

July 27, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

Abraham: The Call To Go

Hebrews 11:8-10

Dr. David Renwick

In the next five Sundays we are going to be looking together at the life of a man called Abraham about whom we've heard in our scripture reading – a man whose life and faith have impacted more people in human history even than our Lord Jesus.

- Abraham stands at the foundation not only of the Christian faith in the Christian scriptures. In the Christian New Testament, in Matthew's gospel and in Luke's gospel Abraham is mentioned as an ancestor of our Lord Jesus; and he is held up by the Apostle Paul in his letters to the Galatians and Romans, as the paradigm of the faith that all Christians are to have.
- Abraham stands not only at the foundation of Christian faith but he stands at the foundation of Jewish faith as well, as the ancestor of all Jewish people.
- And he stands not only at the foundation of Jewish faith but he stands at the foundation of Islamic faith as well both as an ancestor of the Arabs and, as the Qu'ran would say, as one of the first Muslims, even before Muhammad. Abraham is looked upon as a Muslim (Surah 2:65-67). The word "Muslim" simply means "one who submits" to God, to the one true God, the monotheistic God: so Islam holds up Abraham, as I trust we all do too, as one who submitted faithfully to the will of God.

So Abraham is claimed, in one way or another, by each of the world's three great monotheistic religions and they comprise somewhere around 55 to 65% of the world's population: that's somewhere over *three and a half billion* people – so that *three and a half billion* people have some sort of allegiance to this man who is going to be at the center of our attention; *three and a half billion* people who differ in much – and some of those differences are significant – but who are united by this common ancestor whether literally or spiritually, by this single person about whom you and I therefore need to know. And as Christians, we start our quest to know him by turning to the pages of Holy Scripture (there are other ancient Jewish and Islamic writings that we could consider too, if this were more of an academic study: both the Jews and the Muslims have other stories that often overlap, and that come from their various traditions).

So in the next few weeks we are going to be looking at Abraham's faith and story. We're going to do so with the help of our Bible in which Abraham's story begins in the first book, the Book of Genesis, at the end of the 11th Chapter. We are told there that Abraham's family, led by his father a man by the name of Terah, leaves the city in which they have lived, a place called

Ur, on the Euphrates in modern day Iraq, to head north and west to another city called Haran. From archaeological evidence we know that Ur was for its day a modern, sophisticated, cultivated city, a wealthy city. This is taking place probably somewhere between 1600 and 2000 years before Christ, with the archaeological discoveries at Ur going back even further, to around 2,500 years or so before the birth of Christ.

They leave this city of Ur and they travel north into what is now modern day Syria close to the border of Turkey to this new city called Haran, and its in Haran that we pick up the story today about Abraham from the 12th Chapter, the opening verses of the 12th Chapter of the book of Genesis where we read this:

“Now the Lord said to Abraham ‘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.’”

[This is an enormous promise - We’re not going to focus on it today, but we will in the days that lie ahead – an enormous promise which in an amazing way has been fulfilled. There may be parts of scripture where we say, ‘Oh, that’s a stretch to say that’s been fulfilled in this way or another,’ but when this promise was made Abraham was just one. When it was recorded in scripture, the Jewish people, his descendants, were in exile. They could have been obliterated; there could easily have been none at all. And yet this promise in more ways than we can imagine has come true. So the Lord calls Abraham, gives him the directive to “Go,” and then we read in Verse 4 . . .]

“So Abraham went as the Lord had told him and Lot, his nephew, went with him. Abraham was 75 years old when he departed from Haran. Abraham took his wife Sarah and his brother’s son Lot and all the possessions that they had gathered and the persons 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 [modern day Israel and Palestine, the West Bank] Abraham 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 Abraham and said “To your offspring I will give this land.” So Abraham 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. [He is in the region of a town called Birzeit, in which we as a congregation have a long term relationship with a Catholic church called Our Lady Queen of Peace. Near this place where we have present day contact, we read] And there Abraham built an altar there to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And then Abraham journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb [that is, to the desert in the south toward the land of Egypt].

So this is the opening story about Abraham in the pages of Holy Scripture, and this morning I want to make three simple observations about this particular story; I want to draw to our attention three aspects of the story which I think are critical to understanding Abraham and Abraham's God, who is our God too.

- I want us to think about God as a God who calls. Who speaks and who calls ordinary individuals and through that call gives our lives meaning and purpose.
- I want us to think about the God of Abraham who directs human lives, gives directives to human lives, who said to Abraham go, who holds the future in the palm of his hands whether we know what that future is or not.
- I want us to think about the God of Abraham before whom Abraham stopped, just stopped in his tracks, to give thanks and praise and offer the sacrifice of his life in response to the grace that he had found within this God.

