

Called: Patriarchs
Genesis 12:1-5
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This week, when I looked back at the schedule I came up with for these messages many, many months ago and realized that my task this week would be to cover the entirety of Genesis 12-50 in about twenty minutes, I did what our great mother Sarah did—I laughed. Then I laughed again because I realized that after looking at this amazing and also very dysfunctional family, we would all feel a lot better about our own families in the process. Maybe things aren't so bad after all.

So let's not waste any time, shall we? These are rich accounts, stories that have profound impact on our lives because the questions they pose are questions that we need to ask today. Can God still do the miraculous? Can God bring faith out of dry places? Can God bring life out of barrenness?

Given the fact that all three matriarchs in the stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs struggle with infertility, we can see that the rest of Genesis is a story about barrenness and God's promise of blessing and the struggle to believe in the face of waiting and doubt and hardship. God makes promises; does God still keep those promises? What is the promise God has spoken over your life, what is the promise God has spoken over my life, and will God keep these promises? Maybe it's a relationship that has dried up, or the hope of a job or spouse that feels like it will never come. Maybe your hope is for your children to come around to a realization of hope. Maybe your worry is whether your children will know the love of God.

These are the questions that Genesis 12-50 asks over and over again, the struggle to live in faith in the midst of hardship and struggle and to keep the promise alive. I hope you will read these stories, maybe you already have. I know there are at least three of you who have told me that you are already through Genesis in a year-long Bible reading plan. So I better start saving if I'm going to take all these people out to dinner when they're done.

So let's meet this family, shall we? Turn with me, if you will, to Genesis chapter 12 and we'll begin reading at verse 1 through the first part of verse 5. And as a sign of respect for the reading of God's Word, I invite you to stand with me and read aloud Genesis 12:1-5, and when I'm done reading I'll say, "This is the Word of the Lord," so that if you believe it to be true, you can respond by saying, "Thanks be to God." Listen carefully; we're reading God's Holy Word.

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. And 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 him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves." 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. And Abram took Sar'ai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions which they had gathered, and the persons that they had gotten in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

The family we read about lived over 4,000 years ago. No way anything they experienced could be anything like what we're going through today, right? Maybe. In many ways, yes; we don't live nomadic, shepherding lives. But maybe when God steps into Abram and Sarai's life while they were in a place called Haran near Canaan, God chose to step into the middle of the drama, into the middle of the struggle. We have to look back to chapter 11 verse 30 to see that Abram's wife Sarai **was barren, she had no child**. And knowing wives and husbands who themselves struggle with this condition, the wait, the late nights awake in prayer, the longing for life to break into their family, we realize that Abram and Sarai, even in their old age, are relatable people.

And so in their old age – and I think this is key, because if they were young and unable, one might think it was just a matter of trying a little more – Abram and Sarai are not only childless, but physiologically it doesn't look good for them. But here God calls Abram, and tells him that he's going to be a daddy. So clearly the call of God comes with a high premium in the faith department.

You know, each encounter God has with Abram in these chapters God says something like: "Hey Abram, I'm going to send you out," and Abram says, "Where?" God says, "I'll tell you later." Then God says, "I'm going to give you a land," and Abram says, "Where?" and God says, "I'll tell you later." Then God says, "I'll give you a child," and Abram says, "How?" and God says, "I'll tell you later, just wait."

And so far as I can tell, all that is required of Abram is just to believe. This call and promise is just to believe, and it's demonstrated by Abram and Sarai's capacity to leave what is familiar and simply follow a plan that is essentially going to unfold as they go.

God calls them to set out on a journey, but doesn't tell them where they are to go. I wonder, if God doesn't tell you where you're going to go, how do you know when you've arrived? And if a baby is the promise, usually it helps if a baby comes at some point to show that the promise is being kept. And yet, years go by and nothing, nothing but a promise and a call to be faithful.

I have a friend who is going through a time of transition in his life right now, and he is awaiting word back about a job that he hopes will become a reality, even though the company is still creating the position. *Will they call, or won't they? Did I interview well or not?* You know, sometimes in waiting – whether it's for a girl we've just asked out on a date to call back, or a potential employer to contact us so we can go from having a mountain of confidence to, "they'll never call" – we're brutal on ourselves in the face of silence. **What the story of Abram and Sarai shows is that more often than not, living faithfully with God is more about patience and persistence in waiting than it is about having the answers.**

God makes Abram and Sarai wait a long time. Then finally, after years of silence after God's initial call, God steps back onto the scene and inserts a promise, a covenant. The silence is ending.

