

**Accelerate**  
***Maximize Your Character***  
**October 23, 2011**

Let's pray together.

God, I thank you for the truth that is in your word, how it guides us and teaches us what we need to know about You and about ourselves. And I thank you for the story that we just heard. I pray this morning You would use it to speak to us and give us insight and understanding into what You're doing and how You work in our lives and how You want to work in us as a congregation and as individuals. So we give this time to You.

I ask in Jesus name. Amen.

As Kitti said, that has to be one of the most

incredible stories in all of scripture ... but not for the reason most of us would think.

I don't know about you but whenever I hear that story – and maybe for some of us it's the first time to hear it and this is your reaction, too – whenever I hear that story, my first thought is “wow - imagine what it must have felt like to be in Abraham's sandals! Being told by God to take your only son to an unnamed mountain to kill him as a sacrifice? That would be pretty incredible: first of all, that you thought you heard God say to do that and, second, that you would actually attempt to follow through on it.”

We react that way because, to us, the idea of sacrificing one of our children to some god is outlandish. But, in Abraham's day, it was not unheard of for a man to take a child to a high and holy place and offer up him or her up as a sacrifice to some supposed deity. It

wouldn't be too far-fetched for a spiritual man like Abraham to conclude that *he* was to do such a thing as an act of worship to his god.

What makes this story so incredible – at least, as Abraham would have experienced it – is *not* what he almost does to Isaac.

And it's also not so much what *God* does, although what God does is pretty incredible beyond just providing an alternative sacrifice to save Isaac's life. And that was incredible. But what God does in a single dramatic event is to make it crystal clear to Abraham and to all who would follow Abraham, that He is not like the lifeless idols that the people of that region claimed as their gods. He neither demands nor approves of a child sacrifice to appease him. Such practices, He was clearly communicating, would not be part of

worshipping and following Him.

Instead, in a single dramatic event, God points forward to what He himself will do centuries later at, get this, that same exact high and holy place, Mt. Moriah. *His* only son, Jesus of Nazareth will, centuries later, march up that same hill to a place known as “the place of the skull” called Golgotha. But this time though, there is no substitute because He *is* the substitute. Jesus *will* die on a Roman cross as a sacrifice for your sin and mine. In a single dramatic event, thousands of years before it even happens, God prophetically declares that He will never ask a human being to offer up a son or daughter as an atoning sacrifice for sin. Instead, He would one day do that Himself.

Of course, in the story we just read, there’s no indication that Abraham has any such prophetic knowledge. So, again, while that

may be incredible to us, years and years after the event, it's safe to say it was not to him.

What makes this story incredible in the moment is not what Abraham does. And it's not what God does or even intends to eventually do. What makes this story incredible is ... *who Isaac is to Abraham*. He is more than just a son. And he is more than just an "only son" because, in fact, Abraham has *another* son by the name of Ishmael. But Ishmael is not the son God had promised. Ishmael is the son of Hagar not Sarah ... but I should probably back up just a bit in the story so you understand.

Years before this incredible scene on Mt. Moriah, God had come to Abraham and said something which also was incredible. He said, "Abraham, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to make you the father of many

nations," He said. "I'm going to do that by giving you a son." And what made that incredible was that at that point in his life, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were far beyond childbearing years and, even in those years, she had been unable to have children! The Bible describes her as barren. So, this incredible promise came, that one day, Abraham, you're going to have a son.

But, unfortunately, God did not give them a timetable and, as time dragged on, eventually Abraham and Sarah concluded that they were to manufacture something on their own. And that's what they did. According to the custom of their day, Sarah took one of her servants, Hagar, and gave her to Abraham to have a child. And Hagar conceived and Ishmael was born. But this was not God's plan. Instead, *God intended all along to miraculously open Sarah's womb.*

And that's what happened not long afterwards when Isaac was born. And God made it clear at that point that "Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted.<sup>1</sup> Isaac is the only son you have that will fulfill the promise I have made to you."

**And, so, when God spoke to Abraham and said ...**

*"Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you." Genesis 22:2 (NLT)*

... when God spoke those words, you would think that would call into question everything Abraham had experienced in his life with God up to that point. "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!

