

Week 4, Sunday: The Call of Abraham and Sarah
Genesis 12:1-20

For Journaling or Discussing with Another:

- Recall a time that you discerned God's call to "Go" or God's call to "Stay." This could be the call to go to a new place, begin a new vocation, or enter a new relationship; or it could be God's call to stay in a place, vocation, or relationship.

Read Genesis 11:27-32

- In verse 11:30, Sarai is described as being barren (as later will be Rebecca and Rachel). Why do you think this detail is important to the Genesis story?

Read Genesis 12:1-3

- What are the promised blessings?
- What of these promises are also ours? What are not ours?
- What do you believe that God has promised you?

Read Genesis 12:4-9

- In an act of faith, Abram goes. However, it will take many years before the promises come to fruition. Do you tend to think of faith more as a destination or as a journey? What's the difference?
- Twice we are told that Abraham builds an altar. How do you express your devotion to God?

Read Genesis 12:10-20

- How is God's promise of descendants immediately threatened by the humans?
- What is God's response?
- How are you a mixture of trust and mistrust, belief and unbelief?

Continued blessings engaging Genesis,

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Week 4, Monday: Promises

Scripture: Genesis 13:1-13

So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb.

Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD. Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together, and there was strife between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land.

Then Abram said to Lot, 'Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.' Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the LORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastwards; thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.

Reflection: Here's what transpired in the previous chapter. God told Abram¹ to leave his home and go to the place that God would show him. God promised to bless Abram with, among other things, descendants and a certain territory of land. Abram went as God had commanded; however, he immediately acted in a way that put the promise in jeopardy. Fearing for his life, and failing to trust that God would protect, Abram and Sarai pretended that they are siblings and Sarai for a short time became Pharaoh's wife. This jeopardized the promise of descendants.

Now God's promise is being jeopardized again. Here, Abram is described as suffering the kind of conflict over sharing and separating that can come to families who are very rich. Abram's solution is to divide the territory in two, and he invites his nephew Lot to pick one of the halves. However, perhaps unthinkingly, one of the halves Abram offers has already been promised by God to Abram's descendants. What if Lot picks that half?

But God has promised! God is not mentioned in the choosing; yet might it be that God is quietly active in the story influencing Lot's vision? Notice how Lot comes to see the lushness of the non-promised half, but then does not recognize that this half is also filled with especially wicked people. In the end Lot makes his choice and God's promises are still intact.

To Ponder: What do you believe God has promised you? Is there anything that can put God's promises to you in jeopardy?

Prayer: I believe, Lord, help thou my unbelief. Amen. (Mark 9:24)

¹ Note: Abram and Sarai are renamed Abraham and Sarah by God in chapter 17. Until we reach that point, they will be referenced by their original names.

Week 4, Tuesday: Reassurance

Scripture: Genesis 13:14-18

The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, 'Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northwards and southwards and eastwards and westwards; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.' So Abram moved his tent, and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron; and there he built an altar to the LORD.

Reflection: God makes a promise in Genesis 12:1-3, and then keeps repeating it. The promise of land and descendants is repeated here and will be again in chapters 15, 17, and 18. It will take many years from when God first gives the promises to when they come to fruition. In between, God keeps restating the details of the promise; and Abram is reassured.

We need reassurance too. This is one of the reasons many of us keep showing up for weekly worship. Through scripture readings and sermons, hymns and prayers, bread and wine, and the shared devotion of the gathered community, God's promises are repeated: "I am with you," "I love you," "I forgive you," "I'm not done with you yet," "You can trust me to provide," "You too shall live," "You are mine." "You can focus on the demands of this time, leaving your future to me."

We are not promised land, fame, or descendants; but we are lovingly promised God's abiding presence, God's providing, God's Spirit at work in us, and a part to play in the unfolding story.

To Ponder: Where do you turn, and where do you find, reassurance of God's promises for you?

Prayer: Come O Lord, lift me from my fear, open my eyes, give me courage to follow, and keep reassuring me of your love. Amen.

Week 4, Wednesday: Community

Scripture: Read Genesis 14:1-16; here are selected verses.

Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela went out, and they joined battle in the Valley of Siddim. Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits; and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country. So the enemy took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way; they also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who lived in Sodom, and his goods, and departed. Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre. When Abram heard that his nephew had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. He divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and routed them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus. Then he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his nephew Lot with his goods, and the women and the people

Reflection: This is one of those passages where one can get a bit lost in the plethora of foreign names, foreign kings, foreign lands, foreign cities. However, notice that in the middle of it all, Abram's nephew Lot is taken captive. Apparently, in the world of the story, when Lot left Abram, he was in a way also leaving God's protection; that is to say, when Lot left Abram he was leaving the community where God's promises were being worked out.

