

“Beginnings of a Journey”
Genesis 12:1-7 and 17:1-9;
Galatians 3:5-14; John 8:33-42

July 7, 2013
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

This summer, we are working our way through the stained glass windows in our sanctuary. It's been an interesting discipline for me. Today, we are at the very back window on the east side, and on that window is depicted Abraham and his life. So as we begin to think about father Abraham, which may bring a song to mind for a few of us, let's do a quick pop quiz. If I were to say "Abraham," what are the various things you would think of? What kinds of stories come to mind when you think of Abraham? Can anyone think of one off-hand? Isaac. Blessed to be a blessing. All kinds of stories. The topic of Abraham is huge and we're not going to try to go through all of Abraham's life. I'm going to try to focus on a couple of things. I'll start with the stories we heard this morning.

First, we read the passage about Abraham being called to go on a journey. We know that Abraham came from the Ur of the Chaldeans and went up to Haran, and then he heard God's call to go to Canaan. The question in my mind is, did God come just to Abraham, or was God giving this call to people and Abraham is the one who responded? Or was Abraham somehow special and so God came to Abraham? It doesn't say. It simply says that God came to Abraham and invited him to go on this journey, along with a promise. What we know is that Abraham took that journey. Abraham chose to go.

Now the historians have a really hard time placing where Abraham might have been. It's so far back we don't have very many other records, so the historians have a hard time placing Abraham, but as people of faith, we place Abraham at the beginning of creating a people of faith.

Genesis starts with the beginning of everything. Now at this point in Genesis, we are at the starting point or the beginning of recognizing that we can be a people of faith. It's God's promise to Abraham that if you come with me, if you go on this journey, I'll make of you a great nation and you will be a blessing to the nations. So that's one piece I want to think about with Abraham. He trusted God and went on the journey.

The second passage we read was about God making a covenant with Abraham. It's an incredible story in itself to think about God coming to make this covenant. A covenant is simply an agreement that two people make and expect consequences if they break it. We read the second of the two covenant stories in Genesis. In the first one, God actually has Abraham split animals in half and the smoking pot passes between them. Normally when you make a covenant, the

two people making the covenant get together and walk between and say, “Whatever has happened to all of these may happen to me if I don’t keep this agreement.” Luckily God didn’t make Abraham do that part. God went through the middle. He’s taking on that covenant.

The second description of the covenant in today’s scripture feels to me like God coming to Abraham and saying, “I’m making this covenant with you; I’m making this agreement.” Before I go on with that, isn’t it incredible that the God of the universe doesn’t come and just say, “You’re going to be my people!” No, God says, “Come and make this agreement with me so that you’ll be my people. You can choose to do this.” That’s kind of what the second covenant is about. God says, “OK, Abraham, I have chosen to do this. I really want you to choose to do this. I’m not going to make you walk between these animals, but I want you to show that you are serious.” If we read on a little bit in this passage, you would hear how God asked him to be serious, through the act of circumcision to show they are serious about being part of this agreement.

So there are these two pieces: God inviting Abraham on a journey and then coming and making an agreement with him to be his God and his progeny will be God’s people. In some respects, the rest of the Old Testament is about living out this covenantal agreement. It’s about being in covenant.

Sometimes we talk about the Israelites being a covenant people because they were people who had an agreement with God to live together and go forward together. So these are the two stories that I think give us the perspective on Abraham and in it are portrayed two things that I want to talk about further.

Today, to go on a journey, we would almost immediately reach for our keys. If we were to go to Seattle, very few of us would just open the door and start walking. We get out our key and get in the car. So what was the key to the journey for Abraham? He did walk, but he had a key. Actually I think there are two keys I want to talk about.

I think the first key for Abraham was that he trusted God. He believed in God. He was willing to hear God speak into his life and to change his life because of what God said. That was a key to the journey. In fact, that piece itself almost defines Abraham as the Father of Faith. We think of him as being the Father of Faith because he trusted God to go on the journey that God called him on.

We think about that idea of having the faith, having the trust, believing in God, and it is what Abraham is famous for. You notice what Paul says about Abraham: it was his belief that was reckoned unto him as righteousness. It was that faith, that belief, that trust, that allowed him to be in right relationship with

God and to develop that relationship and enter into the covenant, to recognize God's agreement to be his God. That was key for Abraham. It was key for who he became. He started out as Abram, the great one, the great progenitor. The covenant changed him to Abraham, which means he was not only the great ancestor, but he was the ancestor of many at that point.

