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The National Presbyterian Church

Abraham: How to Get it All

Matthew 6: 25-34, Genesis 13:1-18

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In our sermons through August we are thinking together about a man called Abraham who fills a prominent role in the pages of Holy Scripture. We are looking at his life, his faith, his example – this man who lived a long time ago, somewhere between 3,500 and 4,000 years ago, who has arguably impacted more people in human history than anybody else, because he stands not only at the root of our faith as Christians, but at the root of Judaism and Islam as well. All of these faiths look back in some way shape or form to this man called Abraham.

- We find his story of course in Genesis, the first book in the Bible – fifteen chapters in the middle of the book are dedicated to the life of this one man. We find him referred to in the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament: in books like the book of Psalms or the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah.
- Abraham is mentioned there and in other Jewish writings outside of the Bible – in the Talmud written in the period of the first four centuries or so after the time of Jesus and in what we call the Midrash (the Jewish commentaries on the Old Testament scriptures).
- We find him mentioned in the Quran itself, and in stories that surround the Quran
- And we find Abraham mentioned, in addition, of course in our Christian New Testament (primarily in the Gospels, and letters to the Galatians, Romans and Hebrews).

So all, over the place, this man Abraham is mentioned, repeatedly, in different faiths and in different ways. And it becomes very clear from our New Testament that even in the time of Jesus, not beyond Judaism but within Judaism (of which he is by the flesh the ancestor) there was an ongoing debate as to his role, as to what place he had, and who he belonged to. The question as to who Abraham belongs to is not a new question; it's as old as the hills and it's internal to ancient Judaism, just as today it is external to it in the Christian lives and Muslim lives as well.

So you go back to the beginning of the gospel of Matthew into the third Chapter and you find the great figure of John the Baptist, before Jesus' ministry begins, you find John the Baptist baptizing his fellow Jews down by the Jordan River. And when they come they surely would have come from the various groups and sects that were thriving in ancient Israel at that time: Maybe some were Sadducees, upper crust guardians of the Jerusalem temple –unlikely, but there might have been some. There'd certainly be Pharisees; there would have been scribes. There could have been some folks from the Qumran community or from the Essenes. There might have been some Apocalyptic folks who lived in the north of the land). They came from all over, we

are told, to be baptized by John the Baptist who wanted to bring people to repentance in preparation for the Messiah. And John the Baptist, we read in Matthew Chapter three, doesn't mince his words with them. He commands them, saying, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance! Bear fruit worthy of repentance!" And then he adds this: "*Do not presume to say to yourselves*" (which assumes, of course, that they did presume to say to themselves!) . . . "*Do not presume to say to yourselves 'we have Abraham as our ancestor' for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham*" (and if you go to the land of Israel you'll find stones all over the place. They are everywhere: God can, he is saying, raise up numerous descendents of Abraham even from these stones. If we were to summarize John the Baptist's words I'd say something like this: no one has the right, "no one has the right to claim descent from Abraham merely by birth alone." This is what he was saying to these people who wanted to claim him as their own: that, you cannot do that unless there is also some moral similarity in your life to the life of Abraham, unless there is some spiritual similarity in your life to the life of Abraham. "You've got to bear fruit!" says John the Baptist. In other words, you've got to *look like* Abraham in some way shape or form, *follow* him in some way shape or form, in order to claim to be his descendant.

And we find this discussion which was going on *before* Jesus' ministry begins, also going on *after* Jesus' ministry, in the life of the apostle Paul and in his writings in the New Testament. So some 20-25 years after the time of John the Baptist, the apostle Paul writes a letter to Christians in a place called Galatia, modern day Turkey. And he also writes to Christians in the city of Rome.

- As he writes to the Galatians, in the third Chapter, he says this. He says those who believe, who look like Abraham because they have the same kind of faith as Abraham, are the descendents of Abraham.
- And then later, in his letter to the Romans, he writes "No! Not all of Abraham's children physically are his true descendents." So Jesus is very much following in the line of John the Baptist.
- But then there is this what we might call moment of hesitation. In the 9th Chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, there's a moment of hesitation where Paul says to himself "Ah, this business about physical descent I can't quite get that out of my mind. So in Romans Chapter 9 this is what the apostle Paul writes. He says

"for I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh [DR: that is, I don't understand why they have not put their trust in Jesus Christ – those who were born as descendants of Abraham.] I wish I were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites and to them [DR: because of their physical descent] belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises, to them belong the patriarchs [DR: And who are the patriarchs? Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham belongs to them by the flesh, physical

descent] *and from them according to the flesh he says comes the Messiah who is overall God, blessed forever.* In other words, the Apostle Paul writes as if to say, “I know that to be a descendant of Abraham is not about physical descent but, yet, on the other hand, it is!” It’s about faith and it’s about following in his path, but I can’t quite get out of my mind that those who are physically descended from Abraham are somehow still in God’s plans and purposes. After wrestling with this for about three Chapters, Paul ends this little section of Romans at the end of the 11th Chapter by this exclamation: he says, *“O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God how unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways”* As if to say, “I think I know God pretty well, but I can’t quite figure this one out. I can’t quite figure this one out. How do I put it all together?”