God can choose to work anywhere and in anyone. God chose to work through Abram and Sarai, and before so doing promised them that this would be so. In similar fashion, God has promised to be at work through the Church. It is in the community of the church where now, in a particular way, God's promises are being worked out. It is in the community of the church where God's words of love, challenge, and grace are often encountered most powerfully. It is in the community of the church where we are drawn deeper into relationship with God and one another. It is often through the community of the church that God is at work protecting us from external forces that which would seek to capture our spirits and damage our souls.

When Lot leaves Abram he leaves the community where God's promises are being worked out and the world "out there" captures him. But then Abram, who in the moment is the embodiment of God's chosen community, musters the troops; and the community goes and gets him back. This story will repeat down through the ages.

To Ponder: When have you been "captured" or "captivated" by some potentially damaging influence or power? Who or what rescued you?

Prayer: Blest be the tie that binds Our hearts in Christian love;
The unity of heart and mind Is like to that above.

Before our Father's throne We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, Our comforts and our cares.

We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear,
And often for each other flows The sympathizing tear.

(Blest Be the Tie That Binds, text by John Fawcett)

Thank you Lord for the gift of community, for caring friends, and for the ways you seek after me when I drift away. Amen.

Week 4, Thursday: Surprise Blessing

Scripture: Genesis 14:17-24

After Abram's return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything. Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, 'Give me the people, but take the goods for yourself.' But Abram said to the king of Sodom, 'I have sworn to the Lord, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, so that you might not say, "I have made Abram rich." I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. Let them take their share.'

Reflection: Abram is on a journey. God called him to “Go” into a new life and he went. Along the way, he has faced fears and dangers. Now in the midst of his journey, Abram encounters this mysterious figure named Melchizedek; the name means “Righteous King” implying that he is both a political and a spiritual leader of some sort. Melchizedek is religious, though in a way different from Abram; not disconnected, but different. Melchizedek worships a pre-Israelite God called El-Elyon, translated ‘God most high,’ and Abram worships Yahweh. Although their understanding of God and their religious practices differ, in their encounter Melchizedek blesses Abram.

The focus of yesterday's reflection was upon God's blessing being offered in and through the community of the church. Today, we are reminded that God's blessings can come from other sources as well. God's ways are mysterious and God blessings can be conveyed upon us by Jews and Muslims, by people of other faiths or no faith at all. In like fashion, at times God may use to bless others whose traditions differ from our own.

To Ponder:

- When have you experienced a surprising blessing from someone outside your denomination or faith tradition?
- How did that experience deepen your sense that God is with you, that God is leading you, that God will provide what you need?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for surprise blessings. Help me to remember those that have come to me, so that I may draw strength from them. And may I somehow continue to be useful to you in the blessing of others. Amen.

Week 4, Friday: Abram's Faith

Scripture: Genesis 15:1-6

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Reflection: It has been many years since God first promised Abram descendants, but still no child has been born to Sarai. Now God speaks the promise again, "*Abram, your own child shall be your heir.*" Yet notice that God gives no new tangible sign that this shall be so. Abram doesn't all of a sudden sense a rush of virility in his loins, nor does he witness in Sarai some mystical maternal glow. Still, after all these many years, when it comes to a child, all Abram and Sarai have is a present reality marked by barrenness, along with God's promise of a future where barrenness is overcome. That's it! They have a barren present along with the promise of an abundant future. And Abram believes!

This is a pivotal moment. "*Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness,*" this, in a way, is the statement on which the whole story of Genesis turns. Now human goodness will no longer be decisive, faith will be. Because Abram is trusting the promise, he is now declared to be righteous, or "right with God;" this in spite of whatever evil intentions still dwell within his human heart.

This is our story too. We too, at times, face certain forms of barrenness (sickness, loneliness, anxiety over money, loss, disappointment, etc.) At the same time, we too have a promised future. Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10). God has promised us a future connected to Jesus Christ, and therefore marked by abundant life or what we might call, "*life that really is life.*" Do we trust this? God is calling us to live by faith; that is to live a life, in the midst of whatever our present challenges, shaped by trust in God's promise of a blessed future. Thankfully, as God did for Abram, so too God does for us, showing up again and again in Word and sacrament, repeating the promise, "I will bless you!"

To Ponder:

- What did barrenness look like for you ten (or more) years ago? And now?
- How does a trust that God will bless your future shape your life in the present moment?

Prayer:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.

Perfect submission, all is at rest; I in my Savior am happy and blest,
Watching and waiting, looking above, filled with his goodness, lost in his love.

(“Blessed Assurance, text by Fanny J. Crosby, ELW #638)