

Open Fields

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction

This week our series follows the Methodist movement out of the church and into the open air. After Wesley preached in the fields of Bristol in 1739, going beyond the walls became a pattern. He and the people called Methodist visited the imprisoned, welcomed laborers and outcasts, placed women in leadership, and called slavery the evil it was. Respectable religion had already decided who was worth its time, and Wesley continued his “enthusiasm” and kept pushing further, toward those who didn’t quite fit the mold.

We see this in the first call in scripture, when God tells Abram to leave his country, his relatives, and his father’s house for a land God will reveal only as he goes. We see it again when Jesus calls Matthew up from his tax booth and sits down to eat in Matthew’s house, among the people the religious leaders avoided. Abram is asked to leave the familiar behind. Matthew is asked to follow, and then to make room at his own table. Both were called by name, and neither had the advantage of the full picture before saying yes. This week we explore what it might mean to answer that kind of call: to go where we cannot yet see the road, and to make room at the table for the people we sometimes keep at a distance.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBK54RApSgU>

*In this clip from *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012), Bilbo Baggins wakes to find his guests gone and the signed contract they left behind. After a lifetime of staying put, he grabs it and runs out his door and into the open country to catch up with them.*

Why This Video?

Bilbo has spent his whole life in the same comfortable house, with the same warm hearth and well-stocked pantry, and he likes it that way. He has already turned this journey down once. He has good reasons: it’s dangerous, it’s uncertain, and no one can tell him how it ends or whether he’ll come home. When he wakes to an empty house, the choice is finally his alone, with no one there to talk him into it.

He goes without a guarantee. Contract in hand, he bolts out the door and down the lane, past everything familiar, with most of his questions still unanswered. What moves him is the sense that a safe life can become a small life, and that what he most wants is an experience of the unknown. Many of us know this desire, and many of us know how hard it is to take the first step.

Video Discussion Questions

1. Bilbo has already said no to this journey once. When he wakes to an empty house, he changes his mind. When have you turned something down, then reconsidered after the moment seemed to have passed? What made you look again?
2. Bilbo loves his home: the fire, the food, the quiet. Leaving means giving all of it up for a while. What in your own life would be hardest to leave behind if you set out on something new?
3. He runs out the door with the contract in his hand and most of his questions unanswered. When have you said yes to something before you had the answers you wanted? How did you make peace with not knowing?

4. For most of the scene Bilbo is alone with his decision. No one is there to push him or stop him. When have you had to make a real choice entirely on your own? What helped you decide?
5. Once he decides, Bilbo breaks into a run. Have you ever felt a rush of relief or excitement right after finally committing to something you'd been putting off? What was that like?
6. Bilbo gets no promises about how the journey ends or whether he'll return. Where in your life are you being invited into something with an uncertain outcome, and what makes it hard to say yes?
7. By the end of the scene, Bilbo has left the only home he's ever known to join people he barely knows. When has stepping outside your usual circle led you somewhere you couldn't have predicted? Looking back, are you glad you went?

Matthew 9:9-13 (CEB)

⁹As Jesus continued on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. He said to him, "Follow me," and he got up and followed him. ¹⁰As Jesus sat down to eat in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners joined Jesus and his disciples at the table.

¹¹But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹²When Jesus heard it, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. ¹³Go and learn what this means: I want mercy and not sacrifice. I didn't come to call righteous people, but sinners."

Genesis 12:1-9 (NRSVue)

¹Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot and all the possessions that they had gathered and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran, and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. ⁹And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Scripture Study Questions

1. God tells Abram to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's house for a land God will reveal only along the way. Abram is seventy-five years old when he goes. What does it tell us about Abram that he goes anyway, and what does it tell us about God, who calls him with a promise and no clearly discernible destination?

2. In only three verses, God makes Abram a string of promises: to make him a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great, to make him a blessing, and through him to bless every family on earth. All of this is promised before Abram has obeyed, before he has even taken a single step. Which of these promises is hardest for you to believe God might intend for you, and which one do you most long to see?
3. God's blessing doesn't stay confined within Abram, but reaches beyond him to everyone he meets, everyone who follows. Where have you seen God reach other people through someone's ordinary life? How might God want to work through you?
4. Jesus walks past a tax collector's booth, says two words, "Follow me," and Matthew gets up and leaves everything behind. Tax collectors were despised as traitors and cheats. Why do you think Jesus calls someone like Matthew? What does that tell us about who belongs at Jesus' table?
5. Jesus eats in Matthew's house alongside tax collectors and sinners, and the religious leaders are outraged: "Why does your teacher eat with people like that?" Jesus answers, "I want mercy and not sacrifice." What do you think Jesus means by this? Who might our congregation hesitate to welcome to the table?
6. Both Abram and Matthew are called by name and asked to leave something behind. How do you understand God's call in your own life? Do you think everyone is called? If so, how? If not, why not?
7. John Wesley believed the gospel was offered freely to all people including those the church had overlooked, and that reaching them meant going past its own walls. Where do you sense God calling you, or our congregation, to go past what is normal or comfortable? What would it take to actually respond to this call?

Additional (Optional) Questions

1. When have you left something familiar in order to grow: a place, a role, a community? Looking back, what did you gain? What did you leave behind, and how did it feel?
2. Abram built altars as he traveled, marking the places he met God. Do you have practices or places that remind you of God's presence along the way? What are they?
3. Matthew left a profitable, secure position the moment Jesus called him. Is there something in your life that would be hard to walk away from if you sensed God calling you elsewhere?
4. We often describe ourselves as "blessed" when good things happen to us. How would your days look different if you understood "your" blessings mainly as gifts meant to be given away?
5. Think of a group of people you would find it hard to share a meal with. What makes it hard, and what do you think Jesus would do?

Weekly Action

Start with prayer this week: ask God where you are being called to go beyond our comfort zones, toward a person or place we might tend to keep at a distance. Then take time to listen for God's call. Consider spending a few quiet minutes each day, paying attention to what and who comes to mind. When something or someone does, make a specific plan, a first step, whether that's a shared meal, a visit, a phone call, or something else. Make plans and take that first step before the week runs out, even if it feels small. Then have a conversation with a trusted spiritual partner, a loved one, or someone else about what happened. Be sure to notice what you received in this time of giving.

Prayer

God of the open road, you called Abram out of everything he knew and went with him toward a land he could not yet see. You called Matthew up from his booth and made a place at the table for everyone the world had given up on. Call us out, too, past our comfort, beyond our walls, into the company of people we've been slow to welcome. Give us courage when the road is unclear, mercy for the people we are quick to judge, and open hands that share what you have given us. Work in us by your power, and send us out as a blessing, so that through our ordinary days you reach the families you love. You go ahead of us, you walk beside us, and you wait for us in the people we have yet to meet. Make us a people who follow, and who set a wider table when we arrive. Amen.