

SERMON March 16, 2014: Second Sunday in Lent
[Gen. 12:1-4a; Rom. 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17; Psalm 121]
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PRAYER: Send out your light and your truth, O Lord; let them lead us; let them bring us to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Amen.

INTRODUCTION:

In the lessons we have for this Second Sunday in Lent, we find two familiar names: Abraham and Nicodemus. Truth to tell, I'd like to preach on Nicodemus who is taught by Jesus what it means to be "born of the Spirit". But, as I thought about what I should say to you this morning, I kept coming back to Abraham, who appears in our lessons from Genesis and Romans. [By the way, as you probably know, "Abram" in our OT lesson is the same person as "Abraham" in Paul's letter.] Abraham is held up to us in this morning as a great example to follow and we may well ask "Why?"

Now, it is not possible to over-emphasize the importance of Abraham in the Old Testament and the New Testament, for Jews, as well as Christians. The Abraham cycle of stories takes up almost a third of the 50 chapters in Genesis—chapters 11-25 (!) and Abraham is referred to again and again in the rest of the Old Testament. You may recall that when the people of Israel, as well as Christians, referred to God, they said, "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". Now, it is *unlikely* any one of us will refer to God as "the God of Frank & Tom & Bill"! Abraham was one of the three great patriarchs in the history of the people of Israel. In fact, before the call of Abraham, there was no people of God; there was no Israel. The chosen people of God begin with the call of Abraham, which we have in our Old Testament lesson. Indeed, Abraham's personal history anticipates the story of Israel itself as a people and a nation. And for the early Christians, Abraham was the example *par excellence* of what it means to trust God, to have faith, to believe in God, as we can see from Paul's letter to the Romans. And it is not just Paul. In Hebrews 11, Abraham is listed in that great catalogue of persons who lived by faith. Even Jesus talks about Abraham in an exchange with some Jews about who are the true descendants of Abraham. And for the people of God down through the ages, Abraham is *the model* of how a life of trust in God is to be lived out. So, he is a good example for us to consider during Lent as we examine our own lives in preparation for Easter.

But, who was Abraham? The short answer is "*nobody*". Prior to his call, he was virtually unknown, with no history of performance to commend him. He was from Haran in Mesopotamia, which means his religion most likely involved the worship of the sun and/or moon gods. There is no evidence Abraham knew the God we worship this morning. So why is he a model for Christians like *us*? If we are to understand the significance of the call of Abraham and his response, we need to look at *three larger contexts* in which Abraham appears.

(1) The first has to do with the call of Abraham in *the context of biblical history* up to the point of his call. Here is a quick fly-by! There is the story of

Adam and Eve, which was the OT lesson for last Sunday, a story that ends with their expulsion from the Garden of Eden because of their sin; but God graciously preserves their lives. **Next**, the story of Cain and Abel, which ends with the murder of Abel and the curse of Cain because of his sin; but God marks Cain in such a way that he is still protected. **Then**, the story of Noah and the flood when God destroys sinful humanity, but then promises never to do so again and sets a rainbow in the sky as a reminder of this promise. **And**, just before the call of Abraham, we have the story of the unified human family wanting to make a name for themselves and so they built a great tower stretching up toward heaven. Their arrogance and self-striving offended God, who confused their language—hence the Tower of *Babel*—and scattered the peoples in a great dispersion. In this last case, however, there is **no word** of saving grace. Now, this history, as one theologian has pointed out, raises a **troubling** question about “God’s future relationship to...rebellious humanity, which is now scattered in fragments. Is God’s relationship to the nations now finally broken; is God’s gracious forbearance now exhausted; has God rejected the nations in wrath forever?” [Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.148f.] The answer to this profound question comes in the call of Abraham. “Here in the promise that is given concerning Abraham something is again said about God’s saving will and indeed about a salvation extending far beyond the limits of the covenant people to ‘all the families of the earth’.” [Ibid., p.150] Abraham is called to mediate God’s salvation anew for all humanity. “I will bless you...so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” God is making a huge gamble and the stakes are high: nothing less than the salvation of all of humanity, including you and me. What if Abraham had said, “Thank, but no thanks!”??

(2) The second larger context is spelled out in *the call itself* and what it asks of Abraham. “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.’” Did you get that? With no preliminaries, Abraham is asked to leave his **country**—the settled area of Haran; his **kindred**—his brother and his extended family; and his aged **father**, Terah! Now, we, who move about so freely; we who leave our places of origin without a second thought; we who are **expected** to leave families and our parents’ home because that’s what we do in our culture; we may miss the point here. In the culture in which Abraham lived, it was *unthinkable* to leave one’s country, one’s kindred, and, especially, one’s father’s house. Not only unthinkable, but *dishonorable*—something very, very wrong. So, again, I say that in this context, Abraham’s call is simply **astonishing!**

But, now, notice the rest of the content of Abraham’s call: it is all *promise* and it is all *future*. Nothing is said about his past, which does not seem to count.

