

THE TROUBLE WITH TERAH

Texts on Sunday, February 15, 2009

Genesis 11:27—12:5; *Matthew 6: 19-24*

I'm going to use my hands to shape part of the ancient Middle East, to show you Ur, where Terah and his family lived, and Haran, where they journeyed and settled. Today this is Iraq, south of Baghdad—and Syria in the north. It is a long trek —600 miles! But let's not play Bible-movie music in background to stir Hollywood emotions of religious admiration. The trek was not especially hard. Even you with soft feet could do it in a few months, with grown children and dogs and herds along the way. The main thing is this. A river is flowing down beside Terah and his company all the way from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran. They have water. They're all right. Physically.

But the story says "they went out from Ur of the Chaldees to go into the land of Canaan." Terah never made it. He stopped in Haran. Sixty years later, the legend has it, he *died* in Haran. Haran means "parched"—too dry. You can play with the question, Who would stop over in a town named "Parched?" Or: Did he name it himself the day he ran out of spirit and hope and water? It doesn't matter. It's an exaggeration, anyway—like calling your town Mudville. No one lives *in* mud. No one lives sixty years without water. But sometimes we live parched, always thirsting for more, but too spent in spirit to study ourselves and change. You could say Terah's company—Terah's church—finally failed in Haran and shut down. Terah going to Haran and not Canaan stands for a great temptation that confronts every company on the road to the promised land. It is the same temptation into which the Presbyterian Church has fallen and the Lutheran and the Methodist and the Episcopalian and all the other venerable old Christian traditions in America as they head not for God's promise but for Haran, to settle and die there, like Terah, in old age.

What's the trouble with Terah? Back to the map. Terah begins the journey to Canaan on the east side of the Euphrates. To get to Canaan, he has to cross that great river. He has to leave it behind and with all his creatures and family he has to head west over dry hills. But he won't do it. Har-an'—"parched"—lies near the source of a short branch flowing into the Euphrates some 500 miles from Ur. Surveying the confluence of the rivers, Terah must see that the main branch, his life-line, his guide, is flowing from the west beyond the far bank of this near branch. But still he won't cross. He makes his company turn north, hewing to the safe side of the waters. He will not cross over. He will not risk the depths. He will not leave what he can see. He has lost faith. That's the trouble with Terah.

So many of our churches are like him. They go down to the same old river every Sunday, comforting, lovely, unchanged since we were children in Ur of the Chaldees. How can we live without it? If it leads us to Haran, leads us into temptation, into living parched, partial lives, what can we do? We will not cross over. We will not leave what we know. We will not risk something deep. If our children will not stay with us, if they cross and climb far hills and leave us, we will not follow or ask what spurs them away. We shake our heads, certain of their error and sure of our river of tradition. We will never enter the waters and pass beyond.

Sometimes we think that drums and a guitar and some easy new music helps us strike out like pioneers for new country. It turns out that's just a little side stream feeding familiar waters. The trouble with Terah, and the trouble with churches that have lost their faith is that they don't know what's wrong until it's too late—because the river is right there, right? Jesus' picture is right there, right? and all the right prayers and songs? The trouble with Terah and his river, and the trouble with tradition, is the temptation to think that what we can see and hear and drink comes from the will of God, rather than from our stubborn selves, and to keep by the river even when it has mostly turned into a test in these

latter days: Will you risk entering its depth? Will you cross over into lands unknown to follow the voice of your God?

Think about this. In addition to his family, Terah has a lot of property invested in this journey. Hundreds of sheep and goats, and all the tents and gear for servants keeping the herds safe and watered. The river, for Terah, is what money is to us. His wealth, his way of being in the world, depends on that river. He won't risk leaving it because he tastes more satisfaction in the fine things this hoard brings to his family each night than from the things of heaven. His company is parched in Haran and his church dies out there not because it is few in numbers, not because it is old, but because it only has a feeling for what money can buy. Tents safe for sleep and desire. Lamb chops. Silk from India. Prestige. The promise of Canaan land is faded.

Our children learn the money way from us in every quarter of our life. In the church, what do you suppose the children learn when the whole system goes red alert with money problems? What do you suppose they learn when the wealthiest receive automatic respect and the poorest from the town aren't even present, or when people give freely to the building fund but hold back the flow of generosity from the general fund or missions? What do you suppose they learn when the trustees of the church hold serious power, before whom all committees must bow, and the pastor trembles? Terah saw to it that the flocks were pastured; the church sees to it that the flocks are pastored. All draw at the river of money, never crossing it, because it keeps everything the same. What do the children learn?