And it’s hard to put it all together when it comes to figuring out who exactly are the descendents of Abraham, because there are so many issues involved, so many tensions involved in making a claim to this relationship: tension between a promise which seems to have no necessary response attached to it, and accountability. Tension between physical descent and spiritual descent. Tension between nature and nurture, between flesh and faith, between heritage of a-particular-people and God’s passion for the whole-wide-world.

All of these tensions are there in the story of Abraham and in the interpretation of his story, the understanding of his story for your life and mine. And these tensions which have been there throughout the history of the Christian church are as we all know there within our world today, the very world which we live in today some 3,500 – 4,000 years after Abraham lived in the ongoing history of our world and in particular that little corner of the world that we call the Middle East. All of these questions, all of these issues are at play today as they were in the past.

Now let me say (in order to save my political skin!), that I decided to preach on Abraham not just as things began to erupt in the Middle East. Rather, it was about six months ago that I decided to preach on this particular story today This has happened to me on quite a number of occasions over the years. Things just happened to be erupting there just now. And what I have to say certainly has something to do with what’s going on there.

So the promises are made to Abraham and the question is what is Abraham’s role in the Middle East today and in our lives as well but in the Middle East today, especially where there are some Jewish people and many American Christians who are saying that the promises to Abraham, the linkage to Abraham is very clear. We know who his descendants are. We know that the promise of land is a promise that still stands today as ever it did. And all of this is to be fulfilled quite literally today through the State of Israel. There are many people who look at this scripture and that is their conclusion.

Now I quite deliberately said that some Jews and many American Christians but some Jews because it’s very important for us to know that not all Jews think this way. Indeed there are some Jews especially in the State of Israel who have very little interest in Abraham at all. If you go

back to 2010 you will find the Israeli newspaper [PH] Jajaritz speaking about a recent census in the State of Israel which pointed to religious affiliation. And the result of the census pointed out by [PH] Jajaritz the newspaper was this: that less than 30%, less than 30% if Israeli Jewish adults have any deep religious convictions at all. Less than 30% have any deep religious convictions at all while on the other hand over 40% would regard themselves as secular; 40% would regard themselves as secular. Many people forget that the State of Israel was not founded to begin with by those who were religious. That if you go back over the past 100 years secular people, some Socialist, some verging on being Marxist founded the State or, before the State of Israel but came to the land of Israel to begin their life as a Socialistic experiment on the Kibbutz and the Kibbutz scene. So this is a heritage and much of that is continued. So 40% have no religious affiliation at all. They don't care a hoot about the Bible; they don't care a hoot about Abraham. But that still leaves 30% who do and they take it very seriously. This claim to be descended from Abraham and the promises to bless him and his descendants after him and to give to them the land and so part of the issue relating to the settlement, part of the issue relating to the West Bank, everything that's going on is related to this one figure back in history some 3,500 to 4,000 years ago.

So it behooves us as Christians knowing that this is going on it behooves us to understand the Bible as best we can, complicated as it may be to understand the promises to Abraham as best we can complicated as it may be. Both because of the present situation but more than that and I certainly want to take us back to more than that, because the presence of this man Abraham and his role has been of major significance to the Christian faith from that time through the time of Jesus up until our time today.

So what I'd like to be able to tell you this morning is this: that in the time that we have together and let's say I've got another ten minutes, I'm going to unravel all the secrets of who Abraham really is [LAUGHTER] and you first heard it from me. [LAUGHTER] When nobody else has been able to do this since the time of our Lord Jesus Christ. So since you won't want to stay for all of that I've decided just to tackle one issue. One issue and one issue only from the life of Abraham from one very simple story whose message I think is patently clear. One simple story about Abraham and one part of his significance for your life and mine and perhaps beyond that to the world in which we live from the life of Abraham. And I want us to turn to Genesis Chapter 13 and to look at the story that we find there in order to do this. I want us to think about the link between God's promise and accountability. The link between God's promise and behavior. The link between God's promise and response that we hinted at or I hinted at in those passages that I read as the sermon began.

