**Sermon on Genesis 12:1-4**

Delivered at the Reorganizing Convention at Lime Creek, Iowa, on June 14, 1918

by Bjug A. Harstad

Introduction: *Having suffered the dismantling of their precious Norwegian Synod in June of 1917, a handful of men gathered twelve months later to reorganize around God’s truth. Rev. B.A. Harstad, an elder statesman from the old Synod, delivered the following sermon to the small convention in Lime Creek, Iowa. His words approach the future with great optimism in the Lord’s work, while directing the hearers to continue in the ancient ways of God’s truth. For this reason this sermon has been affectionately known as “Old Paths,” and marks the spiritual beginnings of the reorganized Synod. “The confessor serves future generations.” Church history so clearly testifies to the truth of this saying. The spiritual descendants of these confessors continue to be blessed as they follow the “old path,” while observing the sad erosion of truth among many who share the name “Lutheran.”*

Text: Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee; and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing; and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee; and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him; and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. (Genesis 12:1-4)

Dearly beloved fellow Christians! The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all. Amen.

Under exceedingly strange circumstances we greet one another here today. Having always before gathered under a well defined and well understood Apostolically free church organization, we today meet as scattered sheep, without any formal system of government.

This must call forth strange thoughts and questions. Why do we meet alone? Why not together with the many near and dear ones who wish to believe and be saved, as well as we do? Why stand aloof against a current and rush for that great union which all the world is praising? These and similar questions we must earnestly consider, until we, by the power and light of God’s word, arrive at such a firm conviction, that we can, from the Scriptures, answer them properly every time the old Adam puts them into our mind.

Nevertheless, I do not intend to ask your attention to these matters now, but will rather invite you to look away from things which are behind and reach forth unto those things that are before us, that the Word of God may shed light upon the narrow and dark path on which we must run a race, in order to receive the prize.

We know that the old Norwegian Synod was founded on the idea that each congregation which individually gathered around the word and the sacraments has no other master, according to God’s call and will, than our Savior Jesus Christ, who has revealed unto us his counsel for our salvation, and given us a plain, perfect and infallible rule and standard of faith, doctrine and life. As independent churches, built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, they united into an external association, called The Synod for the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, to which they, in Christian liberty, without any divine Command, wished to belong, as long as they should find that desirable for true edification. To such mutual order belonged also this, that the churches sent to the annual meetings their pastors and representatives for mutual consultation, as to the best way of serving and building up the churches.

As equals and brethren, representatives, pastors, professors and teachers they met, with no other duty, right or authority over others than what each congregation had given them, either in their constitutions or in separate resolutions, with this express understanding that the congregation or church is the bride and the body of Christ and that each local church, with each believing member in it, is a member of Christ’s body.

This body has but one Lord and head, Jesus Christ, and owes allegiance and obedience only to Him. It is bound to its own institutions only so long as it finds them serving the welfare of the body.

Woe unto him who in any manner tries to take the place of the groom, or demands obedience of the bride to anyone else than the bridegroom himself. This the Lord has told us in plain words by warning us against being lords over God’s heritage. (1 Peter 5:3)

The example of the Apostles also shows how carefully they observed this, not encroaching upon the liberty and right of the bride. When in Jerusalem only the question of electing overseers of the poor arose in the church, the Apostles did not take the authority to appoint them, but they instructed the multitude saying: *“Look ye out among you men of honest report.”* They chose them and set them before the Apostles. (Acts 6:3-6) Even when an Apostle was to be chosen in place of Judas Iscariot the Lord caused all the disciples to take part in that important election. For it is expressly stated in Acts 1:15-25, that there was gathered a number of about 120 persons, they appointed two candidates, they prayed and cast lots. This casting of lots was done, in order that this Apostle also, like the others, should have an immediate call direct from the Lord, according to this Word of God: *“The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.”* (Proverbs 16:33)

It is true, there are diversities of gifts, differences of administrations, and diversities of operations; but the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. All are to be faithful as stewards of the mysteries of God. Not all are Apostles nor are all teachers. God gave his New Testament church, first of all, the twelve Apostles. But after them he calls none to serve as Apostles. By the death of the 12 Apostles, that office ceased to exist. And yet the Lord takes good care of His bride as to bestowing upon it His blessing here on earth. (1 Corinthians 12:28)

