

## WATCHING THE RIVER FLOW

Texts on Sunday, November 20, 2011

*Genesis 11:26—12:5; 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15*

Perhaps you have never heard of Abram's father Terah till today. But isn't that odd? My umpteenth grandpa Phelps, born in England a long time ago, was named William. But if a book told me the name of William's father, I'd be glad to put that "pa" on the top of my tree. If we say we're children of Abraham and Sarah, are we *not* glad for grandpa Terah?

Terah, we're told, set out from the city of Ur (near Basrah) for Canaan. He brought his sons Abram and Nahor on this trek, with their wives. But "when they came to Haran, they settled there," the story says. He never made it to Canaan. Now, the journey from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran cannot have been especially difficult. Its 600 miles might have taken three months to walk, but the great Euphrates was flowing beside this company. They had water and strength; they were all right. So what's the trouble with Terah? Why hold up in Haran?

The name of the town means "parched"—too dry. Would you stop over in a town called Parched? Or did Terah name it the day he decided to quit his course for Canaan? Or is it all made up? It doesn't matter. What matters is that there is gold in this story. That is why they kept telling it and why we have it. It is a parable. No one lives without water, after all, but sometimes we live parched. Sometimes we go on thirsting for something satisfying, but too spent by our habits and anxieties to seek for more than earth can supply.

A Bible map shows that to get to Canaan, Terah would eventually have to cross the Euphrates; leave it behind; and, with all his family and his creatures, head out over the hills. But Terah has a big investment in this journey—flocks of sheep and goats, and tents and gear and slaves to water the herds. Terah's wealth—his whole way of being—depends on that river: safety and desire and sleep; lamb chops most nights; silk from India; prestige around the camp fires. As he climbs into the high country, he watches that river dwindle like some do the Dow Jones.

At length, a stream coming down from the north joins the Euphrates just as it bends toward the setting sun; Canaan land lies that way. But Terah won't cross. He stays on the safe side of falling waters, where his investments seem secure. Terah will not risk the depths or the unknown lands beyond. He will not leave what he can taste and see. Money matters more; it is more real than God. That's why he settles for Parched. That's why he'll die there, with his whole church. Not because he is few in number; not because he is old; but because he has no vision, and nothing to say to the children. He has

feeling only for what he knows, for what money can buy.

Churches often show up like Terah—Terah-fied, you might say. Not very happy; not blessed with fragrant good will for one another, but able to watch their investments, still able to hire a shepherd to pasture the flocks, still able to hold out in Haran another year. Every year in America, thousands of churches fail because they had nothing to say to the children—I mean the grown children, like Abram and his wife Sarai when Papa Terah made Haran home. Consider this. When we won't cross the rivers always known to us for lands never yet shown to us, money is always the matter. I listen closely to money talk in committees and forums here—it's my job. I offer this observation. Almost always, we talk like Terah, watching that river flow winding down. Almost always, we say, *If things keep going like this, we'll be in real trouble. Let's hold up here.*

This is a test of the emergency visioncast system. Is it not obvious that a few hundred people, giving time and money the way we have given in the recent past, will not shoulder this great church into the future? Terah may have lived to 205 in Haran; we don't have that kind of time. Is it not obvious that the way we have always done it isn't speaking to the grown children? Do you believe that if we hold out here a little longer, somehow the cultural landscape will change and rains will cover the earth and the river will rise with new families and flows of money? Acting as if that fantasy will work out is why we're anxious. And when anxious, we forget who we really are and what we are here for. And when we forget who we are, we act badly.

Where do you *want* your money to come from? As one friend of Riverside puts it, which would you rather: ten new people giving each \$100,000 to the church—or one thousand giving \$1,000 or more? Which is the way for Riverside? Decide! For a church in a city attractive to young adults, the future is not a throw of the dice which might turn up snake eyes or maybe show sevens. The future is ours to choose. It starts today.

To draw near to God's future, let us begin with two things. One, a depth of insight into the power and purpose of money. Two, a practice for experimenting in growth at the tender tips of our being. First, let us repeat that money feels more real than God, as we said of Terah a moment ago. I don't mean always, but mostly. Let us not waste one instant in feeling guilty about this; that keeps the old regime in power. Prefer light to guilt. What situation of our life is untouched by access to money? The size of our dwelling place and its location. How we present ourselves in clothing or speech. The education we had. The condition of our health and our mental health. The time we must spend to get where we must get. Whether we enjoy our work or our leisure. Each of us is a vital explosion of needs and

energies and money is voltage in the currents of vital experience. That is why money feels more real than God. This fact is not bad or good. It is like a leg, or hunger. We have material bodies. Money matters.

