

**ABRAHAM: LET GO & DON'T BE AFRAID**

**Genesis 12:1-4a, 7-8; 13:14-17; 15:1-21**

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As a youngster, my father gave us kids rides on his motorcycles. When we were vacationing in northern Michigan, and before my brother and I were old enough to ride our own motorcycles, dad would take us on rides through the forest. Most of the riding took place on unpaved roads, horse trails, or anywhere dad decided to go. From time to time, we would encounter a stretch of sand. Since sand has a tendency to make the motorcycle wiggle, dad would give us explicit instructions to always keep our feet on the foot-pegs. Dad assured us that he could handle the sand if we would just set tight, hang on, keep our feet on the pegs, and not try to help him. Well, I was never very good at keeping my feet on the pegs. I knew that my father needed my help to keep the motorcycle upright. Once, we hit a patch of soft sand, and as the bike began to dance, I also began to dance. My feet were nowhere near the pegs and I was “helping” my dad steer a straight course. Yes, we dumped into the sand. We were not hurt. There we lay in the sand when my father began to laugh. Then he said to me, “You’re never going to keep your feet on the pegs, are you?” I answered, “Would you?” And we laughed. Many years later, when I was a father myself, I found myself once again on the back of dad’s motorcycle. This time I kept my feet on the pegs. I am capable of learning and changing. It just usually takes a long time for me to do so.

Last week, we noted that from the time God calls Abraham until Isaac is born is roughly twenty-five years. Twenty-five anxious and agonizing years. I raised the question, Why is God so slow? And the answer is, as we saw from the Genesis story, *God is so slow because He is waiting on Abraham to catch-up.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This sermon, for the most part, relies upon Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), 56-69.

During the two-and-a-half decades that Abraham and Sarah wait on the God who is waiting on them, they struggle and suffer with Sarah's barrenness. Before Sarah can become fertile, Abraham must prove faithful. All through this time of testing, Abraham has been having visits with God that include challenges along with promises. In seven visits that encompass the entire drama, God teaches and encourages and waits. In the first four visits—the subject for our study today—Abraham changes from a silent doer to a partner who speaks up. And in the fourth visit, the center of all seven visits, Abraham is challenged to live without fear. Fear lies at the heart of what has plagued Abraham, leading to his lies, the results of which have plagued Sarah. Meanwhile and all the while, God and Abraham are working on a divine-human partnership in which God challenges Abraham to change his way of looking at the world and living in the world. Yes, Abraham is capable of learning and changing. It just usually takes a long time for him to do so.

The story proper begins with the first visit: God calls Abraham and Abraham obeys.

<sup>1</sup>Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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." <sup>4</sup>So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him (Gen 12:1-4a, NRSV).

From the start, Abraham is called upon as a potential partner in God's plans. He has a part to play, a role that will grow with each successive visit. What Abraham is being challenged to do is to change the knee-jerk way that all human beings have in making choices to protect and to promote themselves. Yes, it is true that God dangles a "carrot" out in front of Abraham. *But the ultimate promise, the point of all the promises, is the blessing to all nations.* This is something in which Abraham has no immediate interest, a promise that Abraham must take a lifetime to understand and to embrace. Meanwhile, the challenges will teach him how to reverse the clutching to life and name and family that characterizes all normal human behavior. Abraham must learn something better than being normal. His ordinary way of being in the world must change. Whereas the builders of the Tower sought to make a name for themselves, God promises Abraham a name; whereas the people of Babel were cursed by becoming alienated nations unable to understand each other, God promises that through Abraham all the nations of the earth

shall be blessed. *The two stories—Babel’s and Abraham’s—are linked by “the name game” and the deepest, darkest fear of the human heart: the fear-filled urge to count for something, to have a place in the sun.* We want our lives to matter, to have meaning and merit. We want a name.

In visit one, there is only a voice. In visit two, the Lord is seen.

<sup>7</sup>Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup>From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and invoked the name of the LORD (Gen 12:7-8, NRSV).

God has promised Abraham a great name, and now Abraham invokes the name of the Lord. Invoking God’s name is surely an important first step in relinquishing the effort to establish one’s own name.

Just after these back-to-back visits by God, the promises of land and descendants are threatened. There is the fiasco in Egypt in which Abraham’s lie leads to Sarah becoming Pharaoh’s wife, and then there are the land squabbles between the shepherds of Abraham and his nephew Lot. Abraham regains his infertile wife, and Lot gains the fertile land. It is at this point that we read of visit three.

<sup>14</sup>The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; <sup>15</sup>for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. <sup>16</sup>I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. <sup>17</sup>Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you” (Gen 13:14-17, NRSV).

The original audience would have understood what God wanted: to walk around a land’s perimeter was to confirm it as personal property. But there can be no legal purpose to Abraham’s walking, since there are no witnesses. It would appear crazy to any outside observer. I wonder what Sarah thought, seeing this old man tramping about with no herd and no apparent business of any kind?

The first visit is a concrete test: leave home, pack up and go. The second visit is a much more ambiguous test: this land I give to you and your seed, says God. What does one say to that? Or do with it? But in this third visit, the ambiguous becomes downright strange. Lift up your eyes from the everyday concerns in front of your nose and see how

far you can see, and then walk it—a few days? a few weeks? How far and for how long? *As the tests become progressively more difficult, God’s trust in Abraham grows, just as Abraham’s trust in God grows.*

In three visits, Abraham has yet to say a word. Ah, but all good things take time. We come now to visit four.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (Gen 15:1, NRSV).