Wait a minute, God. Are we talking about the same Isaac? Are you talking about the one you promised to me and to Sarah? The one who You said would be the fulfillment – the only fulfillment – of your promise to bless me and not just me, but to bless the whole world?”

Because, remember, when God told Abraham that he was going to be blessed he said, “I’m going to bless you for your sake, but I’m also blessing you for the sake of the whole world ...

*“I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others ... All the families on earth will be blessed through you.”  
Genesis 12:2-3 (NLT)*

And that was a prophecy that was fulfilled centuries later when Jesus was born to a



young Jewish woman, in the line of Abraham, by the name of Mary.

And with that as the promise and *who Isaac is* to Abraham as “the son of the promise,” you would expect that Abraham at this moment would balk at what he thinks he has heard from God, or at least wonder “did I hear this correctly, God? Are you making sense?” But – and this is what makes this story so incredible – *he doesn't*. He simply trusts and obeys. The very next verse, as we heard in the video, says ...

*The next morning (after hearing this word from God) Abraham got up early. He saddled his donkey and took two of his servants with him, along with his son, Isaac.*  
Genesis 22:3 (NLT)

He doesn't freak out. He doesn't beg or

plead for Isaac's life. He doesn't complain. Instead, he trusts that God is going to do what God said he would do, a fact illustrated by what he says to his servants when they finally arrive at the place God shows him. He says ...

*"Stay here with the donkey,"  
Abraham told the servants.  
"The boy and I will travel a  
little farther. We will worship  
there, and then we will come  
right back."*

*Genesis 22:4-5 (NLT)*

Somehow, Abraham believes that Isaac is coming back with him! In his mind, he's thinking, "God gave me this son, Isaac, as the son of the promise, therefore that means that God is going to someday make him a father because, if there are going to be multitudes blessed through me, it's got to come through him, so it's got to be

multitudes through him, through whom the whole earth is going to be blessed." And, so, in Abraham's mind, whatever was going to happen on that mountain, in between those two events, somehow had to fit into that plan which meant that *both* of them were going to be coming back.<sup>ii</sup>

And at this point, I think a really good application of this story would be to stop and say ... what in your life is God starting and where God has said "here is where you're going to end up." And, right now you are in the middle stage and it doesn't make sense, and you're going, "God, I don't see how this piece right here fits with where I was and what you've done and where I'm going. I'm all confused."

And I think that would be a really good application, but, today, I'm not going to go in that direction because I think there's another

question that's just as important that we need to talk about.

**And that is ... how did Abraham develop such strength of character?**

Why didn't he freak out like many of us probably would (like I would)? Why didn't he - in that moment when it was clear and even in the three day journey when he was thinking - why didn't he just stop and accuse God of doing some kind of a bait and switch? "God, You said this and now you're doing this!" How had Abraham come to the point of radical and immediate obedience to the command of God, even when it seemed to contradict what God had previously revealed to him?

And I think this question matters because I think that's what all of us who choose to follow Christ would like to be like. We would like to be like Abraham who responded with

“yes” when God said “do something that doesn’t make a whole lot of sense at this moment. Trust me.” See, none of us, I think, signs up to follow Jesus with the hope that as time goes on we’ll be *less* trusting or *less* willing to obey. All of us who follow Jesus want our experience to continue the way it starts out when we say “yes” – kind of like what we saw happen in this room last week. Those of you who were here, you saw it. If you were not here,

- We had the baptismal pool set up.
- I gave a message as clear as I could explaining what it means to accept Christ and then the need to follow Jesus by being baptised (even if we were baptized as children because being baptized later is a fulfillment of that).
- Obviously, the Holy Spirit whispered something in this room, because
- about 80 adults and teenagers between

both services, literally got up from their seats, went out into the Dining Hall, changed their clothes, came back into the room and were baptized, fully immersed in the water of the baptismal pool.

They heard what God said and they responded in the moment with radical trust and obedience. And I'm pretty sure that they – as well as the rest of us who have done the same thing at another time – would like to see that pattern continue in their life. So, how do we get there? How do we develop a strength of character like that of Abraham? What produces that kind of spiritual development and maturity over the long haul?