Moving on to chapter 15, we see God gives the next step in his unfolding promise to Abram. I love the way the writer of Hebrews reiterates the promise in front of them: **So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.** And the way God does it is with something called a Suzerain Treaty. It's sort of an easy story to overlook, but essentially a Suzerain is a promise made by a Lord or a King with his vassal or citizen. The suzerain opens with an identification of title, and a description of how the suzerain has been faithful in the past as a way of securing the trust of the vassal. Verse 7: **I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.**

Then come the stipulations and the ratification. Usually treaties were ratified by the slaying of animals, which were divided in half and laid open, in Abram's case a heifer, goat, ram, turtledove, and pigeon to be exact. Then each party walks between the animals reiterating the terms of agreement, that if I don't hold up my end of the bargain, I am as good as this dead meat. Now, this may sound sort of brutal, kind of Game of Thrones-esque, except that there is one important detail that is important not to overlook. Look with me at verse 12 and then again at verse 17:

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

Come again? Abram's asleep, and instead of him walking through to ratify the covenant, we see a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between – which if you stay tuned to the story in weeks to follow, you will learn is actually the very presence of YHWH which leads the people through the wilderness desert. In the covenant God makes with Abram, God ratifies himself by standing in for him, and acting as a substitute for himself for the obligation of consequence. Saying, “I will be faithful even if you, Abram, and your family, and any of your descendents do not uphold your end of the covenant.”

This is really remarkable, this is the Gospel in this passage, this is grace, the God who enters into relationship with the people in this story is essentially telling Abram and his descendents, “Listen, in this agreement we're entering into today, I am going to assume full responsibility if its conditions are not met. I will assume all consequences in the face of unfaithfulness.” What is truly beautiful about this passage, and why it is so important not only in this moment but in every story of God's people, down through the ages from Moses to Elijah, to Jeremiah and Daniel and the community in Exile, and finally to the person of Jesus, **God is a God who will, time after time, offer himself as the faithful**

substitute for his people, for you and for me. When we don't trust, when we are unfaithful, when we let God down, God never does. God is always faithful.

I find it ironic that immediately after this story of such unimaginable and extravagant grace, you have the story of Ishmael. Rather than trusting the plan, living in the covenant, so often we try to take hold of our futures. We try to be the one to manufacture the blessing rather than allowing it remain in the faithful hands of God. You can imagine Abram's logic here: "Well, maybe it's not really about Sarai, maybe it's just about me, and maybe Hagar could stand in and it could happen this way. Yeah that sounds like a good idea, let's go with that."

But what we see is that when we grab hold and move God's plan along on our own, what we often end up doing is just grasping at straws. We need an anchor. We need something to hold us, something that is immovable, something unchanging. The passage I read a little earlier tells us that the promise that was made to Abram is this steadfast anchor for our souls.

Have you ever had to use an anchor? Growing up, my parents had a boat, and every so often we would take our boat out onto the Mississippi or St Croix Rivers, and if you're not familiar... lakes, don't move; rivers, move a lot. If we wanted to stop and eat our lunch or maybe fish in a spot for a bit, we had to become well acquainted with the anchor. Rivers ebb and flow, and putting the anchor down into the water won't do it. You have to put the anchor down into the bedrock of the river, and only then will the river not assail us.

You have to put your anchor down into something that is unchanging, something that's not a circumstance, something stronger than water, stronger even than the rocks at the bottom of the Mississippi River, and that is the promise of God. Abram was able, albeit imperfectly, to live faithfully because he was able to sink the anchor of his heart into the promise of God, which is unchanging.

We all have little plans we try to enact to move God's plan along or circumvent the circumstances we're in, **but the key to life is learning to wait well, and in waiting well, we finish well. Sinking our hearts into the bedrock of God's promise and then waiting in it.** The promise of God is about Abram and Sarai, but it's not only about them. Later in Genesis, it says that Abram and Sarah are blessed, so that they will be a blessing. **And this is it: God is the one who works, not us. God blesses, we receive. All we have to do is wait in him, see the work of his hands, and share in that abundant blessing with others.**

Of course, we don't have time to go into the rest of the stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. But the key to reading the rest of the stories of Genesis is to watch the hands. There is a strong human tendency to become desperate, to doubt whether God's plan is enough, and so we grab and push and manipulate others to get what we want.

Isaac's son Jacob comes out of the womb grabbing at the heel of his brother Esau, and goes on to manipulate his brother and his dad time and again to gain his older brother's birthright and his father's blessing.

Jacob will go on to have twelve sons who do their own fair share of scheming and grabbing. They grab at who's best, who's the favorite. And their fear and mistrust almost drive them to murder their brother Joseph. Instead, they throw him into a well and eventually sell him to slave traders who take him to Egypt.

If that were the end of the story, what a sad story it would be, but that's not the end. Fortunately, there are also some really wonderful stories, like Jacob who wrestles with God and wins, and in so doing, God gives him a new name Israel, which literally means one who wrestles with God. And Israel would time and again embrace and bless his family. Embracing and blessing his brother Esau, and embracing and blessing his children in forgiveness for what they do to Joseph. Joseph is able to embrace and bless his brothers when they are reunited in Egypt.

Through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed. Life from barrenness, hopelessness to promise, waiting to blessing and grace. Read the stories. God calls us, God equips us, God is patient with us when we screw up, and God blesses us so we can be a blessing. These are our stories; this is our life, amen.