Sermon **Genesis 15.1-6**
August 11, 2019 **Psalm 33.12-22**
Proper 14C **Hebrew 11.1-3, 8-16**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **Luke 12.32-40**

I think it was the summer before my junior year of high school. A family friend suggested to me (and my mom) that I apply to be an American Field Service Foreign Exchange Student. Neither my folks nor I had much experience with AFS, but we knew about the program; mostly we knew that a student would go overseas for either the school year, or the summer. Overall, it sounded intriguing. And, so, my folks' response to me was "Sure, go for it. Nothing will probably come of it, anyway.' (Ah, parental support!) So, I worked on the application and submitted it. A few weeks later, I received a letter inviting us to an introductory meeting, to get questions answered . . . so we went. At the end, my parents said, "Sure, keep going for it. Nothing will probably come of it, anyway.'

A little later, another letter arrived. This one invited me (alone) to a group interview at someone's home. I later learned that the interview served two purposes: (1) to "interview" me, but also (2) to see how I functioned in groups where I didn't know anyone. I went home, described the interview to my folks, who said, "Sure, keep going for it. Nothing will probably come of it, anyway."

School stopped for Christmas Break; AFS was pretty far from my mind. Then, on December 22, I went to get the mail. In the mailbox were two aerograms from Australia, one for me, and one for my folks. I remember <u>more</u> what the letter to my folks said: "We were pleased to learn that we were going to be the host family for your son, Gary." Mom and I looked at each other, and said, "WHAT? Do you know anything about this?" And we both answered, "No." Mom quickly got on the phone to our family friend (who was the chair of the school's AFS committee) to get more information. Sure enough, I'd made it through the selection process, and was supposed to leave for Australia in mid-January—<u>yes, in a few weeks</u>, so I could be there for the start of their school year (different hemisphere, you know)! Passport (during the holidays)! Proper clothing! Luggage! Shots! Oh, and how to pay for it!?

Was I excited? Yes . . . but . . . I had wanted to go in a different direction . . . literally! I had noted on my application that I wanted to go to Germany, Switzerland or Austria (since I had had 2-1/2 years of German in high school). My second choice was South America (so I could, at least, pick up the Spanish I'd learned in 7th & 8th grades). But, Australia it was. So, I began researching my next year's home: a farm

community in South Australia. And, in mid-January, I boarded a Qantas 747 that, ultimately, deposited me in Sydney.

My cohort of 30 American students had a few days of orientation, both to help us get over jet-lag, but also to introduce us to AFS rules: 'No driving in the host country! Beware of romantic entanglements!", as well as how the school system was structured (a little different than ours). Then we were taken back to the Sydney airport, and I was put on a plane to Adelaide, South Australia. A few hours later, I was greeted at the gate by a family I vaguely recognized from the photo they'd sent. We went to the airport coffee shop and started to get to know each other before the two-hour drive to Maitland. I could understand, maybe, every third word because, even though they were speaking "English", their accent was so thick I could barely wade through it.

But, after a little time, I DID learn the accent. I've often told people that, even though I didn't learn another language, I did learn a different set of slang. I also learned a whole bunch of different cultural customs, holidays (ANZAC Day), regional cuisine (pavlova!), and all about "Roo-bars" (ask me later). And, with a nod to our "Athletes' Sunday", I learned how to understand, play, and enjoy, cricket. And I played on the "B Squad" of the local Australian Rules Football Club. When I returned home a year later, family and friends asked me to speak more slowly, because they couldn't understand my accent!

Why this long autobiographical sketch? Well, earlier this week, the Daily Office Lectionary had me read a passage from the *Acts of the Apostles* about Paul's encounter with some folks in Corinth who had only received the baptism of John the Baptist (19.1-7). When Paul baptized them into the name of Jesus, they were seized by the Holy Spirit and began to speak "in other tongues". And I thought, becoming (or even being) a Christian can be like a "foreign language immersion class" . . . or, even, like moving from one "familiar" place into another that is "just-a-little-bit-less-than-familiar". And, then, I realized that our readings this morning hinted in that direction as well, with Abram being summoned from home into a new land. And WHAT did that imply? What did that require?

According to our readings from Genesis and Hebrews, what it required was "FAITH"! Abram had had some experience with venturing into the unknown when his father Terah, along with the family entourage, left Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Haran (Gen 11.31). Then, after Terah died, Abram believed God when God told him to journey to Canaan (12.1, 5). From there, he went to Egypt and back and received God's promise of land. But it was this final promise, the one we heard this morning, that capped all of what Abram had experienced. Abram's final wish was to have an

heir . . . and God promised that. Given all that Abram had experienced with God, he believed—he had faith—and it was that *faith* that God counted as righteousness—an affirmation that Abram was doing what God wanted.

