Covenant Made: Abraham

Genesis 12: 1-7 John 8: 31-44

Let us continue our journey through the Bible in 9 sermons. It has been a slow start with the first two sermons covering Genesis 1 to 3. Now things begin to go apace. We now skip over Cain and Abel, Enoch, the Flood and tower of Babel and jump to Genesis 12 to 50. Fortunately the focus is on Abraham so I won’t keep you all day!

Abraham, who was he? What did God promise him? How does this relate to Jesus? And what does it mean for us.

When we first meet Abraham in Genesis his is called Abram, which means exalted father. He was born some 10 generations after the flood, 292 years according to Genesis, in Ur, a city in ancient Mesopotamia, Greek for between the rivers, the rivers being the Tigris and Euphrates; close to modern day Basra which you will remember from the Iraq war, and where the marsh Arabs live. His father was Terah, he had two brothers Nahor and Haran and a half-sister Sarai. Haran, had a son called Lot, Haran died at Ur before the family left on their travels. Abram married his half-sister Sarai and Genesis tells us she was barren, but also “beautiful in appearance”; more on the problems that caused later.

The Genesis narrative does not tell us why Terah and his family set off from Ur; 11: 31 “they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan”. Christian tradition takes its lead from Act 7: 2 where Stephen says “the God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, “Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.” Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran.” According to Jewish rabbinical tradition Terah was a wicked idolatrous priest who manufactured idols. Terah left Abram to mind the store while he departed. A woman came with a plateful of flour and asked Abram to offer it to the idols. Abram then took a stick, broke the idols, and put the stick in the largest idol’s hand. When Terah returned, he demanded that Abram explain what he'd done. Abram told his father that the idols fought among themselves and the largest broke the others with the stick. “Why do you make sport of me?” Terah cried, “Do they have any knowledge?” Abram replied, “Listen to what you are saying!”

So the family set off and got as far as northern Mesopotamia, to Haran, which can be found on a modern map in Turkey near the border of Syria a few miles east of Kobane, the scene of fierce fighting between Daesh and Kurdish forces in 2014 and 15. They settled there but Terah did not travel any further, he did not make it to Cannan, and died in Haran. Genesis does not tell us if Abram set off before or after his father died, but Jewish tradition holds that Terah was still alive when Abram left. Why did Abram leave? 12: 1 “the Lord said go to the land that I will show you”; God spoke to Abram, and Abram went. God promised Abram “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. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all their possessions and people; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. The journey was about 450 miles and with all his baggage it would have taken about a month. He stopped at Moreh and God appeared to Abram and said “to your offspring I will give this land” so Abram built an altar. Abram was 75 years old, his wife was barren God told him his offspring would have the land. Abram built another altar at Bethel, then he headed out of the land of Canaan to the Negeb, a semi-desert region to get away from the Canaanites.

There was a drought, Abram chose to live in a semi-desert away from the Canaanites, and so that was not a surprise. They all went to Egypt, the Pharaoh was attracted to Sarai so Abram told him she was his sister and she joined the Pharaoh’s harem. As a reward the Pharaoh gave Abram and his family a small fortune in livestock. When the Pharaoh found out Sarai was married he sent her back to Abram and told them to leave. Abram and his enhanced entourage returned to Canaan.

Many years passed Sarai had not born Abram an heir and the Lord came to Abram in a vision, Genesis 15:1 ‘Do not be afraid, your reward shall be very great.’ Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir. The Lord said, ‘This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’ He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Abram and Sarai still struggled with the promise the Lord had given Abram so they decided Abram should conceive a child with Sarai’s Egyptian maid Hagar. He was 86 when Hagar bore him a son called Ishmael. The prophet Mohamed is claimed to be a direct descendant of Ishmael and accordingly members of the Muslim faith revere Abraham.

When Abram was ninety-nine, the Lord appeared to him, and said, ‘I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.’ this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, exalted father but Abraham, father of a multitude; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations.’

God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall call her Sarah, she shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac.’ Isaac was the father of Jacob, who had 12 sons, including Joseph and his pretty coat; each son being the head of one of the 12 tribes of Israel.

The point of this story when it was written was to affirm the relationship between God and his people, the covenant between Abraham and God which extended through the generations to all his descendants. It was also to confirm that the land of Canaan was their inheritance. This was particularly important for the Jews when in exile in Babylon many generations later.

Are you with me so far, I started out with four questions and we have answered the first two, we know who Abraham was and we know that God promised Abraham: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and your offspring and I will give this land.” How does this relate to Jesus? And what does it mean for us?

I now want to bring you to the Gospel reading from John 8. Jesus sets out a challenge to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’ They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’ The Jews are offended, they are free they are descendants of Abraham, why should they be slaves. But Jesus is looking at their lives not to their genealogical link to Abraham. Jesus refers back to the very nature of man, the subject of last week’s sermon, to our fallen sinful nature. Jesus answered them, ‘everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. Jesus is referring to himself to his relationship with God, that it is through Jesus that man’s relationship with God can be restored.

They Jews responded, ‘Abraham is our father.’ ‘We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires.’ This exchange comes at a time when Jesus is teaching in the temple in Jerusalem. The very heart of the Jewish faith, Mount Moriah, where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac, where Solomon built his Temple, where Jesus came to be crucified, this is where Jesus chose to reveal himself to the scribes and Pharisees.

The Gospel reading this morning from John 8 started at verse 31 but the context of that exchange comes in the first part of the chapter where the scribes and Pharisees are challenging Jesus. First they brought a woman before him caught in adultery, saying “the law of Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” Jesus answered “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” The accusers went away, one by one, beginning with the elders.

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” The Pharisees challenged Jesus but Jesus responded “the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf. And the Pharisees asked, ‘Where is your Father?’ Jesus answered, ‘You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” Jesus foretold his death saying, “I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.”

The scribes and Pharisees just don’t get it. They think Abraham’s ancestry was theirs alone, the head of the Jewish faith. They seemed to have forgotten that God’s promise to Abraham was that he would be the father of many nations, his descendants as great as the stars in the sky.

Abraham was a fallible man, he was not free from sin, and Abraham did not always follow God’s command. He did not settle in Canaan, he had a son by Hagar, but he did trust God. He was blessed, but he did not live to see his inheritance, God’s promise to him played out in full. Abraham prospered and he sired Isaac in his old age.

Jesus tells us it is not enough to be a direct descendant of Abraham to have a relationship with God. Indeed even Abraham’s direct descendants are separated from God by sin. As he said to them, “those without sin cast the first stone”. It is only through the death of Jesus for the redemption of our sins that our relationship with God can be restored.

Jesus said “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. If you know me, you will know my Father also.”

Amen

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