



“How Do You Want to Be Remembered?”

Text: Genesis 12:1-9

a sermon by Kevin Scott Fleming

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For a fellow who is so central to the life of three distinct monotheistic religions, the Bible tells us very little about Abram's early life. Just before you get to the passage from Genesis that we read again this morning, there is a series of partial genealogies - nothing that would stand up to the scrutiny of Ancestry.com - and then, rather abruptly, we read: 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. Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah...Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, son of Haran, 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. The days of Terah were two hundred five years, and Terah died in Haran."

Now, when you read that, there's nothing there - really - that would distinguish Abram as someone special - someone unique - someone so exceptional that God would choose him for the special purpose that awaited him. In fact, you could argue that God could have done better choosing someone else. After all, if God is looking for someone from whom to "make a great nation," God might have chosen a younger man with a stable of offspring, instead of an older fellow with a wife and fertility problems. We read all those genealogies and then we get to Abram and Sarai and a dead end. The family tree apparently ends here. Hope is drying up. They will live in a foreign land and most likely die there - forgotten and not remembered. Abram and Sarai will be buried in alien soil and covered with rocks.

So, the question asked by students of the scriptures has been, “Why Abram?” Why would God choose such a person - an old man with no offspring - to be the beginning of a great nation? The rabbis created great legends about Abram and why God chose him. But they are just that - legends. The question remains, “Why Abram?”

I was once leading a Bible study and one of the participants, who rarely spoke, piped up and asked, “Why do I get the feeling that God is always up to something?” We all laughed, but it was a great question. Why does it seem that God is always up to something - something questionable, something unexpected, something that doesn’t make perfect sense? Why does God always seem to take a completely different course than the one we would take?

“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.”

In the case of Abram, God speaks into a situation of barrenness - of hopelessness - of impossibility. God speaks into a life that is all but at its apparent end. God speaks into desperation and despondency. God turns the desiccated ground of desperation into the rich soil of a new beginning. By God’s very word, there is now hope and promise.

God’s words are filled with hope and confidence. God’s words are dripping with anticipation and expectancy. God does not rely on anything that Abram brings to the table. God’s word carries everything that is necessary to begin something new. Just as God, by God’s spoken word, created from nothing in the beginning, so now God, by God’s word, is creating from next-to-nothing in Abram.

Barrenness is a place into which God brings God’s life-giving action. Dead ends are God’s specialty. When all hope is gone, God moves in with hope to spare. God is, quite often, up to something.

How do Abram and Sarai receive God’s word? Probably with a measure of skepticism. Probably with a measure of disbelief. Probably with more questions than answers. “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you...” “Uh, Lord, exactly where is that?” “Go...”

Confident of God’s calling, embracing the hope of God’s words, they go. They embrace God’s call, which is, as Walter Brueggemann tells us, “...a call to abandonment, renunciation, and relinquishment. It is a call for a dangerous departure from the presumed world of norms and security.”¹ Still, the choice is simple: stay where you are in your dried up barrenness, or leave where you are and walk in hope.”

And so, not with a catalogued, highly-developed collection of theological understandings, but with the purity of simple hope, they go. They pack up and go - thereby beginning a critical motif that is seen again and again in the pages of scripture and the story of God's people: the pilgrimage. The metaphor of a journey - a pilgrimage - an exodus - appears again and again in scripture. It is a challenge to the overwhelming ideologies of all time, including our own. While we yearn and strive for settlement, security, and a place to call our own, God keeps calling God's people to journey, to move on, to trust in God enough to go where God is leading. God is calling God's people - as God has always called God's people - to trust in God enough to do something that the world just may not understand.

So off they go.

To get from where they were to the land of Canaan, you have to pass through some prime real estate. The temptation to stop must have been great. There were surely a few in the traveling party who were among the first in all of humankind to phrase the question: "Are we there yet?" Still, they kept moving.

Along the way, Abram, we are told, built altars to God. These were probably little more than a pile of stones - an "ebenezer" as we sang last week - a cairn, as the Scots would call it. These were markers along the way and were constructed at places where people encountered God. Abram built one near Moreh, at a place that had been used to worship other gods. Abram built another nearer to what would later be called Bethel. Years after Abram, Bethel would be named by Abram's great-grandson, Jacob after he awoke from a dream in which he saw a ladder rising from earth to heaven, and standing up the rock he had used for a pillow, and anointing it with oil, and calling the place "beth-el" - "house of God." Many years later, as the great company of Abram's descendants crossed into the land promised, through the parted waters of the Jordan, while the waters were pushed back, an elder from each of the twelve tribes took a stone from the river basin and created a monument to God's action on their behalf.

And then, as time went on, when these rocks were seen by others, the question would be asked, "What are these stones doing here?" The answer would come back, "Well, Abram was here once and he encountered God and gave thanks." "Do you remember when God called Abram and promised to make him into a great nation? Well, he passed right by here and left this behind to remind us that he found God right here." The stones, which had been raised to celebrate God's goodness, became a silent witness to the trust that Abram and others had in God. The stones were silent witnesses to the faithfulness and the kept promises of God. The stones helped them - and us - remember Abram and those faithful pilgrims of old.

And that presents us with the question of the day: “How Do You Want to be Remembered?” We remember Abram because he trusted in God. We remember Abram because he left visible reminders of his presence. We remember Abram because his reliance on God left an indelible impression on three great religious traditions.

So, how do we want to be remembered? Various surveys have been taken, asking that question to women and men. The answers vary. Many want to be remembered as someone who loved and was loved. Many want to be remembered as being people of kindness and justice. Some want to be remembered for their participation in various organizations and endeavors. Some want to be best remembered as a good parent, a faithful child, a loving spouse. It was interesting to me that, in my research, there was little mention of being a faithful follower of God or a devoted disciple of Jesus Christ. But, as those committed to the way of God made known in Jesus Christ, as your preacher and pastor, I ask you: how do you want to be remembered?

I can tell you that in my experience, one of the first ways that people of faith want to be remembered is through relationships. When people approach the end of their days, they find joy and fulfillment in their relationship with God, their relationships with loved ones, their relationships with friends. These sacred connections enrich and enhance our lives and bring comfort and contentment.

Another way that brings people joy is being able to continue their participation in their church after they have gone on. I am blessed to have moments of sacred conversation with people who let me know that they want to leave the church a gift to continue the mission and ministry of the church. We are surrounded by living remembrances of those who have gone before us and left us this rich legacy. We remember them. How do we want to be remembered?

God offered Abram something he could never have expected. God offered him life, descendants, hope, and a heritage that Abram could never fully comprehend. Abram offered God his trust, his confidence in God’s calling, his confidence in God’s leading and direction. Abram offered God his worship and thanksgiving.

And we remember him.

In light of that story, I’ll give it to you one last time: how do you want to be remembered?

For now and evermore. Amen.