**Genesis 12:1-9**

**God of the Journey**

Happy New Year!

 Well, it’s not New Year in the Calendar sense, of course, but September does always feel to me like a ‘new year’ in the church sense because it’s as we all come back after a good Summer break.

 And so, at the beginning of this new church year, it’s a good time for us to think about our own response to following God’s call on our lives. And it’s a particularly good opportunity for us this year because of two other things: Firstly, we have our Archdeacon’s Visitation on Tuesday, which is the church equivalent of an Ofsted Inspection and out of that will come a report from the Diocese

reviewing all that we have achieved in the past three years and giving us some thoughts and priorities as we move into the future. And also, we will be launching our new Mission Action Plan at some stage very soon, which will give us the blueprint for our priorities over the coming years as a church family together.

 So it’s a good time for us to be thinking about our covenant relationship with God and how we want to be committed in our discipleship and our walk with God throughout 2018 and beyond.

 So, I want to think a little bit about our reading from Genesis 12:1-9 because it draws on the key themes of faithfulness to God’s vision and our desire to walk with him. And, we understand the need to have some sort of vision of God and our own lives, not down to the finest detail, of course, (God doesn’t work like that), but enough for us to journey forward. In Proverbs 29, we are reminded that, “Where there is no vision, the people perish”. If we have no vision of God, we cannot pursue God. If we have no vision of God, we will perish – our faith will grow cold. But if we devote ourselves to developing a vision of God, all the rest will fall into place. And, as our vision of God develops through worship, so our faithfulness to God will develop.

 What is faithfulness? Faithfulness is just what it says – to be full of faith. Now we need to remember that faith and belief are two different things…

 You might know the story of Blondin, who lived in Canada at the turn of the 20th-century. And he made his living out of walking the Niagra Falls on a tightrope and his party trick was to do this pushing a wheelbarrow! One day, he turned to the crowd and said, “Do you believe I can go across this tightrope with someone sitting in the wheelbarrow?” Well, of course, the crowd went crazy with delight, shouting and cheering him on. So Blondin turned to one woman and said, “Do you believe I can do it?” “Of course,” she said. “Well, get in the wheelbarrow and let’s do it!”

 Did she get in? No! Because she believed he could do it - but didn’t have enough faith to be a part of it.

 And that’s the difference: we can believe in God, but the life to which we are called is one where we exhibit faith: enough faith to step out with God, to get into the wheelbarrow, and allow ourselves to be carried through life by him.

 Do we have belief? Yes, we do.

 Do we have faith? That’s a different question altogether…

 Faith and belief go hand in hand, but they are not the same thing.

 And that wonderful story we’ve just heard from Genesis 12 is all about stepping out in faith with God and discovering a new beginning.

 And there’s just three things I want to draw out of Abram’s story that speak to us about new beginnings and faithfulness to God.

**1. Faithfulness means going on a journey**

What’s the first word that God says to Abram? “Leave”.

 When we give our lives over to God and pursue a vision of him, one thing is absolutely clear: we are not called to stand still!

 Wherever you are at in your life, God says, “Leave”. Not because where you are at is a wrong place to be, but because the nature of the Christian life is a journey - constantly moving on into the vision of God.

 So wherever you are at, no matter how holy you may be, no matter how comfortable you may be: “Leave”. It’s time to journey onwards – it’s *always* time to journey onwards into God. It’s never a time to stand still.

 And of course, and this is my second point…

**2. Faithfulness leaves us feeling vulnerable**

God says to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household”.

 Abram was 75 years old! He was enjoying retirement, feet up, slippers on, warming himself in front of the fire and God says, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household”.

 How much more vulnerable can you get? Everything inside of him must have screamed, “Stay!” But God said, “Leave!” and so he had to go, stepping out into the unknown…

 But crucially, this journey into vulnerability was made on a promise: the promise that God would lead him forward. God says, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.” Wherever God is taking us beyond today, it is not up a blind alley. There is a destination for us.

 Now I want to be really clear about this because this is a real misunderstanding that many Christians have. Sometimes, Christians believe that there is some sort of road-map for us to follow; that God, quite literally, has our life mapped out for us and our task is to somehow work out what that map is and follow the route marked out for us. But I don’t think that is true at all…

 The Bible never, ever suggests that our life choices are predestined - the complete opposite in fact! And in this story from Genesis 12, we have a perfect example of that: God says, “Go to the land I will show you”. There is no road map given to Abram…

 I find it helpful for myself to change the metaphor. Rather than God giving me a road map to get through life, I think he gives me a compass - and as long as I am generally heading Due North, I am going in the right direction. There are times when I might veer off to East or West a bit. There are times when I might have to re-tread my steps South. I can even come off the road for a bit and enjoy the views. But, with compass in hand, heading Due North, I know that I am heading to the land that God has promised to me.

 There is a destination. I don’t have a road map: I don’t even need a road map. I just need to head Due North and I’ll get there…

 Thirdly, and finally…

**3. There is an appropriate attitude to adopt for the journey**

Clearly, to step out on the journey, we need to have an attitude of obedience. Verse 1, God says, “Leave your country…” Verse 4, “So Abram left…” We’ve talked about obedience already.

 But crucially, Abram’s journey with God was also undertaken in an attitude of worship. Twice in this short passage, Abram stops to worship God. In verse 7, at Moreh, Abram stops to build an altar to the Lord. In verse 8, at Bethel, he builds another altar and prays. In all his anxieties and fear and sense of vulnerability, Abram prioritises times of worship as his stability and focus.

 And so must we prioritise worship, in the busyness of our lives, as we journey into God’s future together.

And finally, finally, verse 9 is of paramount importance: “Then Abram set out and continued towards the Negev”. It seems a bit odd to finish in the middle of a story. But actually, we need to remember that 2018 and the launch of our new Mission Action Plan is just the next stage on our journey into God’s future: it is not the destination. We are always moving on, always journeying on, never arriving - just hitting the next stage of where God wants us to be…

 So today, like Abram, we commit ourselves to the journey of faithfulness wherever it may take us: feeling vulnerable, yes, but in absolute confidence that our God is the God of the Journey.

 We don’t need a road map. We need a vision of God. And, like Abram, we dedicate ourselves to worshipping the God of the Journey in 2018 and beyond. Amen.