

Genesis 12:1-9

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. 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. 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.’

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 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. 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. And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.

Matthew 28:19-20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

Last week we talked about Noah and the Great Flood. God threw out what God had made and started over. God told the animals to be fruitful and multiply, and promised all Creation that never again would God send a flood to destroy all life.

This week, the focus of the Bible changes, from grand-scale events like Creation and the Fall of Humanity and the Great Flood to this couple, Abram and Sarai, and their family. It’s like the beginning of the movie *The Sound of Music*. The movie opens with a huge wide-angle view of mountains, the Austrian Alps. Then we glimpse a small figure on one of those mountains. We zoom in on that person until Julie Andrews fills the movie screen, walking and singing.

The view from 50,000 feet, stories about the creation of the *cosmos* and universal humanity, changes here to a much more focused, close-up view of one man. “The Lord said to

Abram,..." And the story of this man and his wife and their descendants fills the screen. Even when the camera pulls back later to show more people, the whole rest of the Hebrew Scriptures are talking about the descendants of this couple.

God tells Abram to leave his country and his family and the people he grew up with and the people he does business with and almost all the people he's ever met, and to go to the land that God will show him.

God tells Abram that he will make a great nation out of him.

God tells Abram that God will bless him to make him and make his name great, so that he will be a blessing. God will bless those who bless Abram, and curse the one who curses Abram, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed, through Abram.

Before we go into what Abram does about this, let's spend a moment on Abram and Sarai and their circumstances. They are not a young couple, itching to be out on their own. They are already older people. And they have no children.

Now, we don't know why they had never had children. The biological problem could have been Sarai's, or it could have been Abram's. We don't know. They are the first couple mentioned in the Bible of any species to have trouble with infertility. But they have no children.

They live in a world where there is no such thing as a Social Security check, no such thing as a pension. There is no such thing as providing for your old age, other than having children. And they have no children.

God has told all Creation to be fruitful and multiply, and they have no children.

This is the couple to whom God says, "Leave everything you know and go into this faraway land and I'll give that land to your descendants."

I believe that Abram and Sarai could have been pardoned for some incredulity here.

“Excuse me, God, what descendants? The last time I checked how that worked, descendants required children, and there seems to be a distinct lack of those running around here.”

But, if Abram or Sarai protests, nobody writes it down.

They go. They take Abram’s nephew Lot, and all the servants and slaves of their household, and they go.

God has made a three-fold promise to Abram. God promises him descendants, land, and a blessing. Abram has done nothing special to deserve this, or, I’m sure, the Bible would record it. And this blessing is not for Abram’s own sake. “I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 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.”

Abram is blessed to be a blessing. This blessing is not for his sake, or the sake of his family; the blessing is for the sake of the whole world. Abram, or Abraham, as he’s later known, and his descendants are to be the channels through which God will bless every family on Earth.

This three-fold promise echoes throughout the entire rest of the Bible.

Abraham and Sarah’s great-grandson saves Egypt and the surrounding nations from famine, not through magic or personal power, but through wisdom and good management.¹

We’ll talk about Joseph next week.

When the Hebrew people are called into covenant at Mount Sinai, you remember, the Ten Commandments, they were told that they were supposed to be a “priestly kingdom and a holy

¹ Genesis 45.

nation” for the whole world.² They are supposed to be God’s witnesses in the world. Nations will come to worship God in the Temple they build.³

And we Christians, of course, remember the blessing of Jesus Christ, who was a Jew, a descendant of Abraham and Sarah.

These promises that God makes to Abram and Sarai are not quick things.

They wait many years for a son. So many years that they end up naming him Isaac, or “laughter,” after Sarah laughs at the idea when God’s messengers remind them that their son will come.⁴

The only piece of the Promised Land that Abraham ever owns in his lifetime is the burial plot he buys to bury his beloved wife Sarah. He himself is later buried there, as well.⁵

But Abraham and Sarah believe in those promises. They stake their lives on those promises. They leave the land that they know and their families and go to the place that God says God will show them. They believe in God’s promise of a son, even when it has been years and when they have already made other arrangements by means of Sarah’s handmaiden Hagar.⁶

Abraham believes God’s promises, and he is even willing to sacrifice that son when he believes that’s what God wants, because he knows that God will provide.⁷

Abraham and Sarah live their lives in faith.

² Exodus 19:6.

³ Isaiah 56:7.

⁴ Genesis 18.

⁵ Genesis 23:14-20, Genesis 25:9-10

⁶ Genesis 16, 21, 25.

⁷ Genesis 22.

This three-fold promise, descendants, land, and blessing, binds God to this family. God repeats these promises to Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac, and to his son, Jacob.⁸ They live their lives in faith, and they teach that faith to their families.

God keeps those promises, in God's time.

Abraham and Sarah do have many descendants. Their son, Isaac, has two sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau has many children and his descendants become the Edomites, who gradually fade out of the spotlight of our story. Jacob has twelve sons and at least one daughter. His sons' descendants are the twelve tribes of Israel.

God does eventually give that land to Abraham's descendants, after God brings them out of slavery in Egypt.

The Hebrew people, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, are indeed blessed. In a time and a region of the world where most of the once-great peoples have simply disappeared from the face of the earth, peoples like the Akkadians, the Amorites, the Gumbulu, the Kassites, the Luwians, and many others, the Hebrew people survived. They even seemed to thrive, no matter what anyone did to them.

And they were a blessing to the peoples around them. The educated Jewish people were a great benefit to lands all over the world.

God kept God's promises.

As Christians, we, too, have been blessed to be a blessing. God has made promises to us, too. Our promises are different from Abraham's, though. We have all not been promised a church pew full of descendants. We have not been promised dominion over the land. Or worldly

⁸ Genesis 26:3-5 and 28:10-15, respectively.

wealth. Or good health as long as we live. These are all good things, but watch out for anyone who tells you that God has promised them to you in this life.

But listen to what God, through Jesus, has promised us:

- "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."⁹
- "If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."¹⁰
- "Come unto me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest."¹¹
- "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."¹²
- "I will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more."¹³
- "Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."¹⁴
- "Do not fear, only believe."¹⁵

Abraham and Sarah had faith, faith that God would keep God's promises, even when God wasn't apparently doing it YET. Even when God did not keep God's promises in their lifetimes, they continued to have faith. They continued to live their lives as blessings to those around them. And God kept every one of God's promises to Abraham and Sarah.

⁹ Matthew 5:7, NRSV

¹⁰ Matthew 6:14, CEB

¹¹ Matthew 11:28, CEB

¹² John 14:27, NRSV

¹³ Revelation 21:4, NRSV

¹⁴ Romans 8:39, NRSV

¹⁵ Mark 5:36, ESV

We, who have been blessed just as surely as Abraham and Sarah were, and given even better promises than they were, well, we can live our lives to be blessings to other people, too. We can give money and material goods, yes, but that's not all. We can give mercy, and justice, and respect. We can give others our time. We can refuse to take the dignity that God gave to our brothers and sisters. We can encourage others, rather than criticize. We can love our neighbors, even when they aren't ready yet to love us back.

Because, in the end, we know that God has made us promises, and God will keep them.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN