

“Call and Promise: Abraham and Sarah”  
Genesis 12:1-9  
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This is a pivotal moment in Genesis, and indeed, for the rest of Scripture. And it is even more: this is a pivotal moment for history. Three major peoples – Jews, Christians, and Muslims – all trace our ancestry to this juncture. The promise of the land in the passage we just heard has had untold global impact. The site of one the last stories in the Abraham saga became the holiest site for both Judaism and Islam – it is the place where the Temple in Jerusalem was built, and where the Dome of the Rock now stands. I need not tell you how crucial it is that we appreciate our common ancestry in Abraham.

Moreover, in this passage we begin to see the *universal* blessing God intends for the world. Last week we learned of the cost of sin and evil on creation, and God’s desire to wipe clean the slate through the Great Flood. But God spared Noah, and creation with him ... and then God made a covenant with the world. The rainbow is God’s signature on a pact: God will not destroy the world again; God has a future in mind for us all. And now, in these opening verses of chapter 12, God reveals what one writer has called the “divine strategy”: through Abraham’s family, God will reclaim the whole creation, to live in harmony as God first intended us to live. God chooses one man, Abraham, so that the whole world will be saved (Terence E. Fretheim, “Genesis,” *the New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. I (Nahsville: Abingdon, 1994), p. 417).

But why *Abraham*? We’re given clues at the end of chapter 11. Ten generations after Noah, his descendent Terah leaves Ur – near modern-day Baghdad – to go to Canaan. He gets as far as Haran, in southeastern Turkey, and settles there. With him are his grandson Lot, whose father has died, his son Abram, and Abram’s wife Sarai – who, we are told, is barren (Fretheim, p. 422). Now in chapter 12, God calls Abram to complete the journey his father Terah began: “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’” The land God has in mind is Canaan – where Terah had been headed in the first place.

Why Abraham? At one level, Abram's call is the continuation of his father's journey ... as many of our lives often are.

But at another level, God's choice of Abram is inscrutable, even arbitrary. Abram is not described as a righteous man, or someone who's found favor in God's sight. God chooses Abram because, well, God is God. The Lord who in Genesis 1 created heaven and earth out of nothing is still creating, and will keep redeeming the world, often in surprising ways. (I think how absurd the cross seemed millennia later as God's strategy for redemption – it seemed a scandal and a folly, both to Jews and Greeks alike.) God's plans are not the ones that we ourselves would design.

And at a deeper level still, I wonder if God calls Abram precisely because he is an unlikely choice to be the father of a nation ... for Sarai, his wife, is *barren*. This understanding of call is contrary to our expectations: we like to think that we are called to particular service because of the gifts we bring to the table. But *unlikely* heroes permeate the Bible: God chooses the tongue-tied Moses to challenge Pharaoh ... the shepherd boy David to become King ... the young virgin Mary to be the mother of Christ ... the fisherman Peter to be the Prince of the church. What is going on here? God is demonstrating his trustworthiness. God's agenda will be fulfilled through us not because we are inordinately gifted, nor because the outcome is a sure bet, but because *God* will provide.

So God calls Abram: "Go from your country, and your tribe, and your family behind, and go to the land *I* will show you. And *I* will make of you a great nation, and *I* will bless you, and *I* will bless you ... so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:1). So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, stepping out into unknown adventures, along circuitous paths, his mission thwarted by dangers without and failures within ... as he journeyed on by stages toward the promise.

It's an incredible story, worth reading in full if you haven't already – just listen to some of the steps of Abram's journey:

- Abram goes to the land of Canaan, the promised land that God shows him; but the land is occupied;
- So Abram moves on toward the Negeb, where it's safe, but they encounter a famine in the land.
- So they make their way to Egypt, where there's still food. But danger lurks there too; Abram is afraid he will be killed and Sarai will be taken, so he passes her off as his sister ... thus threatening the fulfillment of God's promise of offspring. What if Sarai were kept by Pharaoh for his wife?
- So God intervenes, and Abram and Sarai return to Canaan. But again the promise is placed at risk – this time the promise of the land – for Abram and his nephew Lot run into disagreements about the land. A compromise is reached, and they go separate ways, Lot settling in Sodom – taking the best land for his own.
- So God, being God, provides again; God appears to Abram, to reassure him of the promise. But Abram is beginning to have doubts, for Sarai, his wife, is still barren, and the only heir Abram has is his slave, Eliezer.
- So God takes Abram out to the night sky and shows him the twinkling heavens, and promises him as many descendants as the stars in the sky. And Abram trusts him, and God reckons it to him as righteousness. But Sarai, his wife, has not yet heard from God herself, and so she takes matters into her own hands. She gives her Egyptian slave Hagar to Abram – not uncommon in those days – and Hagar conceives, and bears a son, whose name is Ishmael.
- So the promise of descendants has come true at last ... but it is not the way that God intends; instead it's been by human intervention.
- So God appears a third time to Abram, promising *again* the land, the descendants, and the blessing; and this time God gives him the sign of circumcision to bind the covenant, and God gives Abram and Sarai new names, Abraham and Sarah. And he promises them a son *together*, whom they shall name Isaac. But then, just when the promise is about to be fulfilled, a tragic family drama interferes, and Abraham's call is interrupted; for God is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah where Abraham's nephew Lot has settled. Abraham risks his relationship with

God by bargaining with him, trying to convince God to save the cities, if only ten righteous men are found there. The region is so corrupt is that only Lot and his daughters escape.

