

“Abraham leaves home”

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Lawrence Park Community Church
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Genesis 12:1-9



This month, we will be spending each Sunday hearing parts of the story of Abraham, who lived just ten generations after the Flood. Why give Abraham so much time? Well, because he is important. Islam, Judaism and Christianity all consider him to be the father of their faiths. Over half of all humanity belongs to a faith that begins with Abraham. ¹He is counted as the first person to believe in the one God. Jews count him as the first Jew.² Muslims count him as the father of their faith because he was a prophet, and an ancestor of Mohammed.³

Dome of the Rock

¹ Brian Maclaren, *Finding our way again*, p.21.

² <https://www.washingtonjewishweek.com/who-was-the-first-jew/>

³ [https://habib.camden.rutgers.edu/islam/abraham/#:~:text=The prophet Abraham \(AS\) has,the prophet Muhammad \(S\).](https://habib.camden.rutgers.edu/islam/abraham/#:~:text=The prophet Abraham (AS) has,the prophet Muhammad (S).)

When Abraham is told to sacrifice his second son, Isaac, he does it on a rock which is now under the gold domed-mosque in Jerusalem⁴. And as we will see, Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, see him as critical for understanding what faith means.

On me

So who was Abraham? He appears in the book of Genesis, ten generations after the Flood⁵. His distant ancestor is Shem, one of Noah's sons (Genesis 11). Abraham was born in the city of UR, in what is now Iraq, in one of the world's first advanced civilizations. According to Jewish and Muslim tradition, his father makes idols to the pagan gods⁶. For reasons unknown, his father decides to move away from Ur, taking his family with him. They move to a place in what is now Turkey. It appears that they are wealthy, and make their money from large herds of animals.

Abraham's name at this point is Abram. He is married to Sarai. She has been unable to bear children, a source of deep shame at this time. Nonetheless, Abram is devoted to her for he doesn't divorce her or seek any other wives. When his story begins, he is 75 years old, so he's had lots of time to leave her, but he decides to stay. Still, they both wish they had had children.

Now, it is tempting to think that Abram is an old man, being 75, especially back then. He must be pretty close to death. However, in the previous chapter, Abram's genealogy lists many men who live for hundreds of years. Is it because they were herders and get their steps in every day? Hard to know. But within this story, Sarai is too old to have children, but they are not at death's door yet.

The reason Abram is important is that one day, out of the blue, he hears a voice. It is God's voice. God tells him that he should drop everything and bring his family to a new land south of where they are living. It is already occupied, but not to worry, God will take care of Abram and his family. This is the voice of the one God, the God we worship. However, Abram has never heard of this God. He isn't one of the ones his father and his society knows. This strange god speaks promises to make Abram the father of millions of descendants. It's a promise that sounds impossible. His wife is barren. It's a promise that means leaving everything he knows behind - his father, his homeland, his culture. But despite all of this, Abraham says yes. He decides to take his wife and his nephew Lot and all their herds to this new land, following the voice of this unknown God.

Why does he do it? Good question. The text doesn't say. You'll note that there are no miracles here, no burning bush or pillar of fire to prove that this strange God has enormous power. There's a promise of millions of descendants, but if that was really

⁴ Bruce Feiler, *Abraham*, (New York, 2002), 4.

⁵ Bruce Feiler, *Abraham*, (New York, 2002), 23.

⁶ Bruce Feiler, *Abraham*, (New York, 2002), 33.

important to Abraham, he could have just married other women. As we'll see later, Sarai wants children, but Abraham doesn't seem too fussed about it. So his decision to follow God's voice is not motivated by intimidation or a deep desire for children. So why does he go?

Have you ever had this experience? When a voice in your head makes a suggestion, out of the blue? When you have wondered whether that voice was yours or someone else's? From our modern perspective, it seems strange that a new faith starts with a man who obeys voices in his head. In our time, that is often the first hint that a person has serious mental health problems. Schizophrenics suffer from insistent voices in their heads that won't let them alone. They often end up either raving on the streets, or suffering silently before they get treatment through drugs. Incidentally, if you know a young person who is starting to show symptoms of this, there are very good treatments if this condition is caught early which can preempt a lifetime of serious mental illness.

