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The God Who Calls Us Forward

By Revd. Corrie Alexander-Willette

Thomas is almost four years old. Over the last four years, I have learned a lot about children's television. There are shows we have entirely banned from our house, and shows we turn on and forget to turn off because they're just so good. The Wildcats falls into this second category.

The Wildcats follows brothers Chris and Martin Krat as they travel the globe studying and protecting wild animals. In one episode, they find a seedling of an endangered butternut tree. However, as they investigate, they only find dead and broken butternut trees. Aviva, the inventor of the creature power suits, creates a disc so Martin can turn into a butternut tree. He expresses concern about the tree's immobility due to the nature of roots. But Aviva assures him it will be a grand adventure because she has programmed the power suit with root mobility. This root mobility allows him to move where he needs to grow and even escape the beetle that carries deadly fungus.

I have been thinking a lot about root mobility.

The Call of Abram and Root Mobility

Last week I preached at Chiswick for the first time, preaching on the call of Abram in Genesis 12. God calls Abram and Sarai to uproot their lives, their family, and everything they have ever known to go to a place God will show them. As they travel, Abram builds altars—markers along their journey where he can remember God was here. Casey Overton invites us to think of altars as places where our faith shifts and changes, places that help us remember what God has done.

Between the call of Abram and the escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, much happens. Abram becomes Abraham. Ishmael and Isaac are born. Jacob becomes Israel. The 12 tribes are formed. The family moves to Egypt. Then the Israelites are enslaved. Moses is born, the burning bush appears, the plagues come, and finally we find the Israelites with the Red Sea ahead and the Egyptian army behind.

It turns out that God invites us into significant root mobility. We find Abram picking up and putting down roots along his journey to Canaan. We find Moses called to uproot his life to return to Egypt to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery. We find Peter and Andrew and James and John called from their families, from their nets, from their livelihoods to be rooted in Christ.

I have also found myself needing root mobility. There have been times when I felt really rooted, really knowing what I was going to do. In high school, I was convinced I was going to college to become an athletic trainer, then a physical therapist, working with high school athletes. But then God told me my roots might need to move.

I finished college after working at Cedar Crest Camp in Dixon, Tennessee. It was there that I felt my call begin to shift. I thought I would be a camp counselor forever. That would be my life. So I went to seminary.

I remember telling my mom I was nervous about seminary. What if God called me to ordained ministry? I knew that was not what I was going to do. I am the daughter of two United Methodist clergy people. Both my parents are now retired United Methodist clergy. I remember being about seven years old, sitting in a state park near our house, being told we would move because my mom had a new appointment. I thought, I will never be a pastor because I will not do this to my future hypothetical children.

Well, my future hypothetical children is now a very real child who just moved thousands of miles away from everything he has known. In seminary, as it turns out, God does call me from camping and retreat ministry to ordained ministry—again, shaking these roots I thought I had.

Through my seven years as an ordained clergy person, many times I know my roots are settled. And as soon as I realise that, God shakes them a little bit. As we were preparing to move here, we felt God shaking us.

The Messy Middle

Not everything has been easy. But there is a researcher and storyteller named Brené Brown who has spent the last two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. She talks about something she calls "day two"—a metaphorical second day of a three-day conference.

Day one is exciting. You see your friends again. You do all the fun get-to-know-you games. But day two is where the hard work begins. Small groups are assigned. The newness, the hype, the energy have waned. The content becomes heavier. Day two is the middle where things are hard, where you can't yet see the finish line. She frequently calls day two the messy middle. She says: "The middle is messy, but it is also where all the magic happens. All

the tension that creates goodness and learning. Sometimes day two is dark and the doors feel closed. We are too far in to turn around and go back, but we also feel too far away to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

So often we find ourselves in the messy middle. The first week we were here was a little bit weird. We were staying in a hotel, so it felt like we were on vacation. We did a lot of fun things. We went to the natural history museum. Thomas got to see all the dinosaurs. We have been to the Princess Diana Park several times. We are now London Zoo members. But now I find myself in the messy middle. I have not figured out driving. I tried to test drive a car and I immediately sideswiped a car. Everything is just a little bit harder. You don't have Target here. I don't know where to go if I need sheets and pots and pans and random shoes and applesauce pouches.

But we have found ourselves in the messy middle and so often we find scripture in the messy middle and we want to find easy answers.

Scripture as Testimony, Not Certainty

We don't always want to wrestle with the God who is leading the Israelites out of slavery and is also the God who killed the Egyptian army and is also the God Jesus worships as a faithful Jew. We want easy stories, easy answers, easy fixes.

We want stories in isolation to tell us exactly who God is. But when we are in the middle of discerning where God is calling us to root ourselves, it is often messy. It is heavy and disorienting. It pins us with the Red Sea ahead and the Egyptian army behind. It calls us to leave everything we know behind and trust where God is calling us forward.

Maybe that is part of what makes the messy middle so difficult. We want certainty. We want to know exactly what God is doing, exactly where this is going, and exactly how this story will end. But scripture rarely gives us that kind of certainty. Instead, scripture gives us testimony.

The Bible is a collection of people telling stories of how they have encountered God—people from different generations and circumstances and perspectives. People who celebrated God, who questioned God, who wrestled with God, who sometimes cried out to God in anger and despair. That matters when we come to a story like Exodus 14.

There are parts of this story that are beautiful and powerful. God hears the cries of the enslaved people. God does not remain neutral in the face of oppression. God acts to bring people out of slavery and toward freedom. God makes a way where there seems to be no way. And then there is the violence at the end of this story. We cannot simply smooth that over because it makes us uncomfortable. This is part of the testimony too.

The same God who liberates Israel is the God Jesus worships. We cannot simply divide the Bible into an Old Testament God and a New Testament God. So what do we do with that? We remember that scripture is testimony. It is not a single photograph of God taken from one angle. It is an album filled with photographs taken across generations. Each photo tells us something about the people who encountered God. Together they give us a fuller picture.

My church history professor Dr. Anthony Brigman said: "We can know God truly, not fully." No single story contains the fullness of God.

Exodus tells us something essential: God hears the cries of the people who are suffering. The prophets tell us God cares about justice and mercy. The Psalms tell us that sometimes faith looks like praise and sometimes it looks like crying out, "Where are you, God?" Job reminds us that there are questions for which easy answers will just not do. The gospels tell us that God comes among us in Jesus, enters human suffering, and reveals the depth of divine love.