



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “The Journey”

Genesis 12:1-9

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Father Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest, author, and founder of the largest gang member rehabilitation program in the country, Homeboy Industries. Early in his priesthood, when just starting out, he spends a year in Bolivia. At the time, his Spanish is quite poor and the year there was intended for language study and ministry. At the beginning of the year, he can celebrate the Eucharist in Spanish but only by reading it out of the missal, a book that contains the words of the mass.

A few weeks after his arrival, Boyle is approached by a group of health workers and is asked to celebrate Mass in Tirani, a Quechua community located high above the town, whose indigenous inhabitants harvest flowers for market. Tirani has not seen a priest in over a decade. The health workers ask Boyle to celebrate the Mass in Spanish, with one of them preaching in Quechua. The workers pick Boyle up at the bottom of the mountain at 1:00 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon. He hops into the back of the open-air truck with the others, and up they climb. Mid trek, Boyle takes an inventory of the contents of his backpack. To his horror, he has brought everything he needs except his missal. He can't swing the Mass in Spanish. He does have a Spanish Bible in his bag, and he begins to flip frantically through the pages, searching for any passage with words like “bread,” “wine,” or “take and eat.” “Soon,” writes Boyle, “my body is introducing me to the marvels of flop sweat.”

They pull into a huge, open-air landing, a field cleared of all crops, with many hundreds of Quechua Indians seated in concentric circles around a table. The service begins and after the sermon, Boyle recalls, “it is my turn to carry the ball. I'm like someone who's been in a major car accident: I can't remember a thing.”

Boyle looks at his crib sheet scrawled with random notes and stolen scriptural quotations, all the while lifting the bread and wine whenever he runs out of things to say. This is how he remembers it:

It would be hard to imagine this Mass going worse. When it is over, I am left spent and humiliated. I am wandering adrift, trying to gather my shattered self back together again, when a female health worker walks an ancient Quechua woman up to me.

Boyle learns that she hasn't gone to confession in ten years. She proceeds to unload a decade's worth of sins in a rapid-fire Quechua Boyle doesn't understand. Thirty minutes later, the woman finally finishes up. Boyle looks around to find that he has been abandoned and the field where Mass has been celebrated is completely vacated. There he is – alone on the mountain top, not only without a ride, but convinced that a worse priest had never visited that place or walked the earth.

Can you relate to his story? Some days we leave at home the one thing we need to do our job passably well. Sometimes life offers us challenges for which we are ill equipped and unprepared. In last five months, we found our work skills and experience and our life skills and experience aren't that helpful or relevant in a pandemic shaped world. These days we are all novices. I know two guys who run a small company that specializes in large event management – they plan and run events like *Race for the Cure* and *Red, White and Boom*. They are really good at this work. Their skill set and experience are impressive. And basically useless right now. Every

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one of their events has been canceled. Sometimes, our gifts and skills don't match the challenges of our current situation.

Which brings us to the story of the call of Abraham. Our expectations of this account should be high. Abraham's call story marks the beginning of the great traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. You would think the story would tell us all that is awesome about Abraham.

That doesn't happen. In fact, we learn nothing about Abraham except that he and his wife Sarah are old and childless. And, as far as we know, Abraham has no qualities that qualify him for leadership. He is not charming like David or cunning like Jacob or resourceful like Joseph. There is nothing special or noteworthy about him. When God chooses him, he is childless and 75 years old. This is not the guy you pick to be the parent of a mighty nation. He is ill equipped and unprepared.

It's not much of a beginning.

Guess what? It gets worse before it gets better. God asks this couple – who have so very little – to give up what they have to journey to an as-yet unnamed new land.

