

Genesis 12:1-9 Call of Abraham

Abram was introduced in the genealogy of Shem, one of Noah's sons. What we know about Abram is that his wife's name was Sarai, that he moved from Ur (in latter-day Babylonia) to Haran (in latter-day Assyria) with his family including servants and slaves. Genesis 12 is a key text for understanding not only the whole book of Genesis, but also the whole Old Testament.

It is also a turning point in the book of Genesis. Before this chapter we have all the familiar stories that make up what scholars call the "primeval history": Creation, the Fall, Cain and Abram, Noah and the Flood. Beginning with this chapter, the focus narrows; instead of stories about cosmic beginnings, we read stories about one particular couple, Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah, and their family. Judging his brief genealogy, there is no particular reason to single out Abram as anyone worthy of note. So who is this particular Mesopotamian that God should call him specifically and make astounding promises to him?

The scandal of election — God's choosing of a particular person or a particular nation, was not lost on the early Jewish interpreters of this story. Why Abram, of all people? According to the biblical text, he had done nothing noteworthy.

The rabbis said it was because he was the first monotheist - a believer in one God. Rabbinic literature tells a story not in the Bible itself:

Abram's father, Terah, was a maker of idols. Abram, while still in his father's household, discerned that the idols were false gods and that there was only one true God. So one night he went into his father's workshop and smashed and burned all his father's idols. Therefore, the rabbis concluded, he was worthy of God's choosing. God's promise to Abram is three-fold: Descendants - *"I will make of you a great nation"*; Land - *"To your offspring I will give this land"*; Blessing - *"I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing"*.

This promise is pure grace, but it may offend many modern readers. We, who want everything to be fair, are affronted by the idea of election. Why would the God of the whole cosmos, the Creator God, choose one particular human being, one particular family, one particular nation, above all the other families/nations on earth? Does God play favourites?

God promises blessing to Abram, but it is not because Abram has done anything to deserve it. And neither is it for the sake of Abram himself: *"I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and **in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"*

Abram is blessed in order to be a blessing. The blessing is not for his sake, nor for the sake of his family; the blessing is for the sake of the whole world. The promise to Abraham (as he is later called) establishes him and his descendants as conduits of God's blessing for all the

families of the earth, in other words, the whole world. And through this promise, God binds Godself to this people forever.

The three-fold promise to Abram continues to reverberate throughout Scripture. There is tension in the promise. Abraham and Sarah wait many long years for a son.

And in spite of God's promise, the only piece of the Promised Land that Abraham ever actually possesses is the burial plot he buys for Sarah, the place where he himself is later buried.

But note that the promise also binds God. The promise binds God inextricably to this family, this nation. God's promise to Abraham sustains Abraham and Sarah and their descendants in faith, even when they don't see its fulfilment.

According to Jack Miles, a Near Eastern scholar, God, says Miles, has never before been God for anyone. Despite God's great power, God's lack of experience becomes evident in the opening chapters of Genesis, as God struggles to deal with his surprisingly non-compliant creatures who thwart his plans and subvert his intentions at every turn.

First, the couple placed in the garden could not live within its basic limits. When cast out of the garden, the family did not learn its lesson, but set upon one another, brother killing brother. The sibling slayer is marked

and condemned to live as a nomad. But the creatures do not learn anything from this experience. So violence spread from the first family, outward over the whole earth. In exasperation, as we heard last week, God himself becomes violent, reverting the creation to its watery, chaotic, pre-Adamic state, in hopes that a fresh start might result in a different outcome.

Having recoiled in horror at the ferocity of his own wrath in the flood, and having vowed never again to bring such devastation upon creation, God foils the schemes of humankind by confounding their ability to understand one another, scattering them to follow their own paths alone.

So, having made the world and seen it succumb to violence and sin in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, God suddenly decides to zero in on one couple – Sarah and Abraham. This marks a decisive shift in the orientation of God to God's creation. Having tried twice before to work with humanity on a macro level, attempting to guide their affairs collectively, God now decides that this time to invest his time and energy in developing a relationship with a single family, and through that family to bless everyone else. We are no longer looking at the huge canvas of the world, but at a tiny corner of it.

So, here we are: nine generations after Noah. Abraham is now getting on in years. And, one day, as he's walking around his father's estate, he stops dead in his tracks when he hears (or he thinks he hears) a voice:

Abram! Go! Leave your country and get out of your father's house and your homeland, and take your family and all your belongings and go to a land that I will show you.

Now Abraham was probably an ambitious type: always wanting a little bit more than he already had. He had seen his father's fortune grow when he had moved from his homeland to Ur. Perhaps Abraham saw this as a new opportunity for him to gain power and wealth ... it could be a new start for him and Sarah. So Abraham jumps at the chance that perhaps this voice may not be a figment of his imagination. If he can get something out of it – then he's going for it.

So Abram runs inside to his wife, Sarah and says, "We're outta here! We're leaving Ur" "Where are we going?" she asks. "I'm not really sure," he grins, "but it's gonna be great!" She sighs and eventually begins to pack.

In Romans, Abraham's and Sarah's unwavering faith is described this way: "Abraham believed in hope with the result that he became **the father of many nations** according to the pronouncement, "**so will your descendants be.**" Without being weak in faith, he considered his own body as dead (because he was getting on in years) and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver in unbelief about the promise of God but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God. He was fully convinced that what God promised God was also able to do."