Then we have covenant. What does covenant begin to direct us to think about? I think what it begins to direct us to think about is that he knew that in following God, being with God, he received a blessing.

So I want to suggest that there are two keys to Abraham's journey. One might have been the car to get going, trust. The other was the key of blessing. When I say Abraham was blessed, and when Jesus and Paul think back on Abraham as blessed, they don't mean that heaven on earth was there when Abraham lived. Shortly after he got to Canaan there was a drought and they had to go to Egypt. He didn't always make the right decisions. But throughout his life, his life was punctuated with encounters with God. Throughout his life he had faith that enabled him to see his life differently.

I think one of the ways I can think of the key of blessing is that it opens up the shades. It takes off the blinders. It allows us to begin to see how God is at work in our lives and to be present with what is happening. So just as we think about Abraham having these keys, the key of faith and the key of blessing, it's exactly what Jesus points back to.

As we think about Abraham, we think he was probably way back there, you know—3, 4, 5,000 years ago. How is he still important for us? He certainly started something. He was a beginning point of a faith that has made itself known and I believe has become a blessing for the nations. But I also think he is in some ways the description of what it means to be a person of God. What he starts with is opening himself to hear God and follow him on a journey. We are all on this journey. These new babies that have just been born are embarking on a new life. It's a journey through life and as we begin our trajectory through life, we are invited by God to go with God, to see where God might take us. Throughout our lives, God invites us on that journey. We can say, "We would live to see where you'll take us, God," or we can say, "No." It is that trust that is key. God, we'll go on that journey through life with you. We'll be part of that covenant. We'll go and see. It is then that I think the key of blessing also opens up our lives in ways that are just incredible. As we allow God to speak into our lives, we also have the key of blessing—that which enters our lives perhaps at moments that gives us strength to go on, perhaps that opens our eyes in ways that wouldn't have been open otherwise.

It makes me think of a friend I was talking to in the last couple of weeks who told me this story. She said at one point her neighbor, who was about to have a child, came by to see her. She was recently retired and hadn't any thought of having any more children in her life other than maybe some grandchildren down the road. But the neighbor said, "I'm not finding anybody who can watch my children. Will you watch them?" The first time she said no. The second time she said no. The third time she opened her mouth to say no and something else came out. She said, "Yes, I'll watch them." She said to me, "I don't know where that came from, or maybe I do." For 15 years, she has had that blessing of two neighbor girls—it started out with one, and five years later another. But over these last 15 years she has developed a wonderful relationship and she now has two adopted granddaughters living next door to her who have made her life something it wouldn't have been. She notices a blessing that came through—and she believes it came directly through—her trust in a God who would prompt her at the right time.

The key to life is having the faith and the blessings. It's not only to be able to see and to trust in God, but to notice when God has worked in our lives, to recognize those blessings. It's not like everything is a blessing, but it helps us make it through life. And just as Abraham was able to enter into a covenant with God, so are we. That's what we do today. We are reminded that we also have been offered the opportunity to enter into a new covenant with God. In fact, Paul says Christ brings the blessings of Abraham. It is in the new covenant that we, too, are able to enter in, to say yes in trust and faith, and to recognize the blessings—the blessing of a meal together, a blessing to be a member of the family of faith, to be one of God's children, the blessings of life that God has given us.

It's the key to life, I think, to trust in God and to recognize the blessings God has given us. This coming around the table is saying yes to those things. Through Christ, God has enabled us to enter this new covenant, to know faith and blessing, to have the spirit of God in our lives. So we are invited to remember, to say yes again in trust, and to recognize both the blessings that we have and have confidence that in God we have blessings to come. Amen.

Gracious God, we are thankful for the story of Abraham, who you call and guide and bless. You enter into covenant with him and lead him along the way. Help us as well, Lord, to say yes to you, enter this new covenant, recognize your blessings—the blessing of your love and forgiveness, the presence of your spirit and the guidance you give us, and the service you invite us to do. Lord, let us have these keys of faith and blessing. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.