There are also differences of conditions and rank on earth. Some are full-grown and of age, others are children and under guardianship. The husband has his position and the woman hers as well. But in all these diversities, we are by one Spirit baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free, and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13) Seeing thus that the position of every member is allotted to it by the Lord, we find that Peter in his position as Apostle performs his vocation among the 120 persons, instructing them as to the qualifications the Apostle to be chosen must have, according to the will of God. And as to the superintendents of the poor in Jerusalem, the Apostles explain to the disciples the order and demands of the Lord concerning such officers in the church. (Acts 6:3) By the grace of God we have been taught this from the word of Scripture; we are so trained.

These truths, as well as all other words of holy writ, are indispensable; and even though this should be my last word to you, I must ask you all, and especially you young friends, in the name of the triune God, that you will keep these truths in your mind and heart, hold them fast and defend them, otherwise we too may soon lose the prize that we are running a race to gain.

And you, beloved brethren in the ministry, who in the presence of our heavenly high priest, have solemnly vowed rather to shed your blood than to tolerate false and pernicious doctrine, permit me to beseech you, by the mercy and meekness of our Lord, that you in that vow will include also these truths, for they are, as well as all scriptures of God, of such importance that they teach us the maintenance and defense of our Christian liberty against the whims of man in these matters. *“Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.”* (Hebrews 13:7)

The faith which the founders of our old organization these many years fearlessly professed, in speech and writing, and manifested in their church order, is given us of God. It was all prepared according to the Apostolical teaching of the Guide, the Holy Ghost, and all through bears the stamp of evangelical liberty, the truth and grace of God. We have a Christian right to retain it and cannot yield to false brethren, in order that the gospel may continue with us. (Galatians 2: 5) Most of the sages, by whose hands God gave it to us, have finished their course with honor, leaving their shields untarnished. We may well be proud of them.

We have, dear friends, gathered here by the liberty which we enjoy in Christ Jesus. We are, as it were, clustering around the old building site which is storm swept and waste. A destructive hurricane has swept away the dear old mansion, even taking with it most of them that dwelt there. Discouraged, looking around, we discover only the bare ground with wreckage and dangerous crossroads. Yet let us not be too much alarmed nor discouraged. Worse things have repeatedly happened to the church before this, without its being destroyed. Let us remember and follow these words of Jeremiah, the prophet *“Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.”* (Jeremiah 6:16)

Our common calling and labor in the church is here called asking for the old path, and walking in the good way. How this is done, our Lord shows us in our text, describing the call of Abram.

Let us then consider: *Our Christian Calling: A Walking In The Good Way.*

1.) How we are to walk in it, and

2.) How we are to be strengthened to walk in the good way.

The Lord, calling Abram says: *“Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will show thee.”* He must do these two things: go out from his country, and his father’s house, and go to a strange land that he would show him.

If we ask why he should leave his country and his father’s house Joshua answers by telling us that Terah, the father of Abraham, served strange gods. The Lord who had promised to mankind a savior from all evil, reveals Himself to Abraham, and works in him a living faith and hope in the promised Messiah, or the seed of the woman which is Jesus Christ. The first thing then was, that the heart of Abraham was regenerated by the Lord, created anew, and cleansed to be the temple of God. Then he was no longer ruled by unbelief and strange gods.

In order that our journey and labors may be pleasing to God, the first and most important step is that we by the Lord are called out of our original condition, our natural flesh, in sin conceived and shapen, taken from the prodigal son’s country far away, and turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. This the Lord did graciously do to us all in our childhood by baptism which is the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost. (Titus 3:5) He then blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, just as He had chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world. By baptism we were grafted into the vine, and our names were written in the book of life which is Jesus Christ. In Him we shall find and be fully assured of our election and salvation. We must not rack our brain by asking whether or not we will remain steadfast to the end. By doing this, we will only be led astray. As believers we know and treat our flesh as one of the most dangerous foes of our salvation. Therefore, we know that if it depended on our own will, and we so believed, then we depended just as much on ourselves as upon God, and by this faith we would be lost. Our happiness and salvation we will build solely upon the call of God, when He by visible and undeceiving means chose and rescued us from the power of Satan and our flesh, and adopted us as His disciples and children.

