

Creating a People for a Purpose
Sermon preached on Genesis 17:1-11
31 October 2021 Clarence Presbyterian Church
Reverend Judith Brown Bryan

This morning we continue our series on seminal stories from our bible – those ancient texts that contain important truths for our modern life. You may recall that a couple of weeks ago, we heard about Noah and the very first covenant God created with humankind. Today we will encounter a second covenant, this one with Abraham.

The Abraham story begins in Genesis chapter 12. Abraham, then called Abram, is a descendent of Noah and married to the beautiful Sarai. God comes to Abram and calls him to leave Haran and all that he has ever known - the land of his birth, his kindred and his father's house. In return for Abram's trust, God will lead him to a new homeland. God also promises descendants as many as the stars. They will become a great nation. God will bless Abram and through him all the families of the earth shall be blessed. They will be God's people.

Obediently, Abram leaves everything and sets out with his wife and nephew Lot on what Joseph Campbell calls a hero's journey –a journey rife with testing, missteps and danger and growth. Through the journey, Abraham will mature in faith and trust and deepen his relationship with God.

And so they set out from Haran to Canaan. On the way, they make two stops, one in Shechem and the other in Bethel. Abram builds an altar in each place as an expression of his devotion to God. At last they arrive in Canaan. But before they can settle into their new homeland, famine strikes and they flee to Egypt. Here they face an even more difficult challenge.

Abram and Sarai are aliens in Egypt; they suspect and fear that Pharaoh will desire Sarai because of her beauty and therefore dispose of Abram. Failing to trust God's promises for the future, they take matters into their own hands. They agree to pose as siblings and keep their marriage secret. As predicted, Pharaoh takes Sarai into his court as his wife and treats Abram generously as her brother. God, however, is unhappy with this arrangement and afflicts Pharaoh's house with plagues. Abram must confess his deception and is kicked out of Egypt with Sarai- with their people, belongings and wealth.

They return to Canaan and flourish – so much that the land cannot support the two families of Lot and Abram. So Abram decides to divide the land and gives Lot first choice. Lot heads east into the Jordan near Sodom. Abram journeys to Hebron. Here God reiterates the promise of land as far as the eye can see and offspring as many as dust of the earth. In gratitude, Abram builds another altar.

More danger arises. Warring kings capture Lot and carry him off with his people and goods. Abram musters a fighting force and successfully recaptures Lot, his people and wealth. On his way home, Abram is met by the king of Sodom and King Melchizedek

who pronounce him blessed. Just as God promised, Abram is blessed and a blessing to the nations.

Yet, Abram is now 86. He and Sarai are childless. Where are the descendants God promised? He and Sarai are losing their patience and once again take matters into their own hands. Sarai gives Hagar, her Egyptian slave-girl, to Abram to be his wife. Soon she is pregnant and bears a son she names Ishmael. But still no lineal descendant.

Here we arrive at our text from chapter 17. God comes once more to Abram, now 99 years old. If Abram will continue to be faithful and blameless, God will make a covenant, an everlasting covenant- all of the land of Canaan in perpetuity. Abram will be known as he ancestor of nations. Indeed, God gives him a new name – Abraham, meaning “Father of the Multitude.” Sarai is to be called Sarah, meaning Princess, mother of kings. They will be a people blessed to be a blessing. Abraham can’t help but laugh when God promises a son– it is rather laughable to imagine that he and his 90 year old wife can conceive and bear a son.

Nonetheless, Abraham commits to the covenant. The sign of his consent, God says, is circumcision. And although this act is a threat to his fertility, Abraham places the future in God’s hands. That very day Abraham and his house were circumcised. The journey that had begun with provisional faith is now mature.

Indeed, Sarah will conceive and bear a son. They will name him Isaac. The covenant is fulfilled. But the hero’s journey is not complete. There will be one more test, a terrible test, which you will hear next week.

Now several thousand years later, as we follow the footsteps of our ancestors, what truths can we learn. This morning, let’s consider three.

First, like Abraham and Sarah, when we answer God’s call, we begin our own hero’s journey. Like them, we journey by stages and mature over a lifetime. In baptism we enter into the covenant God established in Jesus where we are given new life, nurtured in love and are marked as Christ’s own forever. As you well know the parents and the congregation join together to support the child’s developing faith. Then in confirmation, the young people make their own profession that Jesus is Lord and Savior. They are made members of the church, joined to Christ’s ministry of love, peace and justice.

The journey of faith, of course, continues through life, taking shape as God leads us. Like Abraham and Sarah, we may be called to step away from all that is easy and comfortable and familiar and into a very uncertain future. We can be sure that we will stray and falter and question. We may get impatient with God along the way and take matters into our own hands. We will encounter hardships, suffering, even tragedy that will shake us to the core. What this story teaches is that God accompanies Abraham and Sarah from beginning to end. God never lets them go. We know that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ as we make our journey. Nothing. Never.

