

*Happy Father's Day, Abraham*  
*the father of many nations*  
Genesis 12:1-9 June 18, 2017

This is Father's Day, and I can think of no better way to celebrate than to lift up Abraham, the father of the world's three great religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Those combined faiths represent 55% of the all the people on earth because all three share the narratives of Abraham and his wife Sarah.

His original name was Abram, which means “exalted father”, which is ironic because his wife Sarai was barren, so there were no children and no hope of children on the horizon.

But it is in the midst of what feels barren and hopeless that God does His best work.

Last week we looked at the Genesis 1 creation poem which from beginning to end was rich with God's promise and blessings, but it didn't take long for everything to head south.

Adam and Eve tried to become like gods, and as a consequence were cast out of the Garden of Eden and sentenced to a life of hardship and struggle.

And the downward spiral continued as their sons got into a feud over who was most favored by God, in the midst of which Cain murdered his brother, Abel.

Soon, God had second thoughts about His whole human project and all but wiped the slate clean with a great flood that preserved only Noah and his family.

The world begins to repopulate, but it doesn't take long before humans slipped back to self-aggrandizing and destructive ways.

In the Tigris / Euphrates Rivers Valley – what is current day Iraq – a prosperous and powerful civilization arose.

We know a lot about them because they left many artifacts behind, including extensive writings.

Most of their written materials were ledgers of commercial transactions, but some were stories of about their pantheon of gods, the most powerful of which was Marduk, who was believed to have created the heavens and earth after a battle to the death with the goddess of chaos, Tiamat.

At some point, worshippers of Marduk tried to reach the heavens by building a ziggurat, but in Genesis 11 we are told that God recognized this as another human attempt to become like God and so put an end to their project by scrambling their language – thus becoming known as the Tower of Babel.

This tower may have reached 300 feet tall – quite a feat for the brick and mortar technology of the day.

Ten generations after Noah, Abram and his family were settling into the city of Harran – located about 200 miles north of Babylon– when Abram hears the call of God.

Genesis 12:1 *The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.”*

Los Angeles is famous as the city where people reinvent themselves.

You can have been the class nerd at Podunk High School, but fly into LAX, plop down \$600 for some hip eye glasses frames, and lease a poolside apartment in North Hollywood, and you are a new you.

You can sculpt the story of your past and no one cares because they’re likely doing the same thing to theirs.

But 4200 years ago, no one could conceive of such a thing.

In that world, life was assumed to be an endlessly redundant cycle that followed the harvest seasons.

Your life this year would be the same as last year, the same as your great-grandfather’s and for all generations to come.

And there was no thought of individuality; all you are was pre-determined by the clan you were born into.

Whatever honor or shame that had been accrued by your family over the generations defined who you were.

So, for an individual to walk away from their clan for a journey to start a new way of life was incomprehensible.

That an individual mattered enough for God to call him to a new life ... that wasn’t even on the radar.

So, this moment of Abraham’s call announced a new chapter in human awakening, and a shift in God’s strategy to bless humankind.

Every step forward in the awakening of human consciousness begins with disruption, but divine disruption ultimately leads to a bigger, wider, deeper experience of life.

With His call to Abram – disrupting every expectation he had of life and of gods - God would begin the long process of unfolding blessings for humanity through a single family – and there would be no doubt that it would be through God’s power alone because He chose a couple incapable of conceiving offspring on their own.

So, in the face of the bareness of Abram's wife, God made a series of outlandish promises:

Genesis 12:2-3 *"I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you."*

No matter how hard they might try, Abram or Sarai were powerless to reverse their own destiny.

Reversal of their destiny depended on their receiving and acting on grace.

To this point, in the world of the Ancient Near East, the pantheon of gods didn't care about people.

People might be collateral damage from the battles between warring gods, but no more.

Yet as we travel through the Bible, we often see that the God who spoke to Abraham blesses the underserving, the least likely, the most vulnerable of people.

Genesis 12:4 delivers the two most powerful words in literature: ... *Abram went* ...

He bet it all on the promise that he mattered, and that along with God he could step outside the endlessly repetitive cycle of life and change the world.

And with that, Abram became the prototype for all disciples who risk everything to follow God.

Centuries later, Jesus will demand Abraham-like faith of his followers.

After encountering a wealthy young man who wanted to keep feet in both the world of financial security and journey with Jesus, Jesus turns him away.

Mark 10:29 *"Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age...."*

Letting go opens the door to new life.

Now of course, Abram did not yet know this God, but over the next thirteen chapters of Genesis we share his journey of discovery as he obediently follows, debates, and even laughs at this God who is different from anything his world had yet conceived.

Along with Abram, we meet an outrageous God who is personal, intimately involved in our lives, and in the business of fresh starts.

We meet a fearsome God who walks us through trouble, yet sometimes rains fire and brimstone upon the evil.

There may be some part of your own life that feels barren, hopeless, or stuck – yet that is exactly where you are likely to meet the God of hope.

And God will come to you in the way you need.

For example, Victory Outreach does a wonderful job ministering to drug addicts and street prostitutes.

Do they preach about the subtleties of Hebrew language and cultural context of a passage?

No.

People facing their kinds of challenges need a clear, black-and-white message with “no wiggle room rules”.

But for someone who’s not been to church for twenty years after rebelling against a legalistic upbringing, God may awaken their faith by a Rob Bell talk that reveals exciting subtleties and context of scripture.

So, God reached Abram in his need and in the way he needed to hear.

Abram’s decision recognizes that to remain in what seemed safe and secure would be to remain in bareness.

To leave is to have hope.

*Genesis 12:5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.*

We’re going to follow more of Abraham’s journey in a couple of weeks, but right now I want to turn to one particular incident.