- Still, God is faithful to Abraham. And finally, *finally*, Sarah conceives. And she bears a son, and Abraham names him Isaac. But there is still some question that Isaac should be heir to the promise, as long as Abraham's first born son, Ishmael is around. Sarah makes Abraham cast out his firstborn son, Ishmael, and his mother, Hagar. Abraham is greatly distressed, and does not want to harm the boy ...
- So God hears his plea, and the cries of Hagar in the desert, and God provides for them, and leads them safely into Egypt. And Abraham's offspring is safe, and at last ... at last the conflict is resolved, and the fulfillment of God's promise is assured ... until ... until we get to chapter 22, and God calls Abraham *again*:

“After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.’ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.’ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. so the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘Father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ He said, ‘The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together.

“When they came to the place that God had sown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to sacrifice his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham! Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place ‘The Lord will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’”

“The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, ‘By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.’ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba.”

It is a tender, and terrible, and beautiful story. As one writer puts it, “God and the reader know that this is a test; [but] Abraham [poignantly] does not. God intends not to kill Isaac but to test Abraham’s faithfulness.” Why? It’s crucial that we get this right. First, God is not doing this to be cruel; God never tests us to toy with us or for his own amusement. This is a key difference between the ways of other ancient gods and our God – our Lord never plays with our future. Second, God does not test Abraham to teach him something: “that he is too attached to Isaac, or that Isaac is ‘pure gift,’ or that he must learn to cling to God rather than to the content of the promise” (Fretheim, p. 497). Though *life* may sometimes teach us those lessons, *God* doesn’t manipulate our emotions that way. No, this encounter is something

altogether different – God needs to confirm that Abraham trusts him utterly, because the future of faith hinges on his answer; the future of salvation hangs on his response to God’s promise (Fretheim, p. 419). Is God trustworthy, or not? If the promise doesn’t rest on faith, it will not hold.

And just as Abraham responds in faith when he is first called in Genesis 12, so now he responds in faith all the more. When God first called him, “Go for yourself, from your country and your kindred and your father’s house, to the land I will show you,” Abraham left everything behind to follow him. Now he responds again in faith to this much, much harder call: “Go, take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go for yourself to the land of Moriah ... [to sacrifice him on the mountain] I will show you.” And between his first call, and his last, Abraham has learned that the God who calls, and the God who promises, is also a God who *provides*.

The story of Abraham is among the most moving in all of Scripture. But it is far more than a story. It is our legacy ... from Abraham, the father of our faith. And it is our own story, about what forms us, about how we’re in relationship with God, about how we and every generation follow the same path being called.

For I believe that every one of us will be called, perhaps more than once, to fulfill God’s agenda of wholeness, and redemption, and reclaiming creation as God intended us to live. Like Abraham, we are not called because we are inordinately gifted, nor because the outcome is a sure bet, but because God needs us, ... and whether or not we feel equipped or ready, *God* will provide.

And like Abraham, for some of us, it will be a deeply personal call – around our identity, or around our family. We may be called to go into a particular field of service ... to bear or adopt children ... to serve the most unloved or invisible poor. And, like Abraham, our calling may be very public – to step out as a leader. We may be called to serve a whole people, in politics, or business, or nonprofit service. God’s calling to us comes in many

and various forms, as many ways as God needs his people to be blessings to the world.

But no matter what our particular calling, like Abraham we will all be called to step out in faith, perhaps to leave what we know behind, because God has a greater promise in mind. God has a future to show us.

And so, in Abraham's footsteps, we set out, by stages, we set out by stages toward the promise. It will take time, perhaps a lifetime, perhaps even longer, to see God's promise fulfilled. Like Abraham, we will step encounter out into unknown adventures, along circuitous paths. Like Abraham, our mission may be threatened by dangers without and failures within ... tripping over the choices of others that may get in the way ... being distracted by other demands that require our intervention .... hedging our bets, making little arrangements on the side. Step by step, along the way, we'll have to keep asking ourselves: at the core of our being, do we trust God? Do we really believe that God will provide? Even if, like Abraham, at the end of the road, the very thing we thought we were called to do is the thing we're asked to give up ... as we journey on by stages ... as we journey on by stages, toward the promise. Amen.