At least they had a choice. At least they had a choice. In the past few weeks, I've started saying, "If this were our 10<sup>th</sup> pandemic, we would know what to do now." I say it in jest. I say it in all seriousness. If this was even our 2<sup>nd</sup> pandemic we would have some experience and muscle memory to guide us. All of us are making decisions about our lives without the benefit of a map, without knowing what the next six months are going to look like. I think especially of educators and parents of school-age children, struggling to discern what is the best path forward. The path is so unclear. These days we are all Abraham and Sarah, leaving behind all that is familiar and known and follow God to a destination that has yet to be revealed to us.

Abraham and Sarah have a few things going for them. They have each other. What a gift that is. Neither one of them is alone in these challenges. I think of the two men I mentioned earlier, the event planners. They are doing O.K., creating virtual events and discovering niches of the market that are pandemic proof. It makes all the difference in the world, that they aren't alone in this work, that they have each other for brainstorming and mutual support.

Abraham and Sarah have each other. And they also have God. God has picked them for this assignment.

This has often been referred to as Abraham's call story. For too long I have associated these call stories with vocation. A person is called by God to be a minister, or a doctor or a teacher. The call of Abraham has nothing to do with vocation. Abraham's call isn't about how he makes a living. I challenge you to read the chapters about Abraham and figure out exactly what he does for a living. It's all kind of vague – he owns herds, he had servants. As far as I can figure out whatever ancient world-Old Testament thing Abraham does for a living before God calls him, he is doing exactly the same thing afterwards.

This call stuff isn't about vocation. This call of God is bigger than vocation. This isn't about God wanting us to switch jobs. God wants us to switch loyalties. This is a story about finding deeper meaning in every corner of our lives. God asks Abraham and Sarah to place everything in God's hands – their loyalty, their trust, their future, their hope. God wants a say in every part of their lives – their family life, their social life, their economic life. That's what it means to have God along for our journey.

They are travelling with God. Let's be clear that doesn't make the path any clearer. The destination is still unknown. But traveling with God changes things.

You never know when you will be blessed.

Back to Gregory Boyle, all alone on top of that mountain in Bolivia.

With his backpack slung over his shoulder and spirit deflated, Boyle began to make the long walk back down to town. But before he leaves the field, an old Quechua campesino, seemingly out of nowhere, makes his way to Boyle. He writes:

He appears ancient, but I suspect his body had been weathered by work... As he nears me, I see he is wearing tethered wool pants, with a white buttoned shirt, greatly frayed at the collar. He has a rope for a belt. His suit coat is coarse and worn. He has a fedora, toughened by the years. He is wearing huaraches, and his feet are caked with Bolivian mud. Any place that a human face can have wrinkles and creases, he has them. He is at least a foot shorter than I am, and stands right in front of me and says, "Tatai."

This is a Quechua name kind of like 'Father' but intimate and full of affection. 'Tatai,' he says and then, in Spanish: 'Thanks for coming.' Boyle continues,

I think of something to say, but nothing comes to me. Which is just as well, because before I can speak, the old campesino reaches into his pockets of his suit coat and retrieves two fistfuls of multicolored rose petals. He's on the tips of his toes and gestures that I might assist with the inclination of my head. And so he drops the petals over my head, and I'm without words. He digs into his pockets again and manages two more fistfuls of petals. He does this again and again, and the store of red, pink, and yellow rose petals seems infinite. I just stand there and let him do this, staring at my own huaraches, now moistened with my tears, covered with rose petals. Finally, he takes his leave and I'm left there, alone, with only the bright aroma of roses.

For all the many time I would return to Tirani and see the same villagers, over and over, I never saw this old campesino again.<sup>1</sup>

What a day for Gregory Boyle – a day that includes both failure and flowers – incompetence and blessing. What a day. What a journey.

That's the road we are on right now. We don't know what we are doing. It's hard. And also full of blessings. Blessings that remind us that we are worthy in the eyes of God – not because we are competent or skilled or good at what we do but because we have made the decision to invite God into our lives. Some days, we struggle. Some days, we are showered with rose petals.

Because we are on this journey with God and with one another. With God and with one another.

Sometimes, it all comes down to who is by your side.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, p. 35-38.