

The Gospel in Advance

The Gospel in Advance

Life was good – a new bride, a large city full of exciting things to do and see. But then, for some unknown reason his father decides to embrace a back-to-the-earth lifestyle; and, as was the custom in ancient families, young Abram must trade the bustling streets of Ur for the quiet, isolated pasture lands of Northern Mesopotamia. It was not an easy move. But somewhere in this abrupt departure from the secure and familiar, God speaks to Abraham.

What's this story all about? Why would this story of an ancient man uprooted man from his homeland have such enduring value to billions of people? Why does it continued to spur generations on in the journey of faith?

One biblical clue to the way we should listen to this story and make it our own is the simple statement in Genesis 11 that Abraham was born in Ur *of the Chaldeans*. (11:28). This reference is a really big clue because in the time when Abraham was believed to have lived, there were no Chaldeans, nor would there be *be* any Chaldeans for another thousand years. In Abram's time, the city of Ur thronged with people, but *those* people were not Chaldeans. Chaldean, is the word, in the language of the people of Judah, for *the Babylonians*. These were the people who forced the Jewish population to relocate in the sixth century B. C. The Jews in exile were living in the in the land of the Chaldeans.

So what that means is when this story was finally written down, by people looking back during the exile on the life of Abraham. It was an old, old story. It has been passed by word of mouth and even written down, the *final* version we have today was heard by a people who were longing to return to the land of promise. God's people were strangers outside of the promised land.

This story is for anyone who find themselves on the outside looking in. It was written *for* and *by* vulnerable people living in outside the land of promise. But aren't we all? Isn't the very nature of human life that we are displaced from the kingdom of God an must hear God call and be led back in?

So if we come to this story with our longings and our desires for a better life – a life more abundant, and blessed, and if we are listening for the voice of God, the story of Abraham is good news. In Abraham's story, (and ours) hearing God call is . . .

The departure point from our places of oppression.

"Go from your country and your people "

Abraham was the ancestor of the Jewish people. And they are no strangers to oppression. Now, as they are exiled in Babylon, Abraham's story becomes all the more meaningful to them. For just like their famous ancestor, they, now live in a place that is not to be their permanent home. The place they are in is a place that cannot stay in indefinitely without seriously threatening their relationship with God. They live in an oppressive culture that is not healthy for their spirituality. The Jews believed in a Sovereign God, and that the whole earth belonged to their God, the God of Abraham.

But that was definitely not the dominant belief of the people around them. Belief in the God of Abraham was at best, wacky, and at worse, a defiant challenge to the easily visible gods of Babylon. Belief in the God of Abraham was a strange departure from the common belief in many gods who seek to dominate, one god over the other. It was "my god vs your god," a system of power that was experienced by the Jews as *Satanic*. Oppressive. Something they needed desperately to get out of.

So when God says to Abraham, " Go from your country, get outta here! " they knew this was speaking to them.

They could not stay in this oppressive environment of Babylon without being destroyed by

it. And it was hard enough for the adults and elders who had seen the glories of Israel and lived in the land to hold on to their faith. But what would happen to the next generation who weren't even born when they left the land! And the next generation? Their young were ripe for the picking. Unless something was done, they would soon forget all about the God of Abraham – unless they heard his call for themselves. And if not, they would soon be absorbed into the dominant culture. Defeated by their oppressors.

So, this was when the Jews became the “people of the Book”. Imagine this exile community. Jewish parents by the rivers of Babylon, sitting down with their children and opening the scroll to give them

A crash course of Israel the People of God

The first thing any child in Israel must learn that the call of God is always to an undisclosed location, and to an uncertain future. This had been true since the days of Adam and Eve. Then the great flood, then the tower of Babel: scattering and displacement has always been their lot. But then comes the story of Abraham. The exiles believed that their children would someday be called back to live in the promised land. God was in the process of restoring them to a new life in a renewed creation. And this was not just wishful thinking. This was a *promise* made to Abraham by God. But to get *back* to that land, they would first have to navigate through the hostile terrain. The long road home lay ahead of them and it would not be easy. There would be the *dark powers* that would try to force them to bow down before other gods and forget all about the God of Abraham. For Israel the people of God, there would always be another Pharaoh, or a Nebuchadnezzar or a Cyrus, a Caesar, always looming over them another a tyrant, a *System* working against them –what the apostle Paul calls “principalities and powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places”. But children of Abraham had a *promise*; and by *believing* that promise they could break free from that system into a new life. They could hear the voice of God and come *out* from *under* the rule of darkness and into an entirely different Kingdom.

I put it to you today that the Bible itself is a crash course on how to be the people of God. And the children of Israel by the river of Babylon needed that. For just like Abraham, deliverance from the powers of the world would require of them . . .