Well, the answer is simple, and you're probably not going to like this word: it's testing. Testing.

**Or, as the Apostle James puts it:**

*When your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect [or mature] and complete, needing nothing. James 1:3-4 (NLT)*

Testing produces endurance in our life, and endurance produces maturity of character ... which is what happened to Abraham and what needs to happen to us.

Actually, that's not totally accurate. I should say that "testing produces endurance and endurance produces maturity of character" ... which is what *God did* for Abraham and what God will do for those of us who are believers in and followers of Jesus. God put

Abraham in situations that tested his faith, intentionally tested him, so that his endurance would grow and his character would become even stronger.

Actually, even that's not totally accurate. I should say that "God tested Abraham's faith to produce endurance which produced character ... which enabled him to be tested even more to produce even more endurance which produced even more character ... which enabled him to be tested even more to produce ..."

I think you get the idea. Abraham's life was a series of tests. In fact, one biblical scholar has documented 10 of them just in that little section of Genesis alone.<sup>iii</sup> Ten times that God set up a test to grow Abraham's endurance and character so he could grow even more and even more. Now, when you read the story of Abraham, you read that on



some of these tests he passed and some he failed miserably. But whether he passed or failed, and this is really important, even when he failed, his endurance grew and his character – his ability to actually do whatever God was asking of him – became even stronger, until the next test.

**Bottom line, Abraham became the man he was because God continually put before him challenges that required him to be *more* than the man he was at the time.  
<repeat>**

Now, I know that sometimes spiritual principles like that can get a little bit obscured by ... well, their spiritual nature. We start talking about the spiritual and a lot of us think, "Oh, that's Rick's domain. That's what he does. We don't live there like you do so we can't understand it."

But the truth is that this spiritual principle is exactly how it works in the physical world; in

the world in which you and I live every day.

For example, and some of you are aware of this and some are not ... but, about a month ago, I became a grandpa for the first time. Jetta and I didn't make a big deal of it at the time because my oldest daughter ...

**... Marilyn, and her husband, Tim, were in the process of adopting the little girl who had just been born (in that picture) about a month ago. And things were not final yet. And, things can happen in the adoption process.**

But, as of a week ago, the judge decreed that Bria was legally their daughter, and legally my granddaughter.

Now, here's what's fascinating – and I had forgotten this because it's been like 20 years since I've held a child that small – but that little kid could not hold her head up!

It was just like a bobblehead. And here is a picture of us holding her, and notice where my hand is. I look very calm and collected there, but actually, I was shaking in my boots because several times when I held her I heard this little popping noise and I thought, "Oh my gosh, the kid just broke her neck!" (She didn't.) I was really scared in that picture.

But here's the truth: the only way Bria will develop the muscles – and this seems so obvious that it's almost foolish to have to say it – the only way Bria will develop the muscles to lift her head is through challenges that *require* her to lift her head. Challenges that require her to be more than she already is.

I've been learning a similar lesson from Jonathan, my physical trainer. Three times a

week – most weeks – I spend 40-45 minutes with him and you know what he does? He literally puts before me challenges that *require me to be more than the man I currently am*, physically speaking.

**When I first started working with him last winter, I could barely bench press the bar by itself. <finger weights>**

But week after week after week, he's challenged me to go further and further until it hurts. "Every pain," he says, "is a hard-earned muscle."

I want to smack him when he says it, but he's right.

**Now, I'm pushing weight I couldn't even imagine at the beginning. <pic of super heavy wt>**

But that's not me. Not yet. ☺

However, whereas the bar was a big challenge before, now, it by itself is the warm-up.

**In fact, quite often now, Jonathan and I play catch with the bar. <pic of tossing barbell>**

Just kidding. That's not Jonathan.

But I think you see the point. Physically, you and I don't become more than we currently are without challenges that require us to be more than we currently are. The same thing is true spiritually. You will never be more than you are in terms of your character without God somehow testing your faith in ways that require you to endure. The only way you will become mature and complete, lacking nothing, is for God to put before you challenges that require you to be more than you are.