1) “**Go...to the land** that I will show you”, i.e., a land **unknown** to Abraham at that point. Abraham was living in the country of Haran in northern Mesopotamia, perhaps even in the **settled** city of Haran. Now he is called to begin a **pilgrimage** to a distant land whose name he does not even know. We know from later texts that Abraham left his **settled** community to take up a **nomadic** existence that took him as far south as Egypt. What a change this must have been! 2) “**I will make of you a great nation.**” Remember the scattering of

humanity in the destruction of the Tower of Babel? Now, God intends to make a **new nation** from **Abraham**. 3) “I will bless you and **make your name great**.” This, too, is an ironic allusion to the previous failure of the people who tried *on their own* to make a great name for themselves by building the Tower of Babel! You see, Abraham is not expected to make a great name for *himself* in order to be noticed by others; God Godself will make Abraham’s name great! 4) “You **will be a blessing**...and in you all families of the earth shall be blessed.” Abraham will be the mediator of blessing that will finally reach every human being, including each of us. This is nothing short of the restoration of the original blessing of creation!

(3) Now, before we turn to Abraham’s response, we need to consider the **third context** in which the call comes to Abraham: the **particular situation** in life in which Abraham and Sarai find themselves. We learn from the previous chapter in Genesis that Abraham is **already married** to a woman named “Sarai”, whose name will later be changed to “Sarah”. So he is in a position to have God make a great nation out of him, right? Well, not quite true, for we also read in the previous chapter this crucial statement: “Now Sarai was **barren**”, and, just so the reader does not miss the point, the writer adds, “she **had no child**.” So, now what? What does God’s promise mean in this context? “Make of you a great nation”? “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed”? But Sarai is not able to have any children!

I can scarcely imagine what Abraham thought when he heard God promise that he would be the father of a great nation! He knows he is unable to father even one child! What would *you* think? I think I would have thought I must have **heard wrong**! Surely, Lord, you can’t be calling *me* for *this*? Or at least, I might have delayed my answer by asking, “How can this be?” like **Nicodemus** did.

So what does the text say about Abraham’s response? “Abraham went, as the Lord had told him.” **That’s it!** “Abraham **went**.” He left Haran and entered into the new life to which God had called him. Abraham heard God call, he heard God’s promises, and he **simply obeyed**, just like those first disciples who heard Jesus call them to follow him. Abraham believed God, he trusted God to fulfill God’s promises to him and in so doing he became the father of **all** who believe, of **all** who trust God to keep God’s promises. The author of Hebrews sums up Abraham’s response in this way: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered [God] faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of the heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore’.” [Heb. 11:8, 11-12] By the way, God **did** fulfill the promises God made to Abraham: Abraham was gifted with twin sons, Issac and Jacob, and his descendants include the likes of Moses, Miriam, Joshua, Deborah, Ruth, David, Solomon, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Christ, whom Paul calls “Abraham’s offspring”!

Well, there is much more I would like to say about Abraham, but it is time to ask the “So what?” question. So what does Abraham’s example have to do with you and me, here, today, in this season of Lent? Let me suggest two things—you may be thinking of others. First, when God called him, Abraham was not then what God called him to be. Abraham was *not* a father, at least not in *human* terms; but he *was* a father as God saw him and in what God planned to accomplish through him. As Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase of our Romans passage, “Abraham was first **named** ‘father’ and then **became** a father because he dared to trust God to do what only God could do: raise the dead to life, with a word make something out of nothing. When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding to live not on the basis of what he **couldn’t** do but on what God said he **would** do. And so he was made father of a multitude of peoples. God himself said to him, ‘You’re going to have a big family, Abraham!’” (Rom. 4:17-18)

You and I, my friends, are members of Abraham’s family, **if** we share Abraham’s trust in what God can do **in and through** us. We may not yet be fully aware of what God wants to do through us, or perhaps we are only dimly aware. Some of us have gifts and abilities that we have not fully acknowledged and therefore have not used. Some of us are hearing God’s call to become who we really are as God has made each of us with our unique gifts. God may well be calling some of us as a means of blessing to someone else. **I invite you** to use this period of Lent to listen for God’s call, to hear God’s promise to you in terms of the **gifts** you have been given, in terms of the **opportunities** you see opening before you, in terms of a **growing sense** perhaps that you need to do something different with your life.

Second, Abraham had to **leave some things behind** in order to obey God’s call to enter a new way of living. If we follow Abraham’s example, we will also be called to leave some things behind. This point is more difficult to probe and we need more time to do it. We may not be called to leave our country or our settled place; we may not be called to leave our family or some present relationship; but, in fact, **we may**. Some of us here this morning can testify that we have had to do so ourselves. Only God can tell you what you need to leave behind in order to answer God’s call to live in a new way. **I invite you** to use this period of Lent to ask God to show you what may be holding you back from becoming more fully the person God has made—and calls—you to be.

One final word, this table is where we get strength for the journey of faith we will make as we share the trust of Abraham and follow his example. Those whom God **calls**, God also **enables**.

AMEN