

March 12, Second Sunday in Lent

## **Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17**

by [Nurya Love Parish](#) in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue

I think that every baptism or confirmation class should include a showing of the movie *Mary Poppins*. Not for the suffragettes or the magic carpetbag. The point is the scene where Mary, Bert, and the children take hands and jump straight into the middle of a sidewalk chalk painting, emerging in an entirely new, much more colorful world.

That's what becoming a disciple does. When you are grafted onto the body of Christ, you leave an old, dreary world behind—and enter a world where the unexpected becomes commonplace. It's not enough simply to say you are a disciple; you actually have to jump.

I was baptized at 25, but I don't think I really jumped until I was past 30. The story that gave me the courage to jump was the passage in Genesis 12 in which Abram is sent out by God.

My life thus far had more or less proceeded according to ordinary, middle-class expectations. I had gone to college. I had gone to seminary, been ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister, and taken a first call and then a second. But now I was serving a church that wasn't clearly Christian. Historically American Baptist, it had become independent and theologically diverse, and it was undergoing a period of intense change. I didn't understand what held the church together. After a while it became clear that this church wasn't going to hold me.

The problem was, I didn't have anywhere else to go. I was questioning my entire denominational affiliation; I couldn't seek a new call when I was so unsettled in my spiritual life. I loved ministry, but I had to leave ministry. Where was I headed? I didn't know.

The morning that I sat in my prayer chair and realized I needed to hand in my resignation was the day Abram's story became real to me. "Leave behind everything

familiar,” God says to Abram. “Go to the land that I will show you.” Not the land God *has shown* Abram. Abram has to leave before he knows where he is headed. And so did I. First I left the church; then I left my denomination.

My story, like Abram’s, worked out. A year after that morning in my prayer chair, I was worshiping among the Episcopalians. Five years later, I was once again in ordained ministry. Now I am part of a tradition that fits me: along with its social mission it has a consistent liturgy and a clear theological foundation.

I didn’t know where I was going when I set out on this journey; I got to what the well-known Shaker hymn calls “the place just right” through the grace and mercy of God. My path was taken one step at a time, usually with some hesitation, often in the dark. I had a lot of good-byes to offer: to friends, to my hard-won final fellowship as a minister, to leadership roles. I offered those good-byes without knowing what I was making room for. I only knew that I had to depart before I could arrive.

“You must be born again,” Jesus tells Nicodemus. When you give up your own will to follow the will of God, you are made new. Instead of having control, you give up power. Instead of knowing your destination, you try to be faithful during the journey. Instead of being sure of yourself, you become sure of God.

When Mary Poppins and the others jump through the chalk drawing, they take on the colors of their new world. They are clothed in new, bright clothing; they sing along with the music that is already playing. They are reborn in a world that touches their old world and yet is wondrously different. In that new world there is space not just for work, but for wonder; not just for drudgery, but for delight.

That is the world God means for us to inhabit. God has even come into our world to issue a gracious invitation to this world of joy. God has even died in order that we might die along with him in baptism, so that we might be raised with him to newness of life. This is why in baptism we offer the newly baptized bright new clothing; this is why the newly baptized sing along with the church’s ancient song.

Abram showed me how to go forward when I did not know the road.

The story of Abram didn’t mean much to me until it became my story, too. But once I adopted it as my own, God used it to guide me faithfully through difficult times. It turns out that jumping becomes easier with practice. After making the leap to leave a church and a denomination, I made the leap to cofound a farm-based ministry. The

risk feels great—the model is nonexistent and therefore completely unproven—but wasn't the risk to Abram even greater? And where would we all be today if Abram had said, "Thank you, Lord, but I prefer familiar ground"?

The old stories last because they are true. Maybe we don't need to show *Mary Poppins* at confirmation, after all. Maybe that scene is just one more retelling of the ancient story of new and unending life in Christ. After all, when I needed to take my leap, I didn't think of *Mary Poppins*; I thought of Abram. He showed me how to go forward when I did not know the road.