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And that's how Abraham became the man that he was on that journey to the mountain. You see, and this is something that you don't get unless you read the whole scripture in context, and we kind of took that passage out of context this morning, the one we saw in the video. The experience of the mountain and Isaac, that wasn't something that just happened out of the blue. That was the spiritual high-water mark of Abraham's life – a massive test – a massive test of “spiritual weightlifting” (to use the analogy) which proved that his character had developed to a point where he was as committed to *his* God as the people around him were committed to *theirs* ... which – get this – served to justify *God's faith in him!*

We don't often think of it like that, do we? We don't think about God having faith in us. But

that's part of what's going on in this scene. Especially at the end where the angel comes in and Abraham is about to do what he's about to do, and the angel says "Stop!"

*"This is what the Lord says:  
Because you have obeyed  
me and have not withheld  
even your son, your only son,  
I swear by my own name  
that I will certainly bless you  
... And through your  
descendants all the nations of  
the earth will be blessed—all  
because you have obeyed  
me." Genesis  
22:16,18 (NLT)*

As one commentator puts it: "This is not just about the faith of Abraham, it is about the faith of God in Abraham. God is risking all of his promises on Abraham in this story. God is making himself vulnerable to the loss of his investment of years and years in

Abraham. And he is placing his own trustworthiness up for grabs in the eyes of both Abraham and Isaac; asking Abraham to give up the most precious thing in his life; requiring a son to submit to death by his own father's hand. God would require such a test only one other time in human history, and then he would require it of himself. God so loved the world that he gave his only son."<sup>iv</sup>

## **Accelerate Introduction**

Of course, by now you're probably wondering ... "why is Rick telling us this story? I mean, it's interesting ... kind of. And I can see some application to my own life ... kind of. But weren't we supposed to be starting some series today talking about the future of NHCC? I mean, I got a letter in the mail saying that this is, like, one of the most defining moments ever in the history of NHCC. What does *that* have to do with *this*?"



I'm so glad you asked! I will tell you.

Very simply, God wants to maximize our character. He wants us to become mature and complete, lacking nothing both as a collective body, called North Heartland Community Church, and as individuals. And to accomplish that, He is putting before us a challenge that requires us to be more than we already are. And I'll say much more about that as we move forward in that series but for now, I'll just say that we believe that God is calling us as a church and as individuals to accelerate our efforts to fulfill that threefold mission He gave us when we began 17 years ago. Remember the threefold mission:

- To reach seekers – to connect with people who are not church people. People who would never think that a

church could relate to their life, but who are now beginning to grow in their awareness of God. We want to be a church that reaches seekers.

- We want to build a family of believers who love and care for one another so well that when those seekers come in, who are our friends and our relatives, they can come in and say, "I've got to be part of what's going on there. I want to be part of that family.
- And we want to be a church that plants churches – which is by far the most effective way to reach people who do not go to church.

The truth is, when you look at where we've been over the past five years as a congregation, the truth is that we've made some real strides in the area of building a family but, in other areas, we have been coasting as a church. Maybe not

intentionally, but that's the reality. Let me show you why I say that. This is a little chart we made that tracks the attendance of how many people come in here every weekend, whether it's for the children's program or youth program or the services. We count everybody that's in this building every Sunday. And, for the last five years, you can see our attendance pattern. We've varied very little between 700 to 750.

**From 2005 through the present, our average weekly attendance has been 700 to 750.**

We're not reaching nearly as many people as we could be and as we need to be. Last weekend was a great illustration of that: even in our own church almost 80 people needed to make a public declaration of their faith in Jesus. How many more are there just in a three-mile radius from this building who are not in church this morning who have this

same issue? They need to know that there's a God who loves them and there's a savior who died for them. We're not doing what we need to be doing.

We've also not been involved in planting churches since 2006 when we sent Bob Miller up to St. Joseph to start Wellspring Community Church.

But, friends, here's the deal, it's time to change that. It's time to start moving forward again. It's time to build some momentum because we have not yet accomplished everything God put us here to accomplish. And that's why it's also time this morning to launch a two-year capital campaign which we're calling ...