They learn that even though we're parched, only money talks. God talk is empty by comparison: dry, abstract, ineffective, boring. Money is the river running by our lives—no, it is running our lives. We taste it. We turn it and trade it into meat and fine tents and fun. It's real. We can't fool the children. Like every other enterprise of life, an ordinary church is sopping wet with the meaning and taste of money. But we are dying in Haran, parched for something more, but terrified to cross over, to leave this tradition and these tents. The old church has lost faith in a promise unknown. It has settled in what it knows: Haran. That is why the children don't come back.

Jesus says, "Do not store up treasures on earth, but treasures in heaven. No one can serve two masters, God and money." Do you have a feeling this morning for how serious and how difficult is this word? We have no method for storing treasures in heaven. Why, we hardly know what that can mean. If it comes down to believing we will have a nice after-life, get a life! Do you think the children will drink that weak tea when they taste the energy of desire and fear and ambition and sex and career and anger that is driving everything their parents really pay attention to? We cannot serve two masters. We serve the master Money. Everyone does. Store up treasures in heaven? What is that!

The legend says that Terah's children did leave Haran. Funny—if they hadn't, we wouldn't be sitting here. According to the legend, the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kin 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 in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." When the Bible says "the LORD said"—I don't think the story means that the air vibrated with the divine speech, or that God knew the Hebrew language, or that a camera watching Abram close would have seen anything special at all except a face resolved in serious reflection about how bad things were in his father's house. How parched he was in spirit. How something must be done, a great risk run, to seek life more real than the river of money can ever secure.

That's what is it to say "the LORD says." It is not about the ancient hero's virtue. It is about a possibility lying in wait in you: To see how parched you are, without guilt or self-recrimination. To see how the river runs your life; how money drives everything ordinary; how the fights in the church are about money and power, how lambs and doves are devoured here, and love driven like a goat beyond

the edge of town. What can be the source—it is no earthly river's source—of this word welling up in me, that I must cross this river always known to me to seek a land never shown to me? What is this source welling up in me telling me how thirsty I am to search for reality deep within, reality more vital than the throb of blood at my throat? Call this source God not because you recognize the voice but because you do *not* recognize it from any of earth's treasures. It is unearthly hope to hope that you, in spite of all your sorrows, in spite of all your losses—of job or marriage or children or fights or dignity or plans—in spite of all your confusion and anger and thirst for something more, there comes this unearthly hope that you can be secure—in God, somehow; that you can be blessed apart from that river's flow, somehow; and that you can bless all the families, all the families. I mean, that you can actually touch in on the flow of love and act from it. If only you will leave Terah behind and cross that water. To search for experience of the things above more real than the taste of money and all it buys—that is what it is to store treasures in heaven.

Now, it is one thing for an individual to come to a question like this in her life. Can a whole church do so before they die in Haran, like Terah? Yes and no is the answer. No, not every member can awake to the sound of the voice within calling to leave Terah and the river behind, to be blessed and be a blessing. Some will always slumber, grumpy and afraid. Terah-fied, you might say. But yes, a church can awake, in the twinkling of an eye.

It takes leadership—not necessarily the pastor, though if the pastor's opposed, the flock will definitely lie down beside the dead-still waters. But leadership can come from one or a few. If all of those who have loved the river most all their lives, who hold the church's power and respect, do not let go, do not hear the command to rise and leave your father's house for a new land, a land that I the Lord will show you, then the meek in the church cannot save it from dwindling and dying in Haran. Wherever there is new life, the powerful are doing what only heaven can bid them do: Lay down their sword and shield, down by the riverside. Cross that river over and begin the climb on the other side. "You know you must change your life," writes Jacob Needleman of this extraordinary passage, "and you know that this can only happen by searching for companions and conditions that will support the appearance of this moment of opening." When this happens, the children's eyes are watching and their ears are open. And when they see you break for the far shore, beyond the old river, they will listen to that story that comes from beyond the river of money. And they will tell it to their children, and their children to their children. And on this story will go of life beyond the river and you will be in Canaan.

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