

October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017

Sermon, *The Path*, ch. 3, Abraham

This week as we continue our journey through *The Path*, we learn about Abraham. Most of us have heard probably that Abraham is known as the father of three “Abrahamic faiths”—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As we read and consider Abraham’s story, we may better understand why these three faith families have inherited some issues.

Our father Abraham is definitely a complex even mysterious figure. His story comes to us from beyond the mists of history. That means his story and that of his descendants is larger than life in a sense. It is important for us to remember that as we study and reflect on them. These stories are not like reading a newspaper or a modern history book; they are something different and more important. Listen to the advice of the Psalmist that we heard today:

“Hear my teaching, O my people; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in a parable; I will declare the mysteries of ancient times.”

In other words, as we hear stories from Scripture in general and these stories about Abraham in particular, our first response needs to be to listen prayerfully and consider the **deeper mysteries** of the story. Whether the story happened literally-- or whether it is recorded for us more like a parable—it is important for all of us to struggle with the deeper meaning of the story. What the Spirit whispers in our ears as we wrestle with Scripture is powerful and can radically change our lives.

So what does the Spirit whisper about Abraham? The first sentences of his story which we heard this morning begin with a clear message from God: “Go” and we are told Abraham (then known as Abram) went. That is his essential story—God commanded and Abraham responded with faithful action. It is that essential story that governs all that we will learn and ponder about Abraham. He is our father, our example, of how to live a faithful life.

But there was more to the beginning of this story than the command to go— God also promised a particular type of blessing to Abraham. There are the typical blessings you might expect in a mythic ancestor story in all cultures—that God would make Abraham’s name great and make of him a great nation. Good but standard stuff.

But the unique part of Abraham’s story is that his blessing was ultimately for all the families of the earth. Abraham and the example of his faithful action would become a conduit of grace for all people in all the earth. The blessing was not just about its first recipient and his immediate family and their descendants, but about all of us for all time. Amazing.

So that’s a great beginning to the story! If we stopped with what we have heard so far, we could relax and have a pretty good message of how to behave as a descendant of Abraham. But if we read the rest of the story that we did not hear today in church, then we know that

Abraham's life got complicated. The good news for us is that even—or perhaps especially—in those complications are the stories that can help us live our lives of faith.

There is not time to cover everything that Abraham did or that was done to him, including things that are difficult for us to understand. If you have some particular questions, bring them up in Sunday school or make an appointment with Mother Bonnie or me and we can struggle with them together. But there are three things I want us to at least touch on in these few minutes of wrestling with Abraham's story.

First is what do we do **when things go wrong for us**, when God's promises are not being fulfilled, at least not in the way we expected? For Abraham and his wife Sarah, that meant what to do when they were unable to have children. God's central promise to them required them to have offspring. When that was not happening, they tried to figure out a way to help God do what God was going to do. Let me give you a hint—that is rarely a good idea.

In their story, God continued to renew the promise and they continued to question how it could happen as they got older and older. But if we hear this story as a parable, the impossibility of having a baby at their age is part of what can teach us God's way of blessing. In our lives, when we can't see a way that God can come through and do what God promised, Abraham's story teaches us to hang on. Our answer may take years and it may not be what we expected—but God does not abandon us or forsake God's promise.

Second is what to do **when things go wrong for others**. Abraham knew that part of his promise was to be a blessing for all the families of the earth. In the infamous and misused story of Sodom and Gomorrah, we are told that what Abraham did was negotiate with God even when it involved dealing with bad guys. Now most of us have negotiated with God at one time or another. Generally it is not a helpful practice. But Abraham's negotiation takes the form of what we would call intercessory prayer, asking for mercy for those who did not deserve it.

Abraham's approach is to ask how few righteous people are needed for God to hold off on God's righteous judgment (apparently the number is ten). But beyond the details of the story, the deeper meaning is what our orientation to neighbors and nations needs to be, even those that we consider evil or those that are truly evil. As descendants of Abraham, our path is to pray for them and ask for God's mercy for them. In other words to extend God's blessing to them whether they deserve it or not.

This can be tricky business. It is a lot easier most of the time to cheer when we see what we interpret as God's judgment on an enemy, whether across the street or across the world. But that is not what we learn from Abraham. Remember that we are part of a family that is to bring blessing to all the families of the earth. That is our way if Abraham is our father.

Third is what to do when God asks us to do something that **we do not understand**. The best known example of that in Abraham's life is what we know as "the binding of Isaac." According to the story, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. Of course, this is a

horrific command according to our understanding of what is right and good. But remember to hear this story as a parable, a story that conveys truth deeper than its details. It is not a newspaper account of an abusive father.

First some context—at the time of this story, human sacrifice was real. It was a way for some cultures to show reverence and try to appease their gods. Again this practice is rightfully abhorrent to us. But we are to struggle with it to help us learn something deeper. It seems from the beginning, that Abraham believed this about God’s terrible command, too.

We see his faith in two clues from the story. First, when Abraham says to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” And when Isaac asks his father why there is no animal for their sacrifice, Abraham tells him, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering my son.” There is a light of hope in this dark story as we wrestle with its details. Abraham trusted that God would provide a way that would be true to God’s promise.

We are told that God does provide a lamb (actually a ram) and Abraham and his son do return from worship. If we read this story as a parable, not as a newspaper account that would result in Abraham’s arrest, what do we learn? There are no easy answers. Each of us will need to struggle for our own answers in prayer and study, alone and in community. It is a story that may come back to us when we struggle with something we do not understand. And for Christians, this story of darkness and light foreshadows for us the story of Jesus. So much to wrestle with and no easy answers. Just like the life of faith.

So that is father Abraham. A complex man. If any of us still wonder about our own story and whether someone like us can be part of God’s blessings, we can learn from Abraham that nothing excludes us from God’s blessing except our refusal to believe and act on it. Like Abraham, we can grow to trust in God even when we do not understand. And as we come to trust in God and receive God’s blessing, we can learn to be a blessing for others. Amen.