This our calling and election we will make sure and prove by following in the footsteps of Abraham. God called him to a strange country. This must have been distasteful to his flesh. He was now seventy-five years old, and hardly had any desire to leave his relatives in the prosperous orient. God led him westward to sojourn among Canaanites in a strange land. (Acts 7:4-6) No good thing of this world was promised him. On the contrary, tribulations of many kinds were in store for both himself and his posterity. It is reasonable to believe that he would much rather have remained at home. Only shortly before his birth the patriarch Noah died. His own forefather, Shem, Noah’s son, lived until 75 years after Abraham’s emigration. Nineveh, Babylon and many other cities were in a flourishing state in the powerful Assyrian empire, founded by that mighty conqueror, Nimrod the son of Ham. Undoubtedly there were many good positions for a man like Abraham. Yet there is nothing to indicate that he longed for his home country. *“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he later should receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.”* (Hebrews 11:8) This was his daily renewal.

Similar to this our labor and journey must be. Let us spend the days of our pilgrimage in faith and reliance on every word of our Lord, implicitly obeying it whether we understand where it leads to or not. What we are called to believe and do is by no means so contrary to reason and the order of nature as that which was told Abraham, and by which he was tempted. To be sure, we are few and poor, compared with many others. But let us beware of this question: What can a remnant like us do? Is it really by our own might and ability we intend to succeed on our journey? Is it the power and importance of man that we are to depend on, and by which we expect to work? Then we had better quit now. Abraham would then have returned to the kingdom of Nimrod, to Nineveh and Babylon. No. These with all their pompous glory he must leave, in order to escape the snares and temptations of sinful flesh. By faith Abraham understood that not human wisdom and power, but only the work and grace of God could make him and the generations of the earth happy. What business have we to worry about how God will come through the world with this apparently small undertaking and poor remnant? That is His business, none of ours. We are not called to build a kingdom of this world. That Abraham left to Nimrod and his followers.

When we are asked, and when our own flesh whispers to us: What do you, a handful of people, expect to accomplish? we will answer: First, according to the new man we will and can by the power of God believe His word and confess it and live according to it. We are willing to suffer with Christ, even to be made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. We can also die with Christ. This Christians will do both separately and in company. Secondly, according to the flesh we, in company with many others, also would like to “boom” the things of this world but according to the Spirit we cannot, and will not do it. With Abraham we will depart from them. For the Lord says: Beware of false prophets, be ye separate, come out from them. This is God’s will. To do this He has called us. Each of us has, individually and in company, the honor and happy duty to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. But that does not consist in meat or drink, money or goods, or in the favor or admiration of the world, but in righteousness, peace and joy in the Lord. This is our Mission, our combat for the crown of life, our running a race for the prize, our journey with Abraham to the promised land.

2.) How are we to be strengthened to walk in the good way?

*“And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great.”* This is certainly encouraging to Abraham, one solitary family.

If we would not follow God’s word until we have the masses along with us, what could we then believe or do? The Lord’s yoke is easy and His burden is light. His word is the plainest and His will the best thing we know of in this world. That word is full of promises to us. The only trouble is, that we in our flesh have a big part of the world which is inclined to all evil. Our sinful nature has a keen sense and great cunning to make even disobedience and rejection of scripture to appear reasonable, nay, even as love, obedience and sacrifice for His cause, while it in reality is only self-love and a vain self-chosen worship of a strange God. Therefore we must meditate on the law of God day and night, in prayer and fear of God help each other to hear and keep His word. Otherwise we will surely go astray. For His ways are not our ways. God’s promises are manifold for our encouragement. These few words to Abraham in reality bring him all kinds of blessing for body and soul.