Let me put it like this to summarize what I want to say I would put it like this. If you want it all, if you want all that life has to offer, if you believe that God wants you to have the best of everything then you don't get it by grabbing it – then you don't get it by grabbing it. Even if you believe that God gives it to you, you do not get it by grabbing it. If you think that you are God's chosen people and let me remind you this is not just about the Jewish people. It's about us Presbyterians. We've always thought of ourselves as the elect of God. Isn't that part of our

heritage? God's chosen. We have been chosen by God. So it's not just a Jewish thing, it's a Christian thing too. Given promises by God, treated as children by God. If this is who we are how are we to respond? Is there room for pride? The answer from Abraham is to be our answer there is not one wit of room for pride. Indeed this is cause for humility. This is cause for sacrifice. And this is cause for generosity. Descendants of Abraham whether physically or spiritually this is who Abraham was and we see this, we see this in particular in the 13th Chapter of the book of Genesis. Let me tell that story to you and set the scene. In Chapters 11 and 12 Abraham launches out. He doesn't set out to become a minister. He just sets out to do what God wants him to do. And to begin with, with his father and his family he leaves a town called Ur of the Chaldees. It's a wealthy place, we know from excavations. It is a place filled with idolatry, it's filled with culture, and Abraham and his family leave and go north west from what is now modern day Iraq to the north of Syria, on the southern border of Turkey, to a place called Haran. And God says to Abraham "you're going to leave again!" Speaks to Abraham and calls him to go. And Abraham responds and he heads south.

Abraham is given this promise by God: "I'm going to show you a land. I will show it to you. Go to the land that I will show you." And there is something in the voice which indicates that the unknown path to head onto is south. So Abraham goes through what is now Lebanon. He goes down through the state of Israel and he keeps on going to the desert all the way down to Egypt. Down in Egypt he does not behave particularly well (see Genesis 12:10-20). Abraham, like many of the saints in the Bible, is a flawed character. And this is really important to remember (in fact we'll see this more clearly next week in looking at Genesis 17 and 18). But Abraham goes down to Egypt and then he begins to move north again to the land that God is going to show him. And today we pick up the story at the beginning of Genesis 13 where we read,

So Abraham went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and (his nephew) Lot,
[DR: the only family member and Lot's family who comes with him from Haran]

into the Negeb desert. Now Abraham was very rich in livestock and silver and in gold
[DR: God had blessed him physically in all that he did].

He journeyed on by stages north from the Negeb Desert, as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning between Bethel and Ai

[DR: and if you're looking at the news that's just north of the town of Ramallah, the headquarters of the Palestinian government],

to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abraham called on the name of the Lord. Now Abraham's nephew Lot also had flocks and herds and tents so that the land could not support both of them living together

[DR: "blessed," but then trouble comes, even because of the blessing. Abundance sometimes brings trouble with it: the land cannot support both of them together]

for their possessions were so great that they could not live together. And there was strife between the herders of Abraham's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock

[DR: internal dissension within the family. In the story of Abraham, by the way, there is very little external dissension. Abraham seems to live well with others in the land he's been promised;

for the most part he seems to get on quite well with those “external” folks, but the real danger he faces is now the possibility of internal dissention. And this is when Abraham does something which is absolutely stunning and amazing. So the herders are fighting with each other that there isn’t enough land. And Abraham takes the initiative]

And Abraham said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me and between your herders and my herders for we are kindred. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me.”

[DR: He doesn’t say “I’ll take what I want and you take what’s left over.” He says]

“If you take the left hand then I will go to the right hand. Or if you take the right hand then I will go to the left.”

He gives to Lot the choice to make. He gives to his lesser, his *nephew* the choice to make. Now this is an absolutely stunning action, a stunning statement, a stunning offer. God has singled out Abraham, he hasn’t singled out Lot. God has singled out Abraham. Abraham is the one whom he has honored. And he has promised him a special place in history, in time and in space. He’s promised him a place; and in return, Abraham has followed God. He has left so many things behind. He has sacrificed his life for God. He has left his country and his family behind and he has done what God wanted him to do, and he could so easily have turned to Lot, his nephew, and said something like: *“Lot, young man! I’m God’s chosen one here. You just happen to be coming along with me for the ride! I’m your senior. Show me some respect. Tell those herders of yours to get off my land. This is what God has given to me. This is the best, and I want, in fact, I deserve the best! I don’t just want it I deserve it. I am God’s person here.”* But he doesn’t say that. He doesn’t say that to Lot. He could have said it, but he didn’t.