A commitment deeper than family

Not only must young Abraham leave his familiar and secure *culture*, he must also make a break with his ‘father's household’.

Jesus said “if anyone comes to me and does not *hate* father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even life itself—such a person *cannot be* my disciple. “

Seems like a hard statement, does it not? How to reconcile family love with the God of Love? But it does not mean in any way that family is unimportant, or that we must necessarily distance ourselves from those we love the most. What it *does* mean however that sometimes it's our family that can hold us back from following God.

Abraham, in his walk with God, would discover the deep costliness of obedience. On the altar of obedience, he was willing to even lay down his own *son*. And that deep commitment to God began early, as a young man, when he made a break with his own family. . .

The Bible says, according to Joshua 24:2, that Abraham's family worshiped *the gods of Mesopotamia*. According to a old Jewish legend, (not in the bible) Abraham's father, Terah was said to be in the business of manufacturing ceramic idols.

In Judaism, there is something called *Midrash*, which is basically imaginative stories that illustrate certain Scriptures– what we might call today “sermon illustrations”. In one Midrash, Abraham's father was away from the idol shop one day, when a woman asked young Abraham to offer some grain as a sacrifice to one of the idols. (Maybe they factory-tested them before they

shipped them out, I don't know) But instead, Abraham takes a stick and smashes the idols to pieces, all except the biggest one, into the arms of which he then places the stick. And when his father returns, and is, of course, furious, Abraham explains that the idols had got into a big fight and the big one was the only one left standing. His father said, "Do you think I'm stupid? Everyone knows that idols don't have a mind of their own!"

To which Abraham replies. "*Father, you should listen to what you, yourself have just said.*"

There's always tensions in a family when one decides to follow God but others don't. Abram's obedience to the call to leave his homeland and family to worship the Lord gives hope to those who find themselves caught between God and family. Because the story of Abraham is an invitation to "all who have ears" to leave everything and embark on . . .

A journey led by the Spirit

The Lord said, "Abraham, *follow me*, and I will *take* you to "the *land* I will *show* you."

There's a huge difference between being guided by the various circumstances and rules of life and having a genuine encounter with God. Is a relationship with God just like a game of Clue in which we find shoes and pieces of paper and various things strewn along the path that we have to piece together like Sherlock Holmes. Do we merely trace the footprints of God with our big magnifying glasses? Is God always one step ahead of us but never "caught in the act" of being God? Does God ever become for us more than this mysterious figure, always disappearing around the corner just before we arrive? Or do we get to meet him?

The God of *Abraham* says, "I will *take* you where I want you to go. I will *show* you." I will *walk* with you and *lead* you every step of the way.

Abraham suddenly realized he was in a conversation with the Almighty. To the people who read the story as landless exiles, culturally oppressed, people whose Temple and city lay ruined in a distant land, this was Good News indeed. Their God was a God who could encounter them. A God who could be with them. They were Abraham's children. He would *lead* them back their land. They didn't believe in God, they *knew* God.

When I first began to seek the LORD and follow Christ, certain friends and family were skeptical. Some didn't share my interest in the Bible. And although this was very upsetting for me, it forced me to re-evaluate everything I had previously believed and understood and God *encountered* me and showed me that I was indeed on the right path. And this is to be the daily experience of every Christian: to know this encounter, in prayer and in Bible reading. We know this in the quiet time, in our personal devotions. God encounters us. We encounter God. But if we are on the journey with the God of *Abraham*, we are not alone. We are part of . . .

Something bigger than ourselves

"I will make you into a great nation. . ."

How faint and distant a dream must have seemed to the exiles. Yet that promise to Abraham remained for it was a promise to generations to come. The story of Abraham and Sarah is one of a promise that didn't seem to go anywhere for a very long time. God had *promised* Abraham children as numerous as stars in the sky. And although they tried to keep their hopes up, as time went on, and they grew older and older and still had no children, this promise, seemed to be null and void. No great nation was ever going to emerge from Abraham. Yet this promise remained from *God, and God delivered a son, Isaac*. And it only took one son, who had a son, who had a son . . . And finally the generations of Abraham came down to Jesus. And Jesus, sealed this promise with his blood. God had said to Abraham, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." That promise was as big as humanity itself.

So the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: "*those who have faith* are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced *the gospel in advance* to Abraham. . .

We here today are that great nation, that family of faith from every tongue and tribe. Wherever you go on this planet when you find other Christians, you are with family. So the story of Abraham was good news for the exiles. Even though they were outside their land, they could still keep faith with God and live in his presence. Though the present circumstances seemed grim, and discouraging, and at times they were on the brink of despair, they were part of something much bigger than themselves.

