



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

THE CALL

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The New York Times once said that our generation's way of viewing the world is with what's called "the long zoom." You see it in spy movies when satellites track a license plate number. Or on medical dramas where the camera takes you down inside someone's body to look at blood cells or brain circuitry. You also see it when you go on Google Earth and with a few clicks go from seeing your state to your city to your block to your own house.

One of the classic uses of this technique is in the movie *Contact*. The camera starts out in space, giving us a shot of planet Earth. Then it pulls back, past Mars, Saturn and the rest of the planets. The camera keeps zooming and zooming, out across the universe. Soon, entire galaxies are flying by.

But the shot ends where you would least expect it – in the pupil of an eye of a young girl. All the sweeping, universal imagery is brought into focus in a very personal, individual story that will frame the rest of the film. And you know from that point forward that there is a connection between that girl's story and the whole wide world you've just seen.

That's very much what's happening in our story in Genesis. We've had this long zoom, going from the creation of the world to the fall of humanity, to the ark to the tower of Babel. Then the people of the earth are scattered. It's all been very big and universal in scope. Now the author zooms down in to one individual. We begin to get a very personal story. But like *Contact*, the whole world is contained in that story. It's specific to one person, but always with the universe in mind.

The author picks up the line of Shem, Noah's oldest son, and he starts dialing us down through the generations. But he tosses off extraneous offspring left and right. He's zooming in on one single blood line, one that will lead to Noah's great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandson – Abraham. We'll pick things up this morning with Terah, Abraham's father.

Gen 11:27 – 12:7

This is the account of Terah.

Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no children.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.

Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

*"I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."*

So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.

I once went with my boss to a meeting at a web site development company. I worked on web site design for many of our clients, but my role was purely from a graphics standpoint. I have zero understanding of the programming side. So as I was sitting in this meeting, hearing my boss talk about "razzing into the backbone" and SQL servers, I knew I was out of my league. And I knew I didn't care even a tiny bit about what they were saying. But I did like the sound of razzing into the backbone, so I made that my

new catchphrase back at the office when I wanted to drop some impressive technical lingo.

Maybe this story of Abraham sounds like razzing into the backbone for you. It all just flew straight over your head. Maybe it feels completely foreign and far removed from anything in your life, and as you're listening to it, you're going, "Great. Wake me up when this one is over."

I'm going to wake you up now, because not only is Abraham's story important – this particular piece of his story is one of the most relevant passages out of the entire book. This is the story of one man entering into a relationship with God, and his experience becomes the prototype for what it means to follow the Lord.

Abraham also introduces a new element in Genesis. Up until his arrival on the scene, our attention has been focused on some pretty big messes: The fall in the Garden of Eden, the escalation of evil that resulted in the flood, and the arrogance of the Tower of Babel. The sin problem just keeps cropping up everywhere we turn.

Speaking of cropping up, we had a lot of dandelions that cropped up around our house when I was a kid. For kids, there are pretty much two ways of dealing with dandelions. You can take the "Mama had a baby and her head popped off" approach, where you remove the flower from the plant. I know some kids were paid by the flower for however many they collected. The idea was to chop them off before they went to seed.

Once they did go to seed, my favorite method of weed control was to do what every kid does – blow the dandelion seeds everywhere. Of course all that does is spread out the problem even further. The only real way to get rid of dandelions is to kill the root – either with a pesticide or by pulling it out of the ground. Otherwise, they'll just keep growing back.

It's a good metaphor for sin. God patiently showed how different approaches didn't go far enough to eliminate it. The flood demonstrated the "chop it off" approach – cutting off all humans except Noah's family. Sin still managed to survive that, though, and it reared its ugly head again.

After the Tower of Babel, God scattered the people like dandelion seeds. The concentration of sin was too great, so he blew on it and sent it flying. The people spread out everywhere. Still, it wasn't long before the seeds of sin started growing in new spots.

Cutting down on the number of sinners didn't solve anything. Scattering them didn't put an end to it. God knew all along he was going to need to go straight to the root for a final victory. Ultimately, that would be through Jesus on the cross. God would deal a death blow to sin in the most powerful way imaginable. It's a radically different strategy. And it is through Abraham that God introduces that strategy. He's not only the patriarch of what will one day be Jesus' family – he's the prime example of what it means to live by faith in God, to believe God is the one making a way for us.