**“ACCELERATE: BUILDING MOMENTUM  
TO CHANGE LIVES”**

Including our own!

I'll say more about that in a minute but first I want to say that if you're on our mailing list, or you have already received or will be receiving an envelope that looks like this (it has this little logo down here that says ACCELERATE) and on the inside it's got this really cool book like this that says "Owner's Manual - Accelerate: Building Momentum to Change Lives," and in this book there are all kinds of details about the things we believe God wants us to do, the goals in terms of what we think God wants us to accomplish ministry-wise and also the financial price tag – what it's going to cost us to see those things happen. And, the reason I'm holding this book up is because this booklet is very, very important to the process of the next four weeks so you need to make sure your family has one.

And, I live on the west side of the Northland

and this book came in my mail yesterday. I've talked to people on the east side who did not get one yesterday. You should get one of these tomorrow, so be watching the mailbox. But, if you're worried about that, or you're not on the church mailing list, as you leave this morning, our ushers have boatloads of these so pick one up. It's okay if you have more than one per family. (If you're on the west side and didn't get one, you should take one too).

By the way, in addition to the information about the campaign goals, these booklets also contain the next four weeks of the daily meditations that we give out every Sunday morning as you leave. So, the ushers are not going to have those meditations we give out because it's already in this book. What a deal! But wait there's more.

Inside this book, you will also find your small

group discussion guide for the next four weeks. And if your group is participating in the *Accelerate* study (and all message-based small groups are), then you will need to bring this booklet with you to your meetings. And you might even want to bring it to services for the next four weeks because it has places to take notes.

Speaking of small groups ... today is the last day for those who are not already in a group to get into one of the special *Accelerate* groups for the next four weeks. There are instructions in the program on how to sign up, but *the most important thing you need to know if you have kids and you need childcare* is that today is the last day you can sign up for that. So don't delay on that.

And, finally, speaking of signing up ... we're going to do something in this campaign that we've never done in the history of North

Heartland. Several times a week over the next four weeks, through the magic of text messaging, we're going to be pushing out what we're calling prayers and dares - prayers that will help you stay focused on what we are talking about; dares to step out and go a little bit beyond what you think you can do.

**To sign up for this you need to text the word "accelerate" to 313131.**

Then what will happen is, four times a week you're going to get a little message. It's not going to be a long message but a short sentence to remind you to pray about something related to what we're trying to accomplish here or, you'll get a short sentence that has a little dare in it such as "don't eat lunch today, instead pray." A little dare to do something that is outside of your comfort zone.



Now, as I said, this booklet has a lot of information in it about this campaign, about what we're trying to do goal-wise, but we also had a really cool video produced which gives an overview of the whole thing, because it's kind of complex, what we're trying to accomplish. But I think this video does a really fine job of getting down to the basics of it. So, I'll shut up for a few minutes while we watch it and then I'll come back and draw this morning to a close.

Here we go ...

### **Video – “Accelerate Vision”**

Wow! That turned out pretty good. And I am excited about where we are and this is the best time to be part of North Heartland.

Now, over the next few weeks I'll be unpacking some of that information in more detail but, for today, there are two things I

need to tell you about because they're kind of pressing.

*1. About the renovate and relocate options.*

You heard me mention in there that we have our building for sale and if we have a buyer by Nov. 1<sup>st</sup> then we'll move and build on the ballfield. And there are a lot of details about that, and I'm not going to go into that, but they will be posted on the website, how that's going to work *if* that happens.

In the next 10 days, we will know which one we're going to do, but I need to say right now that we know, and we knew going into this, the idea of selling this building and building on the ballfield is a long-shot. There just aren't that many entities these days interested in purchasing a very specialized building like this one. We knew that going in which is why we only listed the building thru

November 1<sup>st</sup>. Plus, backing up, God didn't say, "I want you to sell your building," he said, "I want you to accelerate. I want you to get back to accomplishing some of these things that I told you to accomplish in the very first place." So, that's why the November 1<sup>st</sup> date.