Our God was “the God of Abraham” long before the time of our Lord Jesus Christ; before Jesus, our understanding of our God was in some ways defined by, and certainly experienced by this solitary individual – Abraham, forefather of our faith and the faith of many.

ABRAHAM AND THE CALL OF GOD. So let's think this morning about Abraham or begin to think about him first of all in terms of the call of God, the call of God that he experienced. The fact that he believed not only in God, that there was one God, but that this God spoke, and spoke to ordinary individuals like him; and in his case not only spoke to him but called him to become a part of God's great and enormous purposes. How amazing is that?

Do you ever think of how small we are like ants in this huge universe and yet we have the gall to believe as Abraham did that God is interested in us? Knows us by name? Speaks to us and calls us into his plans and purposes?

“Now the Lord said to Abraham Genesis says go from your country and your kindred and your father's home to the land that I will show you.” This is his call. Or in the Letter to the Hebrews Chapter 11, as we heard in our scripture reading: *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive his inheritance and he set out not knowing where he was going.* Abraham obeyed when he was called by God, when God spoke to him and called him.

Many people when they think about God calling people, often limit their understanding to God's call to “enter the ministry” or to “become a missionary.” So they ask, when were you called to enter the ministry or to become a missionary?” I hope that anyone who steps into a pulpit has a strong sense of God's call within their life like this; without that sense of call how in the world would we begin to think about speaking in the name of God? How arrogant that is, — unless God actually calls us to do that? This call to ministry is important, but when we look at scripture and we think about the God who speaks and the God who calls, what we see is that God's call is by no means limited just to those who enter a pulpit or those who travel overseas to be missionaries.

The Protestant reformers, about 400 years ago now, back in the 1500s, as they read scripture, pulled out as one of their central tenets the fact that the God who calls does not merely call people to go into “full time Christian service,” or to earn their living by entering the ministry, but calls people to full time Christian service in all kinds of ways, precisely within the professions that they pursue and the jobs that they do, and in the families of which they are a part. So they took this sense of call and said this applies to every person. Not merely to those who become ministers or missionaries.

In the case of Abraham his call was not to become a minister. There is nothing in the pages of scripture that says he became an ordained minister because of the call! He remained a shepherd. He remained a family person. He remained a soldier who could mobilize his people in defense and in attack. He did not become, in our sense, a minister – but nevertheless he was called, and the 15th century Protestant Reformers emphasized this truth for every ordinary person. Abraham was an ordinary person. You and I are ordinary people, yet “called by God” in our daily lives. And this call makes all the difference when it comes to finding meaning and significance not just in the great things of life but in the mundane things of life, as well.

Reformation theologian John Calvin puts it like this (Institutes, 3:X:6). He says,

This point is to be noted. The Lord bids each one of us in all life’s actions to look to his calling. He has appointed duties for every person in his or her particular way of life and has named these various kinds of livings, “callings.” [We need to see that the way we get our living, the job that we do, should never just be a living being, but a calling; the old Latin word from the Latin word in English, “vocation.” Every person who believes in the God of Abraham has a vocation, a calling from God.]

The Lord’s calling, says Calvin, is in everything the beginning and foundation of well doing; and if there is anyone who will not direct himself to it there will be no harmony among the several parts of his life. Accordingly your life will be best ordered when it is directed to this goal.

The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly.

The head of household will confine himself to his duty.

Each one will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness and anxieties in his or her way of life when he or she has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon them by God. From this will arise also a singular consolation, says Calvin, that no task will be so sordid and base provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.

A half century later the poet George Herbert put it poetically like this. He said,

1. “Teach me my God and King in all things thee to see
and what I do in anything to do it as for thee.
2. A servant with this clause makes drudgery divine.
Who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine.

3. This is the famous stone that turneth all to gold. . .

for that which God doth touch and own cannot for less be told.”

[DR: It changes everything in life if you understand that God speaks, and speaks in particular to you and me as ordinary people and calls us in the path of life that we are to pursue] . . .

The call of God to an ordinary person gives meaning, not only to the great things in life but the small things in life.

Some of you may know the name and the work of a man called Victor Frankl who survived concentration camp in Auschwitz in World War II. Frankl was a neurologist and psychiatrist whose approach to his profession was colored by that overwhelming experience that he had, and by the observations he made in the concentration camp between two types of people:

- (a) Those who survived in a sense with their integrity intact and
- (b) those who were crushed by what happened to them.

