

“The Faith of Abraham”

Genesis 12:1-9 • Psalm 33:1-12 • Romans 4:13-25 • Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

June 11, 2023

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

I am very excited about this summer’s Old Testament readings. Today we begin a sequence that will cover some of the greatest stories of our early ancestors in the faith. We will hear about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their wives, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel; about Joseph and his “amazing technicolor dreamcoat,” as it has been called; and after that, key moments from the story of the Exodus. If these are familiar stories for you, great; this will be a good refresher; if these stories are new to you, soak them up and let them sink in. These are foundational stories for our faith.

We begin with Abraham. At first he goes by the name of Abram; his name changes later on. This is a painting of Abraham by a 17th-century Italian painter named Guercino. Many paintings in Western art make the biblical characters look distinctly white and European. Abraham was neither of those. He was a middle-Eastern man, born in Mesopotamia, the fertile land surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Today that is all part of the country of Iraq. Back then – 40 centuries ago, give or take a few – this was the home of some of the most advanced civilizations in the world. In this region emerged the Sumerian civilization and the Akkadian Empire, wonderful innovations like cuneiform writing and irrigation canals, and remarkable literary works including the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Code of Hammurabi. By the year 2100 BC, power was centralized in the city-state of Ur, which was along the Euphrates River, in the southern part of Mesopotamia, not far from the Persian Gulf. Back then the Gulf expanded quite a bit further north than it does today – the green area on this map. The city-state of Ur governed the entire brown area on this map, and its influence extended through the purple area as well. There was a massive temple complex in Ur, the administrative center for the city. Most of that complex has not survived, but the foundations of the great Ziggurat of Ur endure to this day, not far from the modern Iraqi city of Nasiriyah. This was a shrine dedicated to a moon god named Nanna, the patron deity of Ur, who was one of many gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon.

This – the great city of Ur – is probably where Abraham was born. The book of Genesis puts it like this: “Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran was the father of Lot. Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans.” So Abraham’s father’s name was Terah, and Abraham had two brothers, Nahor and Haran, and one nephew, Lot. Abraham’s brother Haran died young, while the family was living in Ur. Genesis continues: “Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah.” Sarai will later become Sarah. “Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.” That detail is going to be critically important. Abraham was destined by God to become the ancestor of the Jewish people. Indeed, Abraham holds a central place in *three* of the great world religions: for the Jews, he is their biological ancestor, preceding Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes, by two

generations; for us Christians, he is our *spiritual* ancestor in the faith, for reasons that will become clear later on; and for Muslims, he is one of 24 prophets that precede Muhammad. You can find Abraham's name 236 times in the Old Testament, 73 times in the *New Testament*, and 69 times in the Quran. This man became *incredibly* important. But he starts off with no child, and no hope of a child.

For some reason that is not specified, Terah decided to leave Ur with his family: "Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there." Terah's destination was Canaan, where Israel is now. To get there, they would have traveled a very long ways northwest, following the Euphrates, pretty much all the way through what is now Iraq, then turned southwest, through what is now Syria. This was the only way to go; there were no roads through the desert. But they stop in the city of Haran. Don't get confused; Haran was the name of Abraham's dead brother, and also the name of an important city in northern Mesopotamia – which was, like Ur, a sacred city of the moon god Nanna. Terah and his family have traveled more than halfway to Canaan – but Terah stops here. They settle down, and Terah dies there.

It is at this point that *God* enters the story. After Abraham and Sarah have been living in Haran for some time, the Lord spoke to Abraham. Not the moon god Nanna, the god Abraham was probably most familiar with, but the *Lord*, God Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth. God said: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and 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." This is the *call of Abraham*. God is *calling* Abraham to a special destiny. The Bible doesn't explain all this right away, but *God is setting in motion a series of events that will ultimately lead to the redemption of the human race*. Everything that has gone wrong since the fall, since the introduction of sin and death into God's creation, God now begins to set right. That will culminate in coming of Jesus Christ. *Our salvation begins here*. This is the beginning of what is called *salvation history*. God is *intervening in history*, telling Abraham to complete his father's journey. Abraham's destiny lies in Canaan. God doesn't give *reasons*, but God does offer Abraham several *promises*, the first of numerous promises that God will give to Abraham and his family. "I will make of you a great nation, and 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." God will fulfill *all* of those promises. Every single one of them. The last one – "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" – will come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