And, just to add a little bit more to that, what led us to even consider selling this building in the first place was that one particular entity in this community expressed interest in our building and property at the same time we learned that the city was going to complete 88<sup>th</sup> Street, which then made it feasible for us to even think about building next door. So, it seemed like "maybe these things are happening for a reason," and this particular entity had expressed interest in property in the past, so we thought, okay, let's go through the real estate process. Let's list the building and then contact this

particular entity that had expressed interest. And, we did, and they said, “we’re *not* interested” – we’re not interested, at least, not at the price for which we need to sell this building in order to make it feasible financially for us to build something on the ballfield. So, that’s the reality. However, the building is still on the market from now until November 1<sup>st</sup> ... and God is still God (now until Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, and maybe beyond, I think) ... *and*, in our history as a church, we have experienced some amazing things right at the wire. Maybe you remember, when we bought this building, when we made the bid on this building years ago, we had a certain period of time to obtain financing, and we did not get financing (no one said “we believe in you enough to give you financing) until hours before the midnight deadline. A great moment in the history of our church. So, God has done that in the past, and He might do that again. We’ll see how that

works out. But I just want you to know that; that's where we are.

And, also, again, as I said in the video, even if the building doesn't sell, moving this wall is a wonderful option. Honestly, I could flip a coin; either one of these options is that good. We would be very excited to do that as well.

I plan to keep you posted on where this is over the next ten days and throughout this series. Also, we have created a special Accelerate website ([acceleratenhcc.org](http://acceleratenhcc.org)) and you can get to that through our NHCC homepage or The City, and that will keep you up to date on all this stuff and answer all the questions you might have.

## *2. About the financial goal.*

It wasn't expressly clear on the video but the goal of \$4M over the next two years is more

or less double what we are currently spending for our building, property and to do ministry. That means that in order to do what God is asking us to do (whether it's renovate or relocate in addition to church planting and everything else we're already currently doing), our generosity as a congregation is going to need to "accelerate" over the next two years from \$2M to \$4M ... or at the rate of an additional million dollars per year.

*And that is a big deal, especially in these economic times.* It's a challenge that God has put before us which will require us as individuals to be more than we already are when it comes to our stewardship of the resources God has placed in our hands. It's a challenge that will require all but the most financially-strapped members of this church to go beyond what we can imagine right now in terms of our financial commitment to the

work of God's kingdom.

## Conclusion

Which, as you've probably guessed, brings us back to Abraham. Remember, Abraham became the incredible man of character he was because God continually put before him challenges that required him to be *more* than the man he currently was. God continually tested his faith so that he would develop endurance and become mature and complete.

And that, I think, I'm fairly positive, is what God will do for you and for me through this *Accelerate* campaign. Over the next two years, I think that's what is going to happen. In fact, Jetta and I have already started talking about this. We have decided, and we don't know what it's going to look like yet, but we have decided that we're going to do

something financially that stretches us beyond what we think we can do right now. And yes, the result of that will be really cool. We'll see either a new facility built or we'll see an auditorium expanded. We'll see more seekers come to Christ. It will be cool to see us send out a church planter again. It will be cool to see how lives of others are impacted and changed.

But it will be just as cool, in our lives, to see how this test of financial stewardship and accelerated generosity produces *in us* endurance and the kind of character that says, as we sang at the beginning of this service: "Today I choose to follow you. I will say 'yes' to you." It will be just as cool to see how this challenge God is putting before us will change *our* lives as we trust Him to provide, just as He provided for Abraham. See, this is an interesting thing, when God called Abraham to become a great man who



would be a blessing to the whole world, including you and me centuries later, the first person God had to change in that whole deal was Abraham!

And I think that's encouraging because most of us don't realize that Abraham did not begin his life as a paragon of faith, but gradually, over many years, he became mature in his character and in his relationship with God.<sup>v</sup> In fact, you may not know this, but Abraham began his walk with God as a distant-from-God pagan who simply said "yes" to God's invitation to go on a journey.

