation more fully about God. But when our communion with God was broken by original sin, our role changed. We were no longer in the center of the garden; we have been cast out and are trying to find our way home.

Abraham’s journey isn’t so much about going to a new geographical location as it is about leading humanity back to its original purpose which was to teach the rest of the world about God. What about the generations between Adam and Abraham? Didn’t the journey home begin with them? Sure, except that what we see in the first eleven chapters of Genesis is a mostly continuous descent of humanity into deepening wickedness. There are some efforts to climb out of the darkness—Seth and Noah—but the overall movement is downward, finally bottoming out with the tower of Babel.

The call of Abram and his journey to a new country mark a turning point and the beginning of a long laborious ascent back towards our original holiness and the resumption of the noble purpose for which we were created. Jesus’ transfiguration is a sign that the journey begun by Abram is nearing its completion; everything contained in the law and prophecy (represented by Moses and Elijah) is about to be fulfilled. The radiance of Jesus is a reminder of the noble purpose for which we ourselves were created. Perhaps that is the spiritual meaning of the Apostles’ fear: they were reminded that God was calling them to be much more than what they currently were.

God has created and called each of us for a noble purpose; perhaps more than we can ever imagine. He is not making us “great” for our own sakes but to be a blessing to everyone we encounter. God wants us to be his representatives to everyone we meet. Fear is a natural response to that calling; but we don’t need to be afraid because Jesus will help us bring his work to completion.