We don't know much about Abraham's early years. The book of Joshua does tell us that his dad, Terah, was an idol worshipper. So Abraham wasn't raised to worship the God of the Bible – he was raised with statues of other gods around the house. Both the cities of Ur and Harran were dedicated to the Assyrian moon god, so it's likely that Terah worshipped that god, among others, and Abraham probably did, too. They would have seen this week's lunar eclipse as having great significance in their religion.

So right off the bat, God shocks us with his choice of Abraham. He's a complete pagan. Idol worship is one of the biggest no-nos in the Bible. Not only that – look at the only detail it gives us about his wife:

Now Sarai was barren; she had no children.

So far, Genesis has been all about creation. God bringing new life into existence. God blessing people and telling them to multiply. You get this long list of so-and-so becoming the father of so-and-so... which all comes to a screeching halt with Sarai. Abraham isn't part of this creative process that's going on all around him. He's a non-contributor and his family line looks like it's about to come to a dead end.

Plus we learn that he's 75 years old. His best years are behind him. All the facts we have are strikes against Abraham being any kind of hero. He's shockingly wrong for the role: He's a sinner/idol worshipper. He hasn't been able to produce an heir. And his story is almost over because he's in the sunset years of his life. Is this really the character God wants to highlight?

Yes. That's precisely God's point. In his dealings with sin this time around, there will be no counting on an innocent Adam in the garden or a clean living Noah on the ark. No depending on human goodness or rule following. God chose Abraham in his sinfulness, his weakness, his brokenness. Abraham had nothing to offer in the equation – God was going to do the work himself and invite Abraham to hitch a ride.

Romans 4:17

We call Abraham "father" not because he got God's attention by living like a saint, but because God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody.

Ever felt like a nobody – at work or school or even church? God sees you as a somebody and loves you fiercely. This is where we start to sit up and listen to Abraham's story, because it's our story. We have a God who chooses nobodies, who does his best work in the least likely places. Romans says it's while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

We think we've got to clean up for him, but God made a way to reach us in our "before" state. That's redemption. Clear back in Abraham, God showed how his redemption plan would work this time: He found someone who had no strength or power or goodness on their own and filled them up with strength and power and goodness. It was all from God.

Let's look again at the first words we have of God speaking to Abraham:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."

That's about as textbook as you can get for a calling in the Bible – God having a conversation with Abram and telling him explicitly what to do.

Which is why this story is hard to relate to. Most of us don't have a strong sense of calling on our lives, and even if we do, it didn't come from an experience where we physically heard God give us instructions. And yet the Bible says we too are "called," just the way Abraham was called by God.

1 Corinthians 1:24

But to us who are personally called by God himself — both Jews and Greeks — Christ is God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one.

We're personally called. In fact, the Greek word that we translate as "church" is *ekklesia*, which means "the called out ones." Every time the early Christians thought of church, they would think of their calling.

Our experience may not look exactly like Abraham's, but it is just as real and definite of a call. And there are many things within his experience that do parallel our own and help us understand it better.

When you think of a calling, what comes to mind? A vocation? A special appointment?

For the kind of calling we're talking about, I would use this simple definition:

A calling is a personal invitation from God to follow him.

That's not an airtight description, but it will work for us this morning, and I want to come back to it as we go along.

But for the moment, let's get back to Abraham. We aren't told when and how God spoke to him, but it had to have been as strange to him as it sounds to you and I. We may like the thought of such a concrete encounter with God, but the flip side of it is that Abraham had no context for it. We've got the Bible with a whole history of similar stories and a frame of reference, but Abraham had none of that. You have to remember, Abraham's religious experience at the time revolved around household idols and the city temple. The gods were associated with places and objects. You burned a little incense, left some offerings, and hoped for the best. And you couldn't really be sure what they wanted.

You can get a sense of that world from a prayer that has been found which was written in Assyria about the same as Abraham. The person who wrote it was trying to find forgiveness from a god for some offense he had committed. The only problem was he

didn't know which god it was or what it was he had done wrong. So he called it "A Prayer to Every God".

*Although I am constantly looking for help,
No one takes me by the hand,
When I weep, they do not come to my side...
Mankind, everyone that exists – what does he know?
Whether his is committing sin or doing good,
He does not even know.*

It's in this environment that God speaks to Abraham directly, showing him right away that when the true God comes calling, it is about **relationship**. Here a God with a name speaks directly to him. This is a God who can be known. This is a God with a set of character traits and feelings. This is a person and not an object. This is the God of everywhere – not just the God of a certain temple. And he's asking Abraham for a personal response.