I presume he was one of those who survived with his integrity intact – but he looked at these two kinds of responses to the devastation that people faced, and he said “You know, there are two responses, there are two choices that can be made. But the power to make those choices lay only with those who were able to hold onto a sense of meaning and significance, even in the midst of awful terror and desolation and those who lost it. If you lost any sense of meaning and significance, he said you were done, you were gone (your only choice was to resign yourself to the fate handed to you). But if you could hold onto meaning, he said, then you could sometimes even thrive in that terrible, terrible situation.

Meaning and significance for Abraham (and for you and me) comes from knowing that the God of the universe speaks: speaks to us, and calls us to live the lives he’s given to us. [Let me note that elsewhere I’ve spoken about how exactly we discern that call. See “Samuel’s Prayer: ‘Speak Up, Lord’” from March 3, 2013].

ABRAHAM AND THE DIRECTION OF GOD. God is a God who calls. And in the second place, God is also a God who directs. The God who calls also directs. This God holds the future in the palm of his hand, and says to you and me, “Here’s the path, move in it. Go!” says God to Abraham. And “Go!” says God to us as well. Let’s go back to the scripture to the 12th Chapter of Genesis and the 11th Chapter of Hebrews at verse 8.

Hebrews 11: “*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance and he set out not knowing where he was going.*”

Genesis 12:1: “*Now the Lord said to Abraham go from your country and from your kindred and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.*”

The God of Abraham speaks and calls and directs – “GO!” he says not only to Abraham, but to you and me. When the directive came, of course, Abraham had no clue where he was actually going to go. He just knew that there was a future that God had for him and that God knew what that future was, and he needed to walk into it – and in a sense that was enough: that

God had a future for him and God knew where that future was; and he was willing to let go of what held him to the past in order to move into that future with God.

Some people never move into the future with God or with anybody else. They are stuck in the present or they are stuck in the past. Some people move into the future but they never enjoy it. They wish they were somewhere else. But here is this vision that comes from Abraham that God is always speaking to us, calling us, and then directing us to move into the future with God in front, saying “Come on, come on, move forward, move forward with me!” Some do, some don’t.

Sometimes we’re stuck in the past because we won’t let go of something that somebody did to us at some time. We cannot *forgive* because of what happened to us; or we cannot *get over* what happened to us in the past. And through Jesus Christ, God says to us “Let that go so that you can move with me into the future that I have for you.” Counselor Amy Botwinick says this about people whom she counsels who have passed through a divorce (but it could be said about any who have gone through any major ruptured relationships in personal life or in business life). She says this:

I can spend five minutes with a person and tell right away if they are going to move forward or stay stuck. With someone who is still angry you can feel the negative energy radiating outward because this person has allowed bitterness to become his or her whole life. It consumes all thoughts and is all he or she can think about. (quoted in, *6 Steps To Get Over Bitterness* by Kimberly Dawn Neumann, in [www. match.com](http://www.match.com))

“I can spend five minute with a person she says and tell right away if they are going to move forward or stay stuck” – tell right away if they have a future and they want to move into that future, or if they are held and grasped by something in the present and the past which stunts their growth and stunts their move forward.

God’s direction though, the direction and directive of the God of Abraham is always forward. “Go, set out, move forward, and I’ll be ahead of you. You may not know where you are going but I do; this is where I want you to be. I’ll take care of the past. I’ll take care of all of that, the injustices, the unfairness of it all, the pain of it all, the loss of it all, that here I am. Will you move with me?”

Last week Quinn spoke about what it’s like to be in exile and drew attention to the fact that in its history the people of Israel lived in exile some 5-600 years before the birth of Christ and they had a choice to make in exile. Do we simply lament our past (though there is lamenting to be done)? Are there things to be held onto from the past? Yes there are – and we don’t let go of everything. We are formed and shaped in large part by the past. But do we believe that God is here in the present and in the future? “Oh yes,” says the prophet Jeremiah in the name of God, “You must believe in that!” And in the 29th Chapter of Jeremiah gives us enormous Abrahamic type promise and commitment. God says “*I know the plans I have for you – plans for good and not for evil to give you a future and a hope. To give you a future and a hope!*”

This is what Abraham had: a future and a hope. Not based on his own life but based on the God who holds the future in the palm of his hands.

Some people have not only no future but they have no hope – and if that’s a picture of your life then there are questions that you have to ask about your life and you need to balance them still, though with what God says to Abraham to go. No future, no hope?