Second, remember that Abraham built 3 altars. Each was a place of worship and permanent reminder of God’s presence to him and his family. It takes time and commitment to build an altar. We are called to the same kind of commitment to worship.

And so we gather on Sunday mornings. Praying well known words and singing familiar hymns, we begin to embody God's promise. As we read, listen and inwardly digest God's word, we come to believe what we have not seen and to lean ever more on the Holy One. Worship shapes us into God's people.

Just as we need common worship, I believe we need silence, too. How else would Abraham recognize God's voice had he not wandered silently across lands with his herds all those years. God's first language is silence, wrote one mystic.

I will tell you that for most of us, silence becomes easier as we mature in faith. If you experienced the grace of stillness in the beginning of our worship, you might try it at home, too. One practice of silence is called Centering Prayer. One way to begin is to simply follow your breath, God's gift of life. Just breathe. Maybe start with 5 minutes. Each time thoughts arise and interrupt your attention – and they will, let them go and return to your breath and to God. As you get more comfortable, consider extending your time another 5" and another 5" until you long to rest and breathe with God 20" every day. Do this for 6 months and see how life- changing it is. Truly.

Third, as Abraham and his people are a blessing, so too are we. As our faith matures, we come to believe in God's saving and forgiving love, to trust in the promise of abundant and eternal life, and to know that all things are working together for good. This is truly a blessing. And one to be shared.

Jesus said it this way. You are the light of the world. Even though he was speaking to a people who were landless and poor, oppressed by the Romans, insignificant to the temple, and wondering what had happened to the covenant with Abraham, Jesus called them blessed. Not because of what they had or what they did, but by who they were and who we are – children of God - God's people, called out of darkness into God's marvelous light in order to proclaim his goodness by our lives.

I want to share a story with you about a man who has been in the world as light. His name is John M. Perkins. Now 91 years old, he is a Christian minister, civil rights leader, author of 17 books and recipient of numerous honorary doctorates and awards. He is African American. You would never have predicted this biography. But God can lead us on journeys we never dreamed if we but consent.

Perkins was born in New Hebron, in Mississippi. His mother died when he was seven months old, and his father abandoned him. He was raised by his grandmother and extended family who were sharecroppers. He dropped out of school in third grade. When Perkins was 17, his brother was fatally shot by a white police officer, and Perkins' family, fearing for his life, urged him to leave.

He moved to Southern California, married, served in the Korean war and then began his family. One morning, one Sunday morning, his oldest son, then a little boy, invited him to attend church with him. Perkins did and had a conversion experience. He committed himself to Christ that very day.

Heeding God's call, he moved his family to Mississippi near New Hebron. Initially as a new convert, he was concerned with evangelism and biblical literacy, so he founded a

bible institute while his wife began a day-care for their neighbors so that they could work. Over time, Perkins began to see how the gospel of Jesus Christ was the story of redeeming love, one that addresses, he says, both spiritual and physical needs. Thus, he began his work in civil rights and justice – first in voter registration in 1965. Then in school desegregation, and then in protesting through economic boycotts. In 1970 he was arrested and tortured by white police officers.

He emerged from this trauma, not to be deterred, but determined to grow his ministry through health clinics, thrift stores, a housing cooperative and more. Then in 1982, hearing God's call once more, Perkins and his family returned to Southern California with an ever-greater commitment to bring about reconciliation in God's name between blacks and whites. This has been his life's work – and his hero's journey - networking with evangelicals and others working in deprived urban areas for social justice and civil rights.

In his most recent book written in 2017, a memoir entitled *Dream with Me*, Perkins describes how a life lived with God can change very suddenly, and what was seemingly impossible can become possible. I quote him:

How in the world did I get here? The only answer I know to give is that these things can happen when you walk with God. It's easy to look at a person—to see where he started and how far he has come—and think you know how the story will end. But I've learned what Saul learned on the road to Damascus: when God's involved, everything can change in an instant.

You may think you know where you're headed, but often God has a different plan—something “exceedingly abundantly above all that [you] ask or think” (Eph. 3:20 NKJV). Sometimes a light drizzle becomes a deluge. Other times you open your eyes to find yourself by still waters. Sometimes you hear thunder clapping along with the rain. Other times the clouds disappear so you can see a billion stars in the sky.

This is our purpose, too. To journey with God and trust God's leading and to be a sign of God's goodness, in spite of what the world is or says or promises.

Some, like John Perkins, will place their efforts toward repairing the world. Some will commit to ethical decisions from their office chair. Others express God's goodness as they serve in the kitchen or food pantry or nursing home or classroom or care for an aging parent or raise kind and generous children. Some will sing God's praises or tend to this building that is itself a sign of God's presence in the world. Others will give generously. And many, many will pray, taking the world into their hearts for God's hope and healing and love.

As we journey, Teilhard de Chardin invites us to trust the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything. Instead, he says, give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you - for Jesus' sake. May it be so. Amen