We often reduce faith to nothing more than a checklist we're signing off on. Whether it's a set of practices to follow or statements to believe, we turn our faith into an intellectual exercise. But God is about relationship. He desires interaction with our character and personality as much as our mind.

When I defined calling, I said it was personal, and I meant that in two ways. It might seem that the story of Jesus is so broad that it's not personal at all. God's call IS universal, but he's interested in the individual. While he extends his invitation to everybody, he does it one by one and not in a blanket approach.

John 10:3-4

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

God sees you individually and he is concerned about your specific heart as much as he is concerned about humanity in general. But the personal side of the calling goes the other way is well. He's asking for a personal response.

At our house, Karin's the calendar keeper. I never commit to anything without deferring to her. Whenever I try, I end up double booking and having to cancel. Then she has to book it anyway. So when we get invitations to go places, I let Karin handle the RSVP for both of us.

But when it comes to God, nobody can RSVP for you. It's you and him. There's no riding the faith of your parents or church. There's no blending in with the crowd. Just like he did with Abraham, he is standing in front of you, saying, "Come follow me. Come enter into a personal relationship with the living God of the universe."

I love how God refers to Abraham later on in Isaiah:

Isaiah 41:8

"But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend..."

They were friends. That puts a whole new level of meaning in the relationship. It speaks to enjoying each other and spending time together. It speaks to shared experiences.

Amazingly, that's the kind of personal relationship that's open to us through Jesus. He told his disciples,

John 15:15

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends..."

A calling not about fulfilling duties and believing the right things, as important as those are. A calling is an opportunity to know God in a way that defies the rules of logic. The Creator of the universe, inviting us to be his friends.

Secondly, Abraham's calling emphasizes **revelation**. God asks Abraham to leave the land of his fathers and go to the land "I will show you." God would reveal where Abraham was supposed to go. But he wouldn't do so until later. All he really knows at the outset is what he is supposed to leave behind, which is everything that has defined him up until that moment – his family, his home, his past.

In other words, Abraham is exchanging a world he knows for one that he can only discover as he goes along. He starts out with little to go on except God's promise. It's vague. God says he'll bless him, but what does that mean?

It was only quite a ways into the journey that he got a fuller description from God:

Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

Here still, there's not much to go on. How will Abraham have offspring? When will this happen? You know there's more coming, but at this point that's all he gets.

This is where we often get hung up as we think about God calling us. We'd much prefer to have our decision based on the "already known" column of information. We'd like to believe that when God calls us to something, it will be clear, specific and buttoned down. And we're inclined to wait until we have perfect clarity before we do anything. I've had many seasons in my life when I wanted God to lay out all the facts for me. Once he did that, I promised to obey.

But wrapped up in the concept of call is this notion of revelation, that God unveils more of his plan as he chooses to and as we act on what we know. We don't get the big picture up front, but we're asked to respond anyway.

One of the best illustrations I've ever seen for this comes from Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade. Watch Indy as he gets close to finding the grail.

There comes a time in following God where we have to step out in faith. It's in the stepping out that we're finally able to see what was unknowable to us prior to the journey.

Those kinds of choices face us all the time. I was talking to Nolan about that this week. He felt God really leading him to his new school choice this year, and at the same time he was really intimidated by it. How would he handle the workload? Would he be able to make new friends? God has had a lot to teach him this year that he only could discover by stepping out.

You heard another example of this from Char Haake this morning. Char felt God placing this desire for a budgeting ministry on his heart, even though it wasn't his background. But he stepped out in faith and went through the training. A few weeks ago, after a service, he came up to me and explained to me what he hoped to do. Now what Char didn't know was that for the past few years, Dan Peek has been filling a similar role here at New Day, helping people with their personal finances. And Dan had just taken a new job in Anacortes, meaning the Peeks will be moving north. God knew what New Day needed and knew it would coincide with Char's calling. And I'm sure some church in Anacortes will have a similar story when the Peeks arrive there. The plan isn't given to us all at once – it unfolds as we go.

That captures the spirit of revelation that we're talking about. We may not know where we're going at the outset or how God will provide or where we'll find the courage to do something. But those aren't reasons to stay behind. If God calls us to something, he will equip us for it and show us more and more of himself along the way.