But as a minister, I can tell you that it is not only schizophrenics who hear voices. Ministers refer to our vocation as a call, rather than a job. When we interview to become ministers, we are asked about the nature of our call, when did we know that God was calling us to be ministers. Some people say that they have always known they should enter ministry. Others report a time when they heard a clear voice telling them, "try this." They believe that was the voice of God. In my case, the call was more subtle, more of a slow seeping in rather than a big announcement. Still, I have had times in my life when a quiet voice has said, "look over there" or "look into this." It wasn't an order, more of a nudge.

You may have had similar experiences. A time when an idea or voice pops into your head with a message or suggestion that is not what you would have come up with on your own. But how do you know if the message is authentic? That you are not losing your mind? How do you know if it is God calling or some more malevolent voice, coming from inside your mind or outside?

Today's scripture reading gives us a good clue. When God speaks to Abram, he doesn't suggest that Abram harm anyone or commit violence. This isn't like those people who blow themselves up saying that God told them to do it. No, God says that Abram will be blessed.

That sounds good, but God adds that *all* people on Earth will be blessed through him. That's the sound of God. A promise of blessing, not just to Abram and his family, but to everyone. That's how Abram knows that this isn't a mental health breakdown. God isn't making this one man a deal. God is thinking of the welfare of everyone.

And this appears to be what convinced Abram to follow God. He wasn't swayed by promises of great wealth, or intimidated by a miracle. He just had faith, without any proof, that God would make his life better, and make the lives of others better.

Abram's first step has proven critical to the Christian faith. In the early days of Christianity, there was some debate about how to be a good Christian. The people who had come from Judaism to Christianity felt that they were pious because they worshipped in the temple, they said their prayers, they were circumcised, they gave alms. They followed the rules and worshipped properly. But this meant they had a beef with the pagans who came to Christianity. Those people weren't circumcised, they didn't go to temple, they didn't do many of the things Jews associated with piety. So a dispute broke out - how do you know if you are being a good Christian if you aren't doing the obvious work?

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul talks about this, and he invokes Abraham to settle the dispute. He points out that Abram wasn't circumcised when God came calling. Abram wasn't worshipping like a Jew since he was a pagan, and Judaism didn't exist yet. We're not told that Abram did anything impressive to get God's blessing. The only thing he had, Paul said, was faith. Here's what Paul says about Abram's faith:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:18-21)

Abram acts based on faith. He's done nothing to deserve this, he didn't earn it. If he had, he would have received God's promises as fair payment for his good works. No, Abram is chosen without knowing why, and he becomes pious through his faith, which is only later expressed through good deeds. He is subject to God's grace, the undeserved help, and he keeps that grace by having faith, long before he can make any burnt offerings or get circumcised. Faith came first Paul says, as it does for all of us. We cannot do anything to earn the grace offered by Christ. He died on the cross for every human alive, regardless of whether they had ever heard of him or not. And that is still true.

Or, to put this another way, the Abraham story shows that God had faith in us first, then Abram follows God through faith. A faith that sounds more like trust than faith in some idea about the divine. God believes in us enough to offer this man a new path. A God who will show that all the idols are just pieces of wood, people following themselves rather than the God who created the universe. God has faith that we humans were ready for a new stage in our understanding of the universe and ourselves. God starts with Abraham, who is promised so much with no proof any of it is possible. And he accepts. Through faith alone. He trusts in God, even though he has done nothing to deserve what God promises.

And often, when life gets tough for us, it is only our faith - our trust - that provides any glimmer of hope. Everything around may seem in ruins, and we don't see a way forward. We may feel like we are unworthy, that we've failed in too many ways. At that time, let us remember that we are the children of Abraham. We are always offered God's grace, it is not something we can earn or deserve. All God asks is that we have faith in God's blessing. That we trust in God's love for us. And that is sometimes all we have to hang onto, and all we need to go forward into the strange land of the future.

Amen.