

Genesis 12:1-9 Call of Abraham

The stories about cosmic creation and universal humankind in Genesis 1-11 suddenly become much more focussed in Genesis 12, giving a close-up view of a single man: “Now the LORD said to Abram...”

In the previous chapter, 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 father, and that Sarai was barren. It is hard to overestimate the importance of this week’s story. 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 Abel, 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 just from this brief genealogy, there is no particular reason to single out Abram as anyone worthy of note. 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.

Well, 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. And what is this promise? It 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?

Here’s where it is crucial to read the text closely. God promises blessing to Abram, but it is not because Abram has done anything to deserve it (contrary to the later explanations of the rabbis). 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 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. Abraham (as he is later called) and his descendants are to be the conduits of blessing for all the families of the earth.

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 one more thing: that promise also binds God. The promise binds God inextricably to this family, this nation. When Moses argues with God not to destroy the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf, the crux of his argument, the thing that convinces God, is this: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

God's promise to Abram sustains Abram and Sarai and their descendants in faith even when they don't see its fulfillment. The promise to Abraham establishes him and his descendants as conduits of God's blessing for the whole world. And through this promise, God binds Godself to this people forever.

Jack Miles, a Near Eastern scholar, in his classic work, *God: A Biography*, offers a developmental reading of the character of God throughout the bible. Taking seriously the depiction and account in the narrative – God, Miles says, 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. Having already lost the idyllic garden through disobedience, 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, God vowed never again to bring such devastation upon creation. So, having made the world and having seen it succumb to violence and sin in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, God suddenly decides to zero in on one couple.

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 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, a man named Terah is born. Terah is pretty wealthy; he's got a big estate, with lots of land, lots of employees, and of course, lots of slaves. Terah also has three sons; Haran, Nahor, and Abram. Terah's first son, Haran, is father to a boy Lot, and a girl, Milcah, but unfortunately Haran dies early. Second son Nahor, grows up and marries Haran's daughter Milcah. The third son and our protagonist, Abram, marries Sarai.

Abram's father made a nice life for his family and Abram is set to inherit a nice estate. They move around a bit, Terah dies, his sons and grandsons take over the estate. Abram is now getting on in years, and one day as he's walking around the 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 Abram was probably an ambitious type: always wanting a little bit more than he already had. He had seen Terah's fortune grow when he had moved from his homeland to Ur. Perhaps Abram saw this as a new opportunity for him to gain power and wealth ... it could be a new start for him and Sarai. So Abram 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.

That's sometimes the way it happens when we're called to do something. While it may be nice to say, "I'm being called to do something for God," our initial call from God is often followed quickly by the thought that perhaps there may be something in it for us. Maybe people might look at us with more respect, or we might be gaining position, or power in the church, or maybe be loved more because of what we do.

So, what's with all this blessing? Something quite amazing. The Hebrew word for bless is *berak*. It means to bless or to kneel. *Blessing*, in Hebrew, is to bring a gift to another while kneeling out of respect; to do or give something of value to another, so not only will Abram be given something of value (a blessing), he will also, while showing and living and kneeling in respect to God, give to all the people on earth, a gift. Of course, there is that little part in there about Abram being *famous*. In any case, that's enough for Abram.

So Abram runs inside to his wife, Sarai and says, "We're outta here! We're leaving Ur". "Where?" she asks. "I'm not really sure," he grins, "but it's gonna be great!" Reluctantly, she starts to pack. Abram 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 he was also able to do."

So, why does Abram go? Why would anyone be drawn into a life of faith? Or respond to the call of God? How do I know when I get there? Most of us prefer to have a plan, to know where we're going. Ultimately we realize that the game plan is beyond our control. Ultimately we live by faith and come to terms with the fact that we don't have control over everything. We are called to live by trust in a God who calls us into a future relationship, a relationship that is not defined. Moving

with God into the future takes an enormous amount of faith. And we don't always see the fulfillment of God's plan in our lifetime.

So, Abram journeys on, before coming to the first stop, Canaan: *"I always heard Canaan was a beautiful place Sarai - 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, Abram thinks this can't be right! There are people in Canaan already!

Abram 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, which means teacher, and 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." And a flush of emotion fills our old friend and he falls to his knees and bows low. He did hear from God. It wasn't something that he wanted so badly that he just pulled it out of the air. He was on track, and as an affirmation of God showing up, Abram builds an altar. Abram 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, Abram builds an altar.