You heard that Abram took his nephew Lot along on the journey into Cana.

Skillful and pragmatic, Abram and Lot eventually accumulate such large herds that the land cannot support them both, so they go their separate ways, Abram granting Lot a vast region in the Jordon Valley while he remained in the highlands and plains.

When Abram was 99-years old, God appeared to remind him of His promise that he’ll conceive a son, and to keep this thought fresh in his mind, God changes his name from Abram to Abraham – from “exalted father” to “father of multitudes”.

It was hard to take seriously.

In fact, Genesis 18:12 *So (Sarah) laughed silently to herself and said, "How could a worn-out woman like me enjoy such pleasure, especially when my master--my husband--is also so old?"*

Some time after that, three men – who turn out to be God and two angels – appear at Abraham's tent during the heat of the day.

Being a man of virtue, Abraham swings into action to welcome the strangers.

Now, hospitality may have been the greatest virtues of the Ancient Near East.

So, when we talk about extending an extravagant welcome to visitors here at church, we are doing more than hoping someone will come back and join our church.

No, we are practicing the biblical virtue of hospitality.

In Abraham's neck of the woods, there were no McDonalds where you could pick-up some fries and a cold drink, there was no Motel 6 that left the light on for you.

Survival in that harsh and desolate landscape depended on the hospitality of strangers.

The alien and the traveler had few legal rights in the ancient world, so they were at the mercy of the residents where he journeyed.

By accepting the alien and the traveler, the host took responsibility for providing for them and protecting them.

So, Abraham orders that the strangers be given water, that their tired feet be washed, and that the fattest calf be prepared.

They again reminded Abraham and Sarah of God's promise, and then after resting the three debate among themselves about whether to tell him that the two angels are headed to Lot's hometown of Sodom to avenge for the people's sinfulness.

Now, it turns out that the divine strangers are on a dual mission: bringing of a new beginning (Sarah giving birth) and effecting an ending (the punishment of the wicked).

The fearsome task of God is to manifest beginnings and endings.

There follows one of the most revealing dialogues in scripture through which we learn just how caring and involved God can be ... and even how we can change God's mind.

God considers us as partners; we co-create our lives – us and God together.

The conversation begins with God saying that He's going to destroy Lot's hometown, but Abraham intervenes and begins negotiating.

Can you imagine trying to negotiate with Marduk or any of the pantheon back in Babylon?

They wouldn't even recognize your existence – but now we are encountering a new kind of God, the God of the Genesis 1 creation poem who delights in every aspect of the earth and its creatures ... a personal God who has human wellbeing at heart.

*Genesis 18:23-26 Abraham confronted him, “Are you serious? Are you planning on getting rid of the good people right along with the bad? What if there are fifty decent people left in the city; will you lump the good with the bad and get rid of the lot? Wouldn't you spare the city for the sake of those fifty innocents? I can't believe you'd do that, kill off the good and the bad alike as if there were no difference between them. Doesn't the Judge of all the Earth judge with justice?”*

*GOD said, “If I find fifty decent people in the city of Sodom, I'll spare the place just for them.”*

Abraham feels so trusting of God that he continues to negotiate until step-by-step they reach the agreement that God will spare the city if just ten righteous people are found.

Then, the two strangers head down to the Jordan Valley and arrive at Sodom, where they meet Lot at the city gate.

Lot welcomes them, and even though they offer to sleep in the town square, he insists they stay in the safety of his house and that he give them a meal and refreshment.

Lot didn't realize it, but this was a test.

What was the primary virtue in the Ancient Near East?

Hospitality.

After dinner, they all prepare to turn in when there's hostile pounding on the door.

It's like a brawl has gotten out of control and the town ruffians want to force the strangers into sex.

Lot resists, but the hooligans dismiss him because he's a recent arrival in Sodom, and then the mob strains the door.

Lot is in a terrible position.

His primary responsibility at that moment is protection of the strangers, but he is not equipped to fight off the crowd, so what does he do?

In desperation, he offers up his daughters – his most prized possessions - as substitutes for the strangers.

With this, the angels take action, blind members of the mob and then hastily arrange for Lot and his family to flee before burning Sulphur pours down to destroy the city.

Then once again we witness negotiations – this time between Lot and an angel.

The angel had told Lot to head into the mountains for safety, but Lot doesn't know how he'll survive there and offers an alternative: the nearby town of Zoar.

The angels adjust their plan, spare Zoar and allow Lot and his family to seek safety there.

The angels also showed a change of plans by allowing Lot, his wife and two daughters to escape.

Remember, the agreement Abraham had negotiated was for a minimum of ten people to be found righteous for their lives to be spared, but now as few as four are granted safe passage.

The angels warn that as they flee they can't turn back, and of course we all know the story of Lot's wife doing just that.

God's blessings are found by trusting, by taking the next step, not by turning back, reminiscing or rehashing your regrets and shame.

As you survey your life, see if you don't notice times that had seemed barren or hopeless that God actually used to bring a fresh start to you.

Maybe you've been in a rut but followed God's prompting to start fresh and found new opportunities and blessings.

God is in the business of fresh starts and second chances.

I'm sure you've been through times when God felt very distant, but sometimes He's come to you in the face of a stranger – an angel offering hope, guidance ... even warning.

And maybe you can look at our world to see how we are welcoming the aliens and strangers of today.

What is God calling us to do?

And what warning can we heed from the fate of Sodom?

And as you draw close and trusting with God, don't be surprised to find yourself in an active dialogue, a give-and-take about where your life is going.

The Creator of heaven and earth is that personal, that close, that forgiving, and that engaged.