As always, promise follows challenge. Fear not, and good will follow. But what exactly is the great reward? And what exactly is Abraham not to fear? The greatness of reward is a reference to the promise that through Abraham “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” But I do not believe that Abraham has reached the point where he is able to embrace this reward or to understand its greatness. If the nature of such a reward is left hanging for Abraham, how much more so is the challenge to fear not? Abraham and his army of men have just rescued nephew Lot and five local kings from four powerful kings of international infamy. It is “after these things”—after Abraham’s heroics—that God decides to utter the challenge, “Do not be afraid.” *Where is the fear? And for what does Abraham need God as a shield?*

For the first time in his visiting with God, Abraham speaks up, but he does not speak to God’s challenge of “Do not be afraid,” nor does he address anything to do with needing God as a shield. Rather, he picks up on God’s mention of “reward.”

<sup>2</sup>But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” <sup>3</sup>And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir” (Gen 15:2-3, NRSV).

Ouch! Is there a touch of bitterness or complaint in Abraham’s question? “What can You give me,” he asks, “when I am going to my end childless, and the heir of my house is my servant Eliezer?” “What can You give me?” There is no obvious fear in that question. There may be a touch of whining: “Really, God, what’s the use, given my childlessness? Besides, I’ve taken care of things. It’s too late for anything better. I’ve got my servant Eliezer.” Rather than fear, this sounds like Abraham is reassuring God!

“Look, God,” Abraham goes on to say, “let’s leave well enough alone. I’ve got it all figured out. It’s OK. Eliezer will be my heir.”<sup>2</sup>

So, where’s the fear? It seems to me the biblical writer wants us to keep the whole story in mind. At the beginning of the story, in chapter 12, Abraham pawned-off his wife Sarah to Pharaoh to save his own skin. And in chapter 20, he will pull the same stunt with Abimelech. Abraham does not trust the safety and security of his life, his marriage, or his wife to God. God’s promise to be a shield comes midway between these two episodes of Abraham’s fear-based deceit. If Abraham can count on God’s provision for a shield against the mean and murderous men desiring his wife all the days of his traveling life, then there will be no more room for fear.

After listening to Abraham, God answers.

<sup>4</sup>But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man [Eliezer] shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” <sup>5</sup>He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be” (Gen 15:4-5, NRSV).

What will Abraham do now? How will he proceed with this promise of an heir from his own aging body?

And he [Abram] believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6, NSRV).

Perhaps Abraham is on his way toward mastering his fear problem. At the least, he is heading in the right direction. God likes Abraham’s response. God considers Abraham’s trust as true righteousness. Abraham is learning to take God as reliable and to rely upon God, and this is what God is looking for in a partner. Such reliance is to Abraham’s “credit” or “merit.”

<sup>7</sup>Then he [God] said to him [Abram], “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.” <sup>8</sup>But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” (Gen 15:7-8, NRSV).

God reacts favorably to Abraham’s pressing questions, laying out the requirements of a partnership ritual. Abraham must act. Animals are to be killed and cut open. It is all a bit mysterious to us, but the custom of two partners confirming an agreement by walking

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<sup>2</sup>Ancient documents uncovered at Nuzi near Kirkuk on a branch of the Tigris River, as well as at other places, demonstrate that a childless man could adopt one of his own male servants to be heir and guardian of his estate. Abram apparently desires doing this with Eliezer.

between split carcasses was practiced in the surrounding cultures. It is as if God swears by His very own self to be cut in two if He fails to uphold the divine end of the bargain.<sup>3</sup> Abraham says yes as a willing partner, although he must accept a future for his offspring that will not be available for another four hundred years (15:13).

I entitled this lesson “Let Go & Don’t Be Afraid.” I am reminded of a drama-skits that I have seen on several occasions. A man has stumbled over the edge of a cliff and is hanging on to a single branch extending out from the wall of the cliff. He screams to the heavens, “God! Help me!” A voice answers, “Do you really want Me to help you?” “Yes!” screams the man. The voice replies, “Then let go of the branch.” There is a pause . . . and then the man yells out, “Is there anybody else up there?” It is hard to let go and trust God.

The story of Abraham encourages me: not because he was perfect, but because God was patient. Where are you in your walk with God? Are you making progress in your walk with God? Are you standing still or are you walking forward? And don’t look back—you are not going that way. *I believe God is still calling. He says, “Let go and let’s go. And don’t be afraid, for I will be your shield.”* Do you hear His voice? Will you trust Him?

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<sup>3</sup>“In ancient times the parties solemnized a covenant by walking down an aisle flanked by the pieces of slaughtered animals (see Jer 34:18-19). The practice signified a self-maledictory oath: ‘May it be so done to me if I do not keep my oath and pledge’ (Ronald Youngblood, “Genesis” in *The NIV Study Bible* (Zondervan, 1985)). Whether or not the covenant of Gen 15 does in fact involve the self-maledictory oath is a matter of dispute. The slaying of the animals may simply ratify the covenant without constituting a symbolic curse.