They simply had to believe in . . .

The miracle of provision

God says to Abraham, "I will *bless* you. "

Here was a landless people, ruled by a powerful empire they could never hope to defeat. Their own prophets had all told them it was because of their own unfaithfulness that they had brought this upon themselves – the present miseries of exile. So what more could they hope for now? How could they ever know once again the *blessings* of God?

But it's was simple, unqualified statement. "I *will* bless you." Abraham's relationship with God was not just a spiritual a spiritual salvation, but extended to his life in the material world. The amazing thing is that the blessing was not dependent Abraham's behaviour. When forced to travel to Egypt, he get's scared for his life and asks his wife to lie for him and say she is his sister. Nevertheless, God continues to *bless*.

And when Sarah doesn't get pregnant, they hook Abraham up with Hagar the slave girl to bear him a child, because they *didn't* really believe God would ever deliver on his plain and unqualified promise: "I *will* bless you." But the miracle was that God *still* blessed them.

Lewis Smedes: "What really matters is not whether Abraham is good or bad or cowardly or heroic, but that God pursues His design for the welfare of the human family with people like that -- in other words, people like us."

People like us, who have faith in the God of Abraham are a transformational force in our world. "I will make your name great and *you will be a blessing*.

The Good News to the people in exile was that they could renew their Covenant with God, and he would *bless* them. The great lesson learned by the Jews in exile was that they must not mess with the idols of this world. Byut nevertheless, God would accept them for who they were, flawed and imperfect people. He would *bless* them.

But there is, however, a direct relationship between keeping Covenant with God and His protecting presence. But as children of Abraham, they were covered by . . .

The immune system of holiness

"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse"

As the exiled people stood poised to re-enter their land, this was their dream, this was where they want to go. This was what they wanted for their children: to follow in the steps of Abraham and reclaim the land. But there are *enemies*. This life with God won't happen unless there is some *protective therapy* against the cultures all around them – the people of Israel need a good dose of spiritual Echinacea to fight off the contagious infections of the dark influences that are constantly working against them. So the Book of the Law contains many rules that may seem to us to be absurd, but emphasis the need to be *set apart* as a holy people.

They realized that the only way the Holy land of a holy God could be entered is by a *holy people*. But if they devoted themselves unreservedly to God, he would take care of them. He would bless those who bless them, curse those who curse them.

One of the most interesting and indeed amusing examples of how this is when Israelites encounter with prophet Baalim in Numbers 22-24. The Moabites are afraid that the people of Israel are a threat to them, so they hire a prophet named Baalim to curse Israel – to cast a bad spell on them, and make sure things go badly for them. So Baalim gives it everything he's got. He gives it his best shot. He musters up is nastiest, dirtiest, most poisonous curses.

It doesn't work.

Finally Baalim throws up his hands in defeat and must say to the Moabites, “Look, how can I *curse* a people God has decided to *bless*?”

God promised through Abraham to *undo* the curse of Adam’s sin. After the curse of the fall, the flood, the tower of Babel, comes to Abraham with the promise to bless again. The immense force of God will turn back all who come against the people of faith. But it remains for each generation to *claim* this blessing and come that protective care.

Last week while we adults were visiting over breakfast, the kids were off in the hallways and backrooms of the church playing a game. From what I could gather, in this game, there was a king in his castle and he was sending out messengers with little red envelopes to the far regions on his kingdom. It was up to the brave messengers to get through the no-man’s land without being ambushed by bad guys. (This was the scene at headquarters)

When it was all over, and we were cleaning up, Doug found one of the “king’s messages:

***“Enimis are attacking,
you come to my kingdom”***

We live in a cultural environment that is in many ways hostile to Christian faith. Wherever we turn it seems, “enemies are attacking”. What we learn from Abraham is that what brings us through to a better place with God is . . .

The radical step of faith

We read in the last line of our text today, that once God had spoken his promises to Abraham, it says “Abram *went*, as the LORD had told him”

If Abraham hadn’t taken that step, if he hadn’t gone, if he haven’t been willing to depart from the secure and familiar, even from his own family, then we wouldn’t be in this church right now. Just as the story of Abraham reassured and strengthened those struggling Jewish exiles so long ago, each new generation must take these promises as their own and step out of whatever oppressive situations they find themselves in. Abram *went*, and we, too must go. Somewhere. And we don’t know where it is. But God will take us there. And God will *show* us.

As you listened to this story today, God somewhere spoke to you about a step of faith he is asking you to take. It could be anything, but it is crucial to take that step. Future generations of people of faith will depend on you taking that step because, ***“Enimis are attacking”***

And whatever that step is, in that step, in some way God is saying:

You come to my kingdom