- If it is overwhelming, if it is part of your experience every single day, so that you cannot get out of the bleak bubble that you live in, and every other thought is painful, then what I need to say to you is that you need to think seriously as to whether you not only have depression, but clinical depression, depression that you need to speak about with a physician. I’m convinced that God’s directive word to you is the same as his word to Abraham: Go! Leave behind any sense of shame (there is no shame in depression), leave it behind. And Go! Speak to somebody who clinically knows how to help you.
- Some of you may have little hope about the future because you have been through something which is traumatic and you’re not ready quite yet to move into the future. You hope you will be able to move ahead in the future, but you’ve had a loss, a grief which is still overwhelming in your life. To you too I would still say “Go!” Go to a friend; go to a counselor. It may seem trite but it’s true: “a problem shared is a problem halved.” Go! Speak to someone in the body of Christ. This is what God calls us to do in fellowship with one another. The word is still “Go! Move into the future!” . . . Carefully and shrewdly, to be sure, but go to someone and share it.
- But having said that – that there are real difficulties in life; that there are clinical issues in life; that there is real grief in life – Having said that, what is also true is that there are some who will not go into the future because they have bought into a faithless and a pessimistic frame of mind, in which everything is always negative, in which nothing is possible. Sometimes, when we are at our worst, for example, we say things like this:

What do I have to look forward to? the future is empty for me; there are no solutions to my problems; I’ll never get over what happened; I’ll never get back to the way I was; there’s nothing I can do to make things better; there is no point in trying; I only see things getting worse in the future; everything is going downhill; it is too late for me!

And we allow those thoughts to lie within our hearts and minds until they dictate the course or outcome of our life.

. . .Whereas Abraham had another word that filled his life, and dictated his direction. Was it, “Everything’s going downhill? Too late for me?” Was this what Abraham said?” Even at age 75 that answer was “No, no! Not too late!” Not too late. God says at every stage in life in some way, shape or another every stage in life “GO! Move on. Let go.” Yes there’s much to hold on to, but let go of those things that stand in the way, between you and the God of Abraham, and move on with him, whether the movement is spiritual or relational or geographic or financial or

. . . Move on with God. I may not know where the future is but God does and in that, like Abraham, we must grow and trust.

ABRAHAM'S RESPONSE TO THE GOD WHO CALLS AND DIRECTS. Abraham found meaning and purpose in his life and a sense of confidence in the midst of much that he did not know, believing in God's call and God's direction – the fact that God had a future for him and would share it in due time. As a response to this great gift of God, this knowledge of who God was, the God who speaks and calls and directs, who holds the future, Abraham made sure that from time to time he stopped: that he just stopped and turned his whole attention to this God in an act of worship, an act of sacrifice.

We find this response of Abraham in our passage on a couple of occasions. When Abraham comes to the land of Canaan he passes through the land to the place that God took him, to the oak of Moreh. We read (12:6-8) that

At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to your offspring I will give this land so Abraham built there an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him. And he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel

. . . and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord.

Abraham was a man moving on his way, but in the moving there was a “stopping” and a “pausing” – as you all are doing today in being here in church: a stopping and pausing before the presence of this God, who called and directed and spoke to an ordinary person such as Abraham. And we have been called and directed to do this too. We're doing it today but this is something we as followers of Jesus Christ, and as those who learn from the faith of Abraham, should do not only one day a week, but day by day in our lives.

From the age of 13, not every day but almost every day I've set aside a time. I was taught this in Sunday school to set aside a time for God. We called it a “Quiet Time.” A quiet time, every day with God. Doesn't always work out. But most days it does. At times it has been a duty but at this stage in my life I count it as a privilege and something I could not live without.

Pastor Rick Warren sums up what's involved in a quiet time very simply in six brief statements (<http://ministrytodaymag.com/index.php/ministry-life/prayer/19879-rick-warren-quiet-time-should-follow-a-simple-plan>). He says,

(1) Find a place to be quiet. Just a place to be quiet. In a noisy world just be quiet before God. (2) Pray briefly he says then (3) read the scripture. Don't have to read a lot. You'll find all kinds of Scripture reading plans on the web. Read the scripture. (4) Think. Meditate. And then he says, (5) Write. Write something. Not an essay, just write something down to get what's in here out there. (6) And then pray again. Very simple. A little daily practice that could take 10 minutes, 15, 20, half an hour but do it. Stop! And in that action offer yourself as a sacrifice back to God.

The God of Abraham, the creator of the universe

- Speaks to simple people like you and me as he did to Abraham.

- Calls us in our lives. Gives us meaning and purpose,
- Directs us into the future that he holds in the palm of his hand, before whom we should bow in praise and adoration.

What a life! What an impact he made and makes! Just a person who did what God wanted him to do – and such will be true of your life and mine as well if we follow in his path.

Let us pray. Holy God we bow before you amazed that you should hear us but grateful that you were and are the God of Abraham so we have confidence that you will speak to us and call us and guide us as we set out day by day to move into your future. Amen.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2014 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/~natio100/sermons>
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800