Instead Abraham lays no claim on God. He makes no reference to what he has done for God. He places no heavy hand on Lot. Instead, he simply says, “You choose!” In a sense he just lets it go; gives it away. And he does this because he doesn’t “see” what he’s done for God. Rather, he “sees” only what God has done for him, and what God will continue to do for him. He sees his life as a gift. He sees the promise as a gift that he did not deserve and did not earn. He sees the call of God, tough as it was, as a gift that gives his life has meaning and purpose. He sees the direction to go as a gift from God. There is no claim there. There is no right there that is to be asserted. There’s just an assurance that if this is who God is, a gift giving God, then God will remain that God as he fulfills his promises, as he maintains his relationship with Abraham his friend.

And Abraham trusts this God and his promise, and is willing to give the contents of the promise, the land, away. The promise and privilege set him free to be humble and not proud. The promise, and the promise-making God, set him free to be generous and not greedy; set him free to be concerned for another and not only for himself, to be honest and not manipulative; free to maintain his integrity and his character; or, as Jesus would say his “righteousness.” Free to maintain his righteousness! He didn’t have to abandon it! To claim the promise was not at the

expense of losing his righteousness – even at the moment when he was on the point of losing everything contained in the promise, – if Lot chose the land that was “best.”

Business guru Steven Covey says this about human relationships in organizations. He says (*Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, p. 21)

If I try to use human influence, strategies and tactics to get other people to do what I want, to work better, to be more motivated, to like me and each other while my character is fundamentally flawed then in the long run I cannot be successful. My duplicity will breed distrust in everything I do and if there is little or no trust then there is no foundation for permanent success. In the short run, in a social system such as for example a school or a place of work [DR: or anywhere with relational politics going on!] you may be able to get by if you learn how to manipulate the man-made rules, to play the game, to make a favorable impression through charm and skill and by pretending to be interested in other people. Eventually, though, if there isn't deep integrity and fundamental character strength then the challenges of life will cause true motives to surface and human relationship failure will replace short-term success.

Keep your integrity! Don't lose it! It's the most precious thing you have.

Jesus puts it like this (Matthew 16:25): “*Those who seek to save their life will lose it and those who are willing to lose their life for my sake will find it.*” Or, in our scripture that we read earlier today and with which our service opened (Matthew 6:33), “*Seek first the Kingdom of God, and God's righteousness (that is, God's way, God's rule, God's community); seek these things first, and all the things you really need,*” says Jesus, “*God will take care of them*” – precisely because God can and wants to!

So back to the story. What is Lot to do? He's given this choice. “You choose,” says Abraham, and Lot looks over everything, and he picks what he thinks is the very best. Leaving, or so it would seem, Abraham in the lurch, with nothing much for himself. Except God! Abraham has God (or, better, God has Abraham!), who speaks to him again, and in speaking to him again assures him that nothing has changed. That the promise still holds true, and God will honor the promise even as Abraham has honored him. As if to say “Abraham, you get it. My promise isn't meant to make you proud but to give you a peace that comes from trusting me.” God knows that Abraham is far from perfect. But here he has shown the faith and the trust that God looks for in life, not only from him but from us too, and, indeed, from all who claim Abraham as their ancestor:

The Lord said to Abraham after Lot has separated from him, raise your eyes now and look from the place where you are northward and southward and eastward and westward for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. And I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth so that no one can count the dust of the earth your offspring also can be counted. Rise up; walk through the length and the breadth of the land for I will give it to you. So

Abraham moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Marmara which are at Hebron and there he built an alter to the Lord. Genesis 13:14-18.

Gratitude to God. Sacrifice before God. Worship of God. Not pride or greed or possessiveness. This is what God calls of us. This is not everything that there is to be said about Abraham; so much of the story remains complex, as does history. How does all of this play out in life in all its varied circumstances? The answer is “I do not know . . . in ALL its varied circumstances. But, this much I know: the 13th Chapter of Genesis is clear. And its story and message is one that we can apply to our lives, and, I trust, to the broader world in which we live: The promise of God is not meant to make us proud but humble; not to make us grabbers but givers; not to give us a right to abandon basic human goodness, but to demonstrate it, as we keep trusting the one who is the giver of whatever we need, and who longs, in the best sense, to give it all to us.

Let us pray. Holy God we bow before you and our hearts go out to this world that you love which is in so much pain. We pray for your peace even as we pray for ourselves that in our part of the world wherever you send us wherever you call us we might find your strength to be faithful, generous and gracious; to be faithful, generous and gracious followers of Abraham even through our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

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