Long after the time of Abraham, the Bible tells us that God was reminding his decendents, the people of Israel, as they were about to enter the Promised Land, he was reminding them where they had come from.<sup>vi</sup>

**He said:**

*“Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods.”*

*But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants.” Joshua 24:2-3 (NLT)*

And that’s the background for the beginning of Abraham’s story in the opening verses of Genesis 12:

*The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you.”*

*Genesis 12:1 (NLT)*

*"I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others ... All the families on earth will be blessed through you."  
Genesis 12:2-3 (NLT)*

And at this point in the story, and this is what's interesting, there is no hint that Abraham had any prior contact with the god identified here as the LORD. Yet God just shows up and says, "Hey, I've got an offer for you Abe. Leave behind life as you have known it, leave behind your family and go to an undisclosed location where I will tell you when you get there. And I'm going to make you a great nation. Just go on a trip with me. Go on a journey, Abraham."

Abraham and Sarah said "yes" to that journey, and that changed you and it

changed them as well.

Today I hope you will say yes. And I'm not talking about saying yes to some kind of a financial commitment. That's not what this is about this morning. I'm not asking you to make a financial commitment this morning or to think about any kind of a sacrifice. There will be a time and place when we do that. But what I'm asking you to do today is to simply say "yes" to a journey that will last for the next four weeks, from now through Sunday November 20<sup>th</sup>. That's it. Just say "yes" and commit to hang out with us as we go through this process, as we go through this series. Get the "prayer and dare" texts; get the book; go to the small group. Just walk through this journey through the next four weeks and consider whether or not God might be challenging you to go beyond what you have ever expected of yourself, in this way.

In just a minute, I'm going to give you an opportunity to say "yes" to that in a demonstrable way if you so choose ... and you don't even need to change clothes or get wet to say "yes." So just to let you know up front, it's very simple, what you're going to do. But before we do that, the band has a really cool song which kind of speaks to this. So, we're just going to make a little room here for God to speak. Take just a couple of minutes, and then I'll come back and I'll tell you what you can do if you want to say "yes" to go on the journey.

The Bible tells us that one of the things Abraham occasionally did as he and Sarah were Canaan bound was to stop and build an altar out of stones in worship of this god who had called them to a place and to a vision that was so far beyond anything they could have ever imagined. It was kind of a

way of marking a defining moment and of making a commitment to say “yes, God, we’ll continue in this journey with You.”

This morning, I’m going offer you the opportunity to do something similar. I can’t give you a stone because, well, you don’t need to be carrying a stone around with you. Instead, we have set up tables full of little tiles at the various communion stations all around the auditorium.

And what I invite you to do after I pray, is to pick up a tile on your way out and put it someplace where you will see it over the next few weeks – maybe in your car, your purse, the bathroom ... wherever you will see it. And whenever you do see it, let it remind you that you have been invited by God, in his amazing grace, to go on a journey that has the power to change not only the lives of others but to change yours

as well.

Let's pray.

God, thank you so much that You invite us to be part of the work You are doing and then You use that work to get us done, to make us people we could have never imagined we could be, to allow us to see You and experience You in ways that we never could even imagine when we first started out. And, God, that is my hope for everyone who is gathered in this room today, that wherever we are in our journey with You that we would just say "yes" to whatever the step is - "okay, this is what I'm going to do over the next four weeks, and I'm not sure, you're kind of scaring me with this talk about giving more than I've ever given in my life, but I'll worry about that when I get to it. All

I'm going to do, God, is say 'yes' to You and let You speak to me over the next four weeks, let You challenge me to be more than I ever thought I could be. I know that you'll provide. I know that you'll give me the strength. Teach me that. Grow me to be more than I ever thought I could be."

God, that is my prayer for all of these folks in this room this morning.

And, friends, as we leave this morning, I'm not going to say anything else; no need to do anything else. Just, get up and pick up a tile if you want to say, "yes, God, I'm willing to go on a journey with You for the next four weeks."

Thank you for being here. God bless you and we'll see you next week.



# Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 21:12

<sup>ii</sup> Hebrews 11:17-19

<sup>iii</sup> See [www.hoshanarabbah.org/pdfs/fatherabra.pdf](http://www.hoshanarabbah.org/pdfs/fatherabra.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://johnyork.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=56769>

<sup>v</sup> Henry Blackaby: *Spiritual Leadership*

<sup>vi</sup> See <http://johnyork.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=55791> for a great explanation