So now Abraham has a choice. Will he, or will he not, do as this unfamiliar God asks? He will indeed! "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him." Was there any indecision on Abraham's part? Were there any doubts? Did he question God's word? The Bible gives no indication of *any* of that. When God calls Moses, hundreds of years later, Moses had *lots* of objections. *Lots* of reasons why he didn't think he was the right man for the job. There's none of that here. Abraham just – goes.

This is a remarkable moment. How many of us, when God tells us to do something, just leap in and do it? A lot of us stumble. Every time in my life God has wanted me to do something truly significant, my initial response was, "Heck no!" God calls us out of our comfort zones, God beckons us into the unknown, God calls us into places or situations that we've never seen or experienced before, and that usually is accompanied by a lot of trepidation. *I don't want to do this! I don't want to leave my comfort zone! I'm not up for this job! You're asking the wrong person! Please, God, send someone else!*

But Abraham went. Faithfully following God's call. This is the first of his great moments.

There will be more. Granted, not everything Abraham does is filled with this much faith; there are times he makes some very poor decisions. The Bible doesn't shy away from telling us about his all-too-human mistakes. He wasn't perfect, any more than you or I. But in this moment, *he was faithful*.

"Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran." We know next to nothing about the first seventy-four years of Abraham's life. It's as if those weren't important. All the great things Abraham did, all the things that make us remember him roughly *four thousand years later*, he did at the age of seventy-five, or greater. Those of you who have reached that milestone and think that the most important years of your life are behind you, consider the possibility that *God might still want something from you*. There might be a task that God wants you to do in these golden years of your life.

"Abram took his wife Sarai ... and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan." And they made it, to a land flowing with milk and honey. Abraham comes to the city of Shechem, which is now the city of Nablus, in the West Bank, north of Jerusalem. It was located on some important trade routes; people had already been living and farming here for two thousand years. God appears to Abram here, saying, "To your offspring I will give this land." Abraham is 75 years old; his wife is barren; he has no offspring, and no hope of getting any. But God will fulfill that promise, in God's good time.

Abraham begins exploring the land, setting up some altars in various places. He has done as God directed. His journey – both physical and spiritual – has begun. There is much more to come.

A few chapters later, after Abraham and Sarah have been living in Canaan for a number of years, they are *still* childless, despite God's promise. Abraham has all but given up; he has named as his heir one of his trusted servants, a Syrian man named Eliezar. Abraham says to God: "You have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But God tells him: "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." God invites Abraham to come outside and look at the stars – that massive expanse of stars that you can see when you are far away from city lights. God says, "Count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be." God is telling Abraham that he will have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. It sounds incredible, when Abraham – now well into his eighties – doesn't even have a *single* child. But Abraham responds with another great act of faithfulness: "he believed the Lord." He really and truly believed that God would do as God had said – despite his years, despite his wife's barrenness. The apostle Paul, reflecting on this story many centuries later, described Abraham's faith like this: "Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), and the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."

This is faith: being fully convinced that God *is able* to do what God has promised. God has promised all *sorts* of things. Things about our future. Things about what will happen to us when we die, and about what will come at the end of time. Promises filled with *hope*. Promises filled with *peace*. Promises that will bring us *joy*. Do we believe them? Do *you*? Abraham didn't have any child, didn't have any reasonable hope of *having* a child, yet God told him that he would have innumerable descendants, and Abraham *believed*. Just simply *believed*. Can you believe God's promises, the way Abraham did? Can Abraham's faithfulness inspire your *own* faith and trust in God? *Every* promise that God made to Abraham came to pass. Every promise that God has made to us will too.

© 2023 Rev. Bill Pinches