God had inexplicably chosen Abram's family after the multiplication of languages and peoples at Babel. God had inexplicably led Abram from culture to culture, protecting him and promising him a future. None of these could have been part of Abram's mental or psychological "homeland". And then, God stretched the boundaries of the credible even further. In Abram's "homeland", speaking its language—and, indeed, in ours—no one would expect a ninety-nine-year old man and a ninety-year old woman to produce a child! But Abram said "Yes" to the promise; he said "Yes" to the unknown future. So, the story tells of Abram and Sarah's enrollment in a "foreign language immersion class" where, because of their experiences with God, they received new names: Abraham and Sarah (17.5, 15).

"Stepping out in faith" is something we actually do all the time—including this time of year—although we don't always recognize it! My Facebook feed has been filled with pictures of students starting at a new school: a grand-niece starting middle school; her Downs-Syndrome brother starting first grade. We have young people here in this congregation moving from elementary to middle school, and some moving—literally—to start university or college. These are new worlds for these young people. There are new languages to learn, new customs to adopt. And they and we trust that they will have support systems to correct them, to encourage them, to keep the promise alive — much as Abram had in God. And the students (and their parents) will rely on these support systems to see them to their ultimate journey's end — a future of promise for which we hope, but cannot yet see.

"Stepping out in faith" is something athletes do, as well, when they "sign on" to their given endeavor or team. I think particularly of student-athletes (and their families) who chose a school based on the coach. There is faith! "Will I be able to learn the playbook?" "Will this coach bring out the best in me?" "Will this coach, this program, help me succeed?" "Will this coach, this program, support me in my larger academic pursuits?" When the answers are "Yes," the decision is made to step into the unknown future with new companions, some seasoned, some "green", as well as mentors and supporters.

With these young people moving on, moving up, taking the field, many of us are relegated to the role of "spectator" or, perhaps "supreme fan"! We may not entirely understand the culture they've entered, but we know that their future is theirs to pursue, and, with support, we cheer them on, but . . . . But, even on the sidelines, or the grandstands, of their endeavors, we must not forget that all of us

have our own journeys before us. Journeys into new worlds where there may be new customs, new languages . . . certainly new demands. And so the stories that I've told, I hope, prod you to recall similar occasions in your life where "stepping out in faith" was part of YOUR experience. It may have been study-abroad; it may have been military service; it may have been going to college in an entirely different part of the country (my going to North Carolina for graduate school was a double immersion experience!). It may have been something as "normal" as getting married.

So, where do **we** step out in faith? This is not a rhetorical question—I'm really asking! Athletes and those heading off to (a new) school know an answer for themselves; perhaps I'm suggesting a different set of considerations to them. But to the rest of us: into what "new country" is God summoning us. What stories, from our past, inform us as we look ahead? What, from our various encounters with Christ, can WE relate to others that will intrigue them enough to ask us more? As I've noted, over and over again, Good Shepherd is moving into a new land; I've just seen a draft of the document that marks the end of our "Season of Discovery". That means our "Season of Visioning"—our season of looking beyond the bow of our boat—is next. How do we access our congregational faith to support us?

But I should be dressed down by the heavenly Coach—or just perhaps by the Bishop next week—if I didn't raise the question about the elephants in our societal room. To what are we, as Christians in THIS secular land, being called at a time when racism and xenophobia seem to be normalized, while our faith asserts that we love all of our neighbors as ourself? To what are we being summoned when we can't recall which shooting we're discussing—because there are so many—while we pledge allegiance to the Prince of Peace? In our baptismal commitment, in our regular recital of the Lord's Prayer, we affirm our that our ultimate "citizenship"is in a new "country" where our dominant language isn't spoken by those around us. How are we "strangers in a strange land" to act in ways, informed by our faith, that bring health and hope to that land?

God's promise of an heir gave Abram hope to venture into his future. Students and athletes heading off to school and playing field find hope in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Our hope is grounded in the resurrection, the promise of new life and light in the darkest of times. And, at this time, Jesus' charge to his followers is most pointed: "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit . . . You . . . must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." (Lk 12.35, 40). The hour to take the earthly field and shine the light of our heavenly realm is now.

Amen.