So, Abraham journeys on, before coming to the first stop, he recalls: *I always heard Canaan was a beautiful place, Sarah - and God said that this is the place we'll call home. It's going to be ours. All that land! All that ...*” But as they approach Canaan, Abraham thinks this can't be right! There are people in Canaan already!

Abraham goes off by himself to think. He remembers there is a place just outside of the town of Shechem, where it's been said that people sometimes hear from their gods. When he finds it, he sits under an oak tree, called Moreh. Moreh means teacher. He probably sulks a bit. *What's going on God? I thought this was supposed to be my land? Did I hear from you or not?*

Isn't this true for us? We hear from God, we think we hear clearly as to what we are supposed to do. But after stepping out in faith, something doesn't feel right. Things don't feel comfortable. Everything is called into question: *Did I really hear from God? Did I hear the right thing?*

And thankfully, God appears. God says, “Yes Abram, this is the place. But this is a step-by-step process. This Canaan is the land I am going to give your children. I wanted you to see what I'm promising.” He did hear from God after all! He was on track, and as an affirmation of God showing up, Abraham builds an altar.

Abraham will repeat this pattern over and over through his journey. We'll see him, (and his descendants after him), stop, take a breath, go back and seek God again. Or God sometimes just shows up at the right time. But as an affirmation of God showing up, Abraham builds an altar.

And when God calls us to something, God doesn't promise it will be easy. Usually it involves getting stretched and pulled out of our comfort zone, and, most of the time, well past where we thought we were capable of going. And we don't like feeling discomfort. We don't like feeling scared, or nervous or insecure, and our instinct for security will urge us to go back and stay with what's safe. But by going back to the place of "what we know," stops us from going with God to the place of "could be." To the land of promise ... Abraham's journey was not all that easy. There were many threats and hardships that Abraham and his family had to face.

And, while God doesn't promise us it will be easy, God does promise to be with us. So when we're feeling insecure and shaky and questioning whether we're on the right path; we just need to stop, breathe, and let God show up. So, we can freak out or question God anytime, without fear, without condemnation. God is not going to look at us and tell us we're idiots for not understanding.

God was about to do remarkable things through Abraham. And Abraham didn't do much more than respond, and that's all God is waiting for us

to do today, to answer the call to “Go!” We may not know where, and we may not know how we’ll get there. But we are called to try following, one step at a time.

So, why does God call any one of us into this journey of faith? God wants you, just as God wanted Abraham. Why? For the nations and for the world, all of which connects to the bigger story. Abraham’s life is one small contribution to what ultimately becomes the welfare of all the nations of the world. We will never see, Abraham didn’t get to see, the fulfilment of God’s promise. That’s when faith comes in, and our trust in a God who calls us into this relationship. It’s about the business of doing something not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of all the nations.

What does it mean for the nations of the earth to be blessed? The scope of blessing extends to being in a rich relationship with God, and has nothing to do with the receiving of material rewards. Abraham was elected by God for the sake of the whole world. He, just as we, was blessed to be a blessing for the world.

Christians have always understood themselves to be grafted into this tradition of Israel’s election: in Christ we are blessed so that we might share that blessing with others. It is not something to be kept to ourselves; the good news is to be shared. This is the idea of the “missional church.” It’s not just a program of the church. It defines the church as God’s sent people. Our challenge today is to move from a

church with mission, to a missional church. The church is not just about perpetuating itself, maintaining its own survival; it is about being a blessing to and for the world.

God's call to Abraham is a call to serve, to be a blessing to others, but it is also a declaration of love: God loves Abraham. God loves the world and so sends Abraham on a journey that will bless the whole world. The Israelites are loved for themselves, prior to any impact for good that they may have on others. Blessings did not come from what Abraham *did*; he became a blessing to others because he was open to the on-going relationship God offered him. In accepting that blessing, he could become a blessing to others.

This story of the calling of Abraham speaks a powerful word today in those instances when we are called to leave behind all that is known; to relinquish all our comforts and securities; to follow God with closed eyes; to depart on a journey without a map. The journey may be long, much longer than we may have thought, a journey with ups and downs, joys and sorrows. This is the journey many of our refugees have taken, leaving everything and everybody behind, not knowing where they will end up. But it is a journey filled with many, many promises, the most important is the promise of God's presence to show us the way.

Abraham became the father of all wandering Arameans who leave everything behind to live for something greater than themselves. For

Philo of Alexandria, Abraham's story was about the migration of the soul from this world to the next. The author of Hebrews said Abraham was looking forward to a heavenly city whose 'architect and builder is God.' I don't know if he knew all that, but he was the first to do what all disciples must do: leave everything behind and follow.

Jesus repeats God's command to Abraham to be a blessing, a conduit to all the nations. As we heard in today's gospel: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God among us, we gather in the name of Christ to learn to love for the sake of All Creation. Turn our minds to your wisdom that, like your servant Hildegard, we might discern your life-giving presence in each of your creatures. Turn our hearts to the grace revealed in Jesus that we might have the courage to act for the good of them all. We pray in Jesus' name. **Amen.**