

First Presbyterian Church
Genesis 12:1-3, “Roots and the Abraham’s Family”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/22/2020

We’ve been looking into our roots this month.

Some of you have even dug things up and looked at their roots!

Last week we saw the terrible roots that gave rise to anguish
in David’s family.

I thought we should consider the flip side this week
and explore some of the roots of promise and hope
in the family of Abraham and Sarah,
or as they are known when we first meet them, Abram and Sarai.

That doesn’t mean that these two had a trouble free family.

Far from it. There are no families or congregations
that have only good roots to draw from.

What it means is that God is able to work and remain faithful
in a huge variety of settings.

In this case, God chooses one family,
the family of a guy who was probably a moon worshiper
from a land we now know as Iraq.

This is a very odd thing for God to do.

If I was God I’d zap everybody with a mini bolt of lightning
to get their attention and then I’d say,
“Hey! I’m God—get it? You can’t do this on your own, you need me.
So here’s a book of rules for you to follow
that will help us be honest with each other
and you can depend on me alone just like it was before.”

That’s what I would do. But God’s smarter than me.

And he’s a better storyteller. So God just gets one person’s attention.

Abram the moon worshiper.

And he tells him to leave his family and his homeland,
and to go to the place that he will show him.

How did Abram know that this was God speaking to him?

Was there any proof offered?

Did Abram ask any questions of God?

We don't know the answers to all that.

We just get these few short verses of God's initial promise to Abram.

To begin with, God says,

“Leave everything that you've known in your life
and go into the land that I will show you.”

The land. Well the land God shows Abram is inhabited and unavailable.

But it's a promise – a promise of land that will guide the paths
of millions of people yet to be born.

From there the language turns to poetic form.

Listen to what God says to Abram in choosing him:

I will make you into a great nation,

and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing. ^[a]

³ **I will bless those who bless you,**

and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you."

Some might accuse God of favoritism,

of neglecting untold millions by choosing only one family.

But this passage shows us that God's fundamental posture

toward all of humanity is one of blessing,

and that God's unique choice of Abram

was for the purpose of using him

and his descendants to carry on that

message of blessing to the rest of the world.

Let's count out the phrases in the blessing that God gives to Abram:

- 1) I will make you into a great nation,
- 2) and I will bless you;
- 3) I will make your name great,
- 4) and you will be a blessing.
- 5) I will bless those who bless you,
- 6) and whoever curses you I will curse;
- 7) and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

This tells us something because the number 7
in the Hebrew imagination symbolized fullness or completeness—
all seven days of the week that God himself established.

So in the very structure of the blessing God is telling Abram,
“I’m blessing you in full, there’s no aspect of your life
that I’m leaving out, I’m blessing you and your family
and your descendants 7 days a week.”

These seven lines form three basic promises that establish
the roots of Abram’s family. For generations people
will look back at these promises and the way that
Abram and Isaac and Jacob and so many others
lived in light of them.

The first promise is to make Abram into a Great Nation and to bless him.

Since we’ve read ahead, we know that this nation
will eventually be known as Israel,
but for Abram it was just a promise,
and he would die not knowing
how it would be fulfilled.

Most of the Old Testament is spent narrating
the very messy and difficult process
that led to the creation of this nation
that was really only great for a short period of time.

“I will make you into a great nation *and I will bless you.*”

This whole idea of “blessing” is a bit foreign to us today,
but in ancient times it meant you conferred life
and energy to the person who was blessed.
To be blessed by God was to be in God’s favor,
and in that day and age God’s favor
wasn’t something people took for granted.

The second basic promise is that

“I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.”

In the ancient world having a great name has to do with a person’s character.
So while the nations are trying to make a name *for themselves*,
God says that Abram’s character and reputation
will have a *divine* origin.

God himself will establish Abram’s reputation.

And what does a divine reputation mean?

Does it mean Abram gets to run the show?

No—It means that Abram himself will be a blessing.

Do you see that connection?

“I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.”

If we follow Abram’s roots back to the beginning of Genesis,
we can see that the original vocation of humanity was to be caretakers
for the world—a blessing to the created order.

In line with this, Abram—he is to be a blessing to others,
a steward of blessing that comes through the land God will show him.

In a world marked by division,

Abram is to be an agent of blessing and integration,
and that will be the marker of his divinely granted character.

The third and final portion of the blessing is the most dramatic.

God tells Abram, that somehow all peoples on earth
will be blessed through him.

Those are some deep roots!

Who could be expected to deliver on something like that? This is a
calling that no one can live up to. No one...except for God’s own self.

No wonder the apostle Paul reads this passage and responds,
“God announced the gospel in advance to Abraham!”
This is where we see God drawing upon roots that go back
to the Garden of Eden,
back to the place of right relationship and blessing.

Abram and Sarai believed God, and they set out on a journey.
They could not control the outcome or predict how long it would be.
That’s an act of faith.

They stepped out in faith that God would be faithful—
even in their old age—to provide them with descendants, and land,
and blessing that would reach all families on earth.

That act of faith was just a seed, but it grew roots.
Those roots enabled Isaac and Rebekah to live by faith
that God would pass on the promise through them
—they got twins.

And those roots enabled Jacob (the younger twin) to act in faith
that God’s promise would be true for him even if he tricked
his slightly older brother out of it!

And those roots were evident in Joseph who believed God
even when he was in a dungeon in Egypt.
On and on the stories go, the roots of our faith,
the patterns of behavior that shape how we frame
ourselves to God, to the world, and to one another
are on display even now.

So the question is, church, is this the God that you worship?
Is this the God that has called you?

If the answer is yes, then your life is a branch that has been grafted
onto the vine of Abram,
and you have been joined in these roots of blessing
that God has given to the chosen people of Israel.

This week let us remember our roots, and give thanks.