

So Abram Went

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Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

In our reading this morning from the Book of Genesis, we are told that the LORD comes to Abram out of the blue with an incredible promise. **“I will make of you a great nation,”** God says, **“and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”**

And let us just stop and savour that promise for a moment. These are, perhaps, some of the most important words in the Bible, for they are the promise upon which so many other promises are founded.

A Chosen People

This is the moment when the people of Israel become God’s “Chosen People.” And they become that despite the fact that none of them have even been born yet.

But at the same time, this passage doesn’t say that this special status is conferred as a *privilege*. It is not favouritism on God’s part. There is a very important purpose behind it all – it is **“so that you will be a blessing.”** Thus, the nation of Israel is called to exist as God’s people in order to be a blessing to all of the people of the earth.

A Blessing for us

But we don’t believe that this promise is only given for the people of Israel. It is also the promise that lies behind the foundation of the church. There is a real sense in which God has said to us, **“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.”** And we ought to claim that as God’s promise to us. God wants us to be a great nation and that we have a great name – that people might know us throughout this town and beyond as people who are significant and meaningful. If this is God’s promise given to Abram, it is given to us as well.

And yet, just like in the case of Abram, we must recognize that this blessing is not given merely for our own sake. If we, as a church, have any blessing, any particular status in the eyes of God, it is only so that we might bring blessing to the other people of the world. When we hoard God’s blessing to ourselves, we rob it of its true power. It is only when we take whatever we receive from God and use it to energize our ministry of reaching out and caring, love and compassion, that we will know the depths of those blessings.

But there is also something else that we must learn from Abram about activating such a blessing in our church. We must ask how Abram obtained such a blessing for himself.



So
Abram
Went

How did Abram Earn this?

And it is very important to note that, up until this point in the Book of Genesis when God comes and offers this blessing to Abram, the patriarch has done nothing at all.

At this point in the story, he has simply been introduced as the son of Terah and as the husband of Sarai. That is all we're told of him. He has lived with his father as his father has moved around. He hasn't said anything. He has also professed no particular faith in the God who will become so important in his story. Abram is just a guy. He is a guy who is not really any different from any other guy.

This makes one thing perfectly clear. That God's blessings are not given as something that we earn. There is not a single thing that we could do that would make God more inclined to love us and bless us. All of God's blessings come to us as a result of God's grace, the lovingkindness that God chooses to lavish upon us.

Abram's Response

Yet there is one thing that truly does set Abram apart in this story and that is his response. When God says to Abram, **“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you,”** we are told only one thing about Abram's response. We are told that **“Abram went.”**

Did you noticed what is missing there? Where is the part where Abram hears that call and raises his objections? “Excuse me, LORD, but do you really expect me to walk away from everything that I am familiar with, everything that makes me comfortable?

I have my traditions and the ways I have always done things. And I have all kinds of wonderful memories of the things that have happened in this place. Why should I leave all of that behind for the sake of some big promise that you're going to show me a new land that I know nothing about? How do I know that that's a good trade? How do I know that such a costly journey will be worthwhile?

How We React to New Things

That is exactly how I would respond to such a command, wouldn't you? I mean look, for example, at how we react in the life of the church whenever we consider doing something new or different. What are the reactions that you hear? “Oh, we've never done it that way before,” one will say. Or, “we tried that once and it didn't work,” another will say, likely referencing something that is hardly the same thing.

And heaven help you if you try some new thing and it, in any way, seems to impinge on some program or activity that the church has been doing for thirty years and actually doesn't really work today like it did thirty years ago because it's no longer relevant to people. Such things, apparently, must be maintained at any cost, even if you must sacrifice the exciting new future that God is calling you to.

I speak in general here, of course, I've had enough experience with enough churches to know that this is the kind of thing that we do all the time. We value holding onto what is familiar and

comfortable much more than we do embracing whatever new thing God might be calling us to do. It is just human nature.