The Lord Himself will show him the land that he shall go to. But He does not at once show it to him, not so much as giving the name of it. The divine word and dispensation is to our mind striking, often shocking, and but seldom suits our taste. The devil seems to do business in a better way. He takes man to a high place, in a moment shows him all the glories of the world and in fine words gives tempting promises for the seemingly small thing to fall down and worship him, while the Spirit of truth does not tempt our mind, but convinces and trains it to obedience of heart. We cannot at once grasp the whole truth, nor fully understand all that here on earth comes with the great things of the kingdom of heaven. Earthly glory is thus always more or less false and disappointing, but God’s promises are always truthful, and never disappointing. He will show to Abraham the land in actual experience, and be with him day by day. To us also the Lord has said: *“Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”* (Matthew 28:20) He is present with us according to His human nature as our fellow man, in word and sacrament, by which He calls, gathers, enlightens, instructs, leads and comforts all, according to the needs and requirements of each person. Abraham moved his tents from the north to the southern part of Canaan. He saw what it was, and the Lord proved His presence with him all along.

Our life and journey is similar to this, a moving and advancing, a development and training under the benign dispensation of the Lord. Thus in an assembly like this different stages of spiritual life will exist. Some are like children, without much experience, others have gained a more mature manhood in Christ. Some are weak, others are strong. Then the one shall help the other, and all bear with each other. *“Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.”* (Philippians 3:16) Then we will adjust our faith and progress only to the word and will of God. Then we will, like Abraham learn by actual experience what the kingdom of God on earth is. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. (Hebrews 13:13-14) Another promise is this: *“And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great.”*

Abraham here receives both an earthly and a spiritual gift. When God blesses, it is done, not only in word, but in deeds by letting actual things come to him. He enjoys strength and perseverance in faith, hope and love; He gains victory over the flesh, and even defies the gates of hell, that did not prevail against him. To become a great nation was a temporal blessing, but even therein he found reason for spiritual joy. As a true believer he would bring up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. He knew the power of God’s grace and rejoiced, because many should receive it. He was convinced that the promise would in due time be fulfilled even though he received no part of the land, no, not so much as to set his foot on. Wherever he pitched his tents, there he built to the Lord an altar from the earth and stones that he found in the place. So will we also do. We have just as complete promises. *“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.”* (1 John 3:2)

*“And thou shalt be a blessing”* is another part of these promises to Abraham. He shall not only himself enjoy the blessings of the Lord, but he will also have the honor of being a co-laborer with God to make many others partakers of the beautiful fruits of the Lord’s blessing upon him. Although he, a solitary family, and a sojourner in a strange and hostile country, was wandering about, without any connection with his many and powerful relatives in the orient, yet he became a great blessing, not only to his own household but also to many others. By his obedience and worship of the one true God he served many people as a shining star in the dense darkness that covered the nations. He rescued Lot and the King of Sodom and Gomorrah. To him it was an enjoyment by his obedience and teaching to give his fellow men a true reflection of the grace of God that he himself enjoyed and valued so highly. He especially gloried in the fact that in his seed all the families of the earth should be blessed. He professed the Christ that was to come.

We are called to bring the same blessing to all mankind, with this difference only, that we confess the Christ as He appeared on earth, and fulfilled the promises to all the families of the earth, reconciling the world unto Himself and proving to friend and foe that He, in spite of the gates of hell, gathers people into His fold and feeds his flock by the spiritual nourishment, served through the ministry of reconciliation, and given us by the same Lord that revealed Himself unto Abraham.

We no more than Abraham should look for support from the world. The powers of this world can never espouse the cause of Christ Jesus.

But to the other blessings the Lord adds one more, which I mention last, because it, as it were, covers, confirms and guards the rest of them. It is this: *“And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee.”* We see how closely the Lord will stand at his side and take care of him, protecting him against his foes, and promoting him and his friends’ wellbeing. His life and journeys will not be in vain, but always bring some good fruit.

Such are the blessings, flowing from strict obedience and adherence to every one of God’s words, even though it should call down upon us the curse and persecution of the world, and to us seem to bring only defeat and destruction, besides the ridicule and contempt of the world. Yet we will not swerve from the truth for the Lord is at our side. He says *“And ye shall be hated by all men for my name’s sake. But there shall not a hair of your head perish. In your patience possess ye your souls.”* (Luke 21:17-19)

Even in apparent defeat the sincere disciples of the Lord are conquerors. *“Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: to the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life.”* (2 Corinthians 2:14-16)

Let us abide strictly in the word until our dying day.

*“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins gird about with truth, and having the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall he able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God: praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.”* (Ephesians 6:10-18)

May the Lord grant us these blessings for our Savior’s sake. Amen.

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