There is comfort in that, because that is how our walk with God goes. We feel like we're hearing from God, telling us to do something, or calling us somewhere, and we get so excited that we can just about jump out of our skins. And we sweep everybody around us into the drama. But, we can get so far, and then we realize that we're feeling a bit lost, shaky, and we question: *Did I hear right? Is this really what God was calling me to? Because I wasn't expecting to feel like this . I was under the impression that if God called me to do something then everything would be easy, things would click into place, and that God would lay out the specifics for me, and I would always have that euphoric feeling of the presence of the Almighty filling me and guiding my every step. But now I'm feeling insecure and I need some reassurance.* And it's during those moments that we need to go back to the something as solid as an oak tree, back to the teacher, back to the one who called us in the first place, because the call isn't always comfortable.

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, Abram's journey was not all that easy. There were many threats and hardships that Abram 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 are feeling insecure and shaky and questioning whether we are on the right path, we just need to stop, breathe, and let God show up. We can question God anytime, without fear, without condemnation. God is not going to tell us we're idiots for not understanding.

But, how do we find those places of assurance? Abram made physical markers, altars, at the places he heard from God. So for us, this is simply a space that we have made for God in our lives. We don't need to put up something physical, although it helps to have a prayer space in your home or even at your workplace, a place where you can go, that is set apart for communicating with God. But, what is important, is to create a space in our lives, in our own schedule, amidst the busy-ness of our day, to spend time with the Creator. We all need reassurance and direction, every single day of our lives.

God was about to do remarkable things through Abram. And Abram 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 will get there but we are called to try following, one step at a time.

So why does God call anyone of us into this journey of faith? God wants you, just as God wanted Abram. Why? For the nations, all of which connects to the bigger story. Abram's life is one small contribution to what ultimately becomes the welfare of all the nations of the world. Abram didn't get to see the fulfillment of God's promise. That's when faith comes in. We 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. Abram 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 *church with mission* to 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 Abram is a call to serve, to be a blessing to others, but it is also a declaration of love: God loves Abram, and God loves the world and so sends Abram 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 or how long the journey will last. 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.

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.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE - SEPTEMBER 18, 2022

God in your love and mercy....hear our prayer.

God, you are a God of compassion and love. Time after time we have experienced your care and provision. Time after time you've answered our prayers and met our needs - often in ways we could never have dreamed possible. We praise you for your faithful love toward us. Because we have known your love, we come to you with confidence, offering our prayers for the world that you love. God, in your love and mercy.....**hear our prayer.**

We see so much pain and suffering; so much anger and frustration and despair. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the needs around us. But we continue to bring our prayers to you in faith. You are the God who rained down bread from heaven, the God who resurrected Jesus Christ from the dead and who brings new life and hope to all who believe. God, in your love and mercy.... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who live with serious illness, those with chronic pain, those without access to proper medical care, those recovering from surgery or undergoing treatments, those for whom treatment is no longer an option. God, in your love and mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who have suffered the loss of a loved one and are mourning. We pray for the extended royal family and all who are grieving the recent death of Queen Elizabeth II. Surround them with your comforting presence. God, in your love and mercy.....**hear our prayer.**

We pray for the blessing of your Spirit on all kinds of people with their widely diverse needs: those who are hungry and those who feed them, refugees and those who welcome them, those ill with addictions of any kind and those who care for them, and the sorrowing and those who comfort them. God, in your love and mercy....**hear our prayer.**

We pray for and ask that you protect those who have no place to live and no one to love them. Help them to know you, and to know love. We pray for those we love: family friends, and others. Fill them with your Spirit. God, in your love and mercy....**hear our prayer.**

We pray for the world you created and the people who share it with us: for countries caught up in war or violent conflict, for regions of the world still struggling with increased cases of

COVID-19, for those whose homes and lives are threatened or affected by natural disaster, including the country of Pakistan, and coastal communities in Alaska experiencing a torrential storm; where there is need and despair. God, in your love and mercy....**hear our prayer.**

Merciful God, you sent your Son, Jesus Christ, to show us a different way to live - the way of deep humility and obedience. You've called us to love one another, and to work together with one heart and one mind, balancing our needs with the needs of those around us. Give us courage to follow faithfully and with integrity - with actions that bear witness to the words we speak, so that our lives will bring glory and honour to you, our Redeemer and Lord. **Amen.**