He Just Went

But that is, of course, what makes Abram so extraordinary in this story. When he receives the call from God to leave everything that is comfortable and familiar and move into an unknown territory to receive an ill-defined blessing, he likely felt the same kinds of hesitations and doubts that you and I would. But he clearly did not let any of that get in the way of him making one singular response: Abram went.

And in those two words, the whole key to Abram is found: Abram went. The Apostle Paul praises Abraham in his letters (calling him by the new name that will be given to him later) as an extraordinary example of faith. But, when Paul says that, he is not thinking about faith in the same way that we usually talk about faith in the church today.

When we talk about faith, it usually means something like that we accept certain concepts and ideas and doctrines about Jesus or God or the world. But Abram's faith did not consist in him believing or holding any particular beliefs. In fact, there are no indications that Abram believed anything in particular, at least, not anything different from anyone else around him.

The Meaning of Faith

When we talk about faith, we often mean that somebody simply accepts certain teachings without raising any questions or struggling with any doubts. When we talk about it, we often frame faith as the opposite of reason and suggest that if anyone has any doubts or critical thoughts, they cannot have faith. But there is nothing of that in this response of Abram. We are given absolutely no insights into what is going on inside Abram's mind because, ultimately, that is not what matters to God. What matters to God is that Abram went.

Abram's true expression of faith is simply acting on what God has promised him and doing that despite knowing that it will lead to a loss of what is comfortable and familiar and easy. Abram went.

A Listening Process

All of this is extremely important for us to understand because of where we are as a congregation in this moment in time. During this season of Lent, we are engaging in a listening process. We have raised some very important questions about where we are in the church right now and where we are going. And we are listening for God to speak on these questions. And I am going to tell you two things that I am certain of in this listening process.

I am certain that God will speak. And I am certain that God's message will, in some way, be a promise that is for our blessing and for the blessing of the world through us. I know that because I know the God that we meet in the Bible does speak, does care and does offer us this blessing.

Will We Listen?

But there are two things that are uncertain in this process. One is whether or not we will listen, and the other is whether or not we will actually act on what we hear.

Listening is not automatic because it's not easy for us to listen to God. It is not easy because we fill our minds and our hearts and our lives with so much noise that we don't offer the opportunity for God's voice to get through.

Psalm 46 encourages worshipers to **"be still and know that I am God."** (v.10) When the prophet Elijah is given the opportunity to meet with God, the God that he meets is not found in the wind, the earthquake or the fire. God's voice is only heard in **"a sound of sheer silence."** (1 Kings 19:11-13) And so the reality is that unless we can teach ourselves to be in silence, we will generally miss the voice of God.

Learning to Listen

And so it is no accident that we have introduced into this season of listening various practices of prayer whose primary purpose is to teach us to find the silence. In *Lectio Divina*, you teach yourself to stop listening to everything else but what God might be saying to you in a certain passage of scripture. A meditative prayer takes a similar approach to focusing your mind only on what you hear the scriptures saying to you.

Through these and other practices that we are teaching you, you will learn to quiet your mind and to put aside the concerns of life to focus on the presence of God in a particular moment. This does not come easy. It is something you have to work at and practice, but I promise you that this is something worth learning because God does speak, and you really don't want to miss the message when God does.

The Bigger Challenge

So, the listening is a challenge, but it is something we will work at. The bigger challenge is actually acting on what we hear. And that is a challenge because of all of the things I've been talking about.

It is a challenge because we have all kinds of reasons not to do what God is telling us to do in the life of the church. We've never done it like that before. We tried it once and it didn't work. It will take away from the familiar old practices that we are used to and comfortable with and that we want to hold on to even though they actually don't seem to work anymore. These are among our many excuses for not doing what God is telling us to do.

Abram's Example

And that is why I am so thankful for the example of Abram today. When he heard the voice of God, he had every reason not to do what God told him to do. He could have complained and offered all kinds of excuses. But Abram went. Abram went and it changed the future and brought blessings to the whole world as a result. So, if we hear the voice of God, what will we do? That is the biggest question facing the church both here locally and globally today.

Abram went; what will you do?