Are you waiting for God to put everything in black and white for you? You'll be waiting a while. Even Abraham, who had God speaking directly in his ear, wasn't given full disclosure. Oswald Chambers said, "Have you been asking God what he is going to do? He will never tell you. God does not tell you what he is going to do; he reveals who he is."

That's the key to revelation – seeing that it's more about God than the plan. What God is really showing us is more of himself. The details will fall in place as we know him better. To follow a call is to depend on revelation – seeing more of God as we go along.

A final word that could describe Abraham's calling is a **road trip**. He physically picks up and leaves his homeland. He becomes a pilgrim, traveling hundreds of miles over long stretches of time.

He moves spiritually as well, transforming from an idol worshipper in the beginning to someone who steps out in obedience, to someone who builds an altar to God. In the last paragraph of our story it says this:

From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.

Here, for the first time, there's no mention of God appearing or speaking. Yet Abraham chooses to build an altar and call on the name of the Lord. He's reached maturity in his faith. He's moved into being a worshipper who is committed to God even through the times of silence. He's not depending on the dramatic moments to sustain him – he's learning to just love God along the way.

Most of the time, God isn't asking us to quit our jobs or sell our houses. In fact, Paul encouraged his readers to stay in whatever station in life they were first called to Christ in. Career changes aren't the kind of movement we're talking about.

But a calling from God is about movement of the heart. Sometimes we see putting faith in Christ more like switching political parties. Once you do it, it's a done deal. I've known people who always seem to be at the same spot in their faith. But that's not what a calling is about. It's much more dynamic. God intends for there to always be movement in our hearts more and more toward him.

Come follow me, he says. In your program, I've listed out two parts to that calling: what God asks us to leave behind, and what he calls us to.

God asks me to leave behind:

- My past (Whatever defines and limits me in my mind)
- My own plans for the future (Wrong expectations of God)
- My need for all the info (Wanting every detail before jumping in)
- My wrong ideas of God (That he's a checklist)

God is calling me to:

- Trust the guide more than a map (Knowing God has a good plan)
- Keep it personal (remember that God is a friend)
- Act on what he has already revealed (Trust that he will unfold a path before me)
- Keep moving toward him (Not getting stuck in one spot)

Take a moment to think on those. Which in each of those categories would you say is the most difficult for you? Where are you most needing God's help this morning?

I want to leave you with a story you may have seen in the media about Herman and Roma Rosenblat. Herman was a 12 year old boy in a Nazi concentration camp back in the 1940s. He was wasting away, emotionally and physically. His job was to put dead bodies in the crematorium, and he felt dead himself. One day, he glimpsed a face in the woods outside the fence. He snuck over when there were no guards around and discovered it was a girl about his age. He asked her if she had anything to eat. She threw an apple to him over the fence.

Every day, for the next seven months, she'd meet him there for a few minutes and toss him apples or hunks of bread. That was what sustained him through those dark days. One day, he told her he was being shipped out to another camp, so not to come back anymore. They never even exchanged names.

Fifteen years later, after the war, Herman had moved to America and gotten a job. A friend set him up on a blind date with a girl who was also from Poland. As they were riding along in the car, she asked him, "Where were you during the war?" He told her he was in a concentration camp. She had been hiding with her family on a farm and she said, "I used to throw apples to a boy in a concentration camp." When they made the connection, Herman proposed right there in the car. He said, "I lost you once. I'm never losing you again."

The Rosenblats just celebrated their 50th year of marriage, and when they were interviewed, it was obvious they adore each other. Herman was asked the secret to their longevity, and he said, "Every morning when we wake up, I say "I love you, I love you, I love you" and not only say it – but mean it."

There's much more that could be said about God's call on each of us. But at its core, we're in a love story. God begins by tossing apples over a fence to us – giving us reason to hope, feeding us and giving us strength. We barely know him at that point, even though we need him. But he doesn't want us to stop there – he calls us to move closer to him. Even after a lifetime of following him, we can still be growing in our love for him and learning just how much he loves us.. He wants us to reach that point where every morning we can say I love you, I love you, I love you. I love you with all my strength. I love you with all my heart. I love you with all my mind.

That's what it was all about for Abraham, and that's what it's about for us – moving ever closer to the God who calls us.