But we are a creature with two natures, not one. This embodied, historical, instinctual, habitual, death-bent reactive nature is a bear which must have what it must have; and which sleeps when it sleeps. Our other nature is spiritual, unbounded, eternal, conscious, free. It is not flesh at all, but it needs flesh in which to dwell. These two are never reconciled, yet they must touch. In you, heaven and earth touch, by the grace of God. When you forget this, you are Terah-fied and you succumb to small thoughts and small behavior. But when you remember who you are—you Abram, you Sarai, you child of God—you awake to your eternal nature and everything flows. This is what the Bible means, saying that “the LORD spoke” to this one or that one: suddenly, she was alert and awake to her whole nature, flesh and spirit. And then, money matters in a new and different way. For then money, be there a little or a lot, serves consciousness.

This happened to me, just three years ago. Having helped my church nestle safely under the wing of a larger congregation, I resigned my position. Then passed, to my deep dismay, one year with no call except to preach as a guest. I owned a nice home; the mortgage was no burden. I watched the river flow. Then the markets collapsed and the savings shrank. The image of retirement the savings were supposed to support fell apart. At one sum, those sums had induced in me the groggy sleep of a bear; but beaten up, the shrunken sums woke me up and I saw that I had been Terah-fied. And I heard our story from today in a wholly new way—the LORD saying “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house, and I will make you a blessing . . .” Remember: that word came to Abram and Sarai in Haran! That winter, I delivered a sermon grounded in this story of Terah and his children. Six weeks later, I crossed the river—the Hudson, actually—and came to the City of New York for blessing, though no job was waiting.

When we forget who we are and react like animals only who need their comforts, be they in styles of clothes or entertainment or worship, then money is the means of our destruction, spiritually speaking. In our bear-like nature, those desperate or angry or proud or smooth feelings that attach to money are nevertheless dim signals of our need of God; for we are insatiable beings, being two-natured. When we wake from the sleep of the bear, we can use money to help us stay in touch with our true two natures. Here, if you choose, heaven and earth can touch. In a book of reflection on these things, Jacob Needleman writes, “What [free] *will* really means is the power to live in two opposing worlds at once.” (*Money and the Meaning of Life*, p. 118)

Abram and Sarai have that kind of will—that heaven and earth might touch. This is why, after long years thirsting for more in Haran, they finally hear the word of God. Although old and few in number, they take all their possessions—you see, it *is* a body and spirit thing; it's OK to have a portfolio—and they leave their safety and society and their old religion, too. They stop watching the river from the bank, so to speak, and they step in and cross that river toward “the land that I will show you,” says the LORD.

Now it is your turn. Heaven and earth can touch, if you ask. This is why the apostle boldly advises the wealthy Corinthians to give eagerly from their income. “For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.” We need a practice and a discipline in giving money, if we are to awake from our sleep and affirm who we are. Why else do the spiritual traditions hand down clear counsel to give a tenth of your income *first*? It is not primarily that others need your money; nor primarily that you are supporting a good thing of which you approve. Such might be but another purchase from your bear nature. The deep reason you need to give more liberally is to wake up, more and more, to discover who you are—a holy place, where heaven and earth touch.

If someone thinks, *But I can't trust the church with my tithe*, this is a serious matter. As a spiritual matter, you cannot both withhold in distrust *and* receive heaven's touch. Only two choices remain for serious souls: either you find a church you will trust and take your tithe there, or you stop watching the river from the bank and step in and change your church with your tithe. In an attitude of gratitude, step this day into the river which separates our past from God's future. When you make your pledge, bring in the full tithe of your present abundance. Cross over now. Give in a wholly new way, trusting that God transforms a people who practice heaven and earth together. Meister Eckhart put it this way, “The labor of gratitude accomplishes the transformation which the gift but promises.” O that we had a stream rolling right through our sanctuary this morning, that we might remember the day we got wet on the way to the promised land.

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*The Riverside Church  
in the City of New York*

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