

Genesis 12:10–20, The Beginning of Hope in the Promises of God: A Life of Abraham, Preached by Michael Gunn @ Harambee Church on January 13th, 2008

“But the picture we get of these men and women (In Genesis) is uncomfortably human. There is so much marital conflict and sibling intrigue they almost forfeit the call and fumble the promise. Yet the storyteller refuses to clean up his act. This is the amazing thing about the people of Genesis. The more we talk about them, the more they look like the people we know, faces in the mirror.”

Bill Moyer

Intro

And so it is. As the above quote from Bill Moyer reminds us, Genesis is an accurate account of humanity. Usually the victors tell important and heroic stories about their heroes, but here in Genesis are strugglers like the rest of us. The fact is, 3000 years later, humanity hasn't made that many advances in being human. I know many people feel that humanity has become more compassionate, and that our current global village is making us more caring, but reality and statistics do not seem to be bearing this out. We have more access to one another than we have ever had, yet world violence, wars and genocide have actually increased in that same period of time. Man's technology brings comforts and destruction all at the same time. We have become better and more efficient in making coffee, listening to our music, and killing one another.

Last week we saw how God reveals Himself and calls us into a journey with Him. It is a journey into the unknown, and it's a journey to build our faith, and rebuild an intimacy with God as our only source of joy. It is interesting to see how Islam has approached today's story. I believe it highlights the large differences that separate the gospel story from religious epics. In the gospel story, Abraham is a pagan idol worshipper in need of salvation from a sovereign God who calls him out of his sin, and into a relationship with God. Within the journey there are many bumps from choices that a sinful man makes in his life. In the story of religion, or in particular Islam, Abraham is imperfect, yet capable. He is chosen because of his strong moral character and his own innate reason. In Islam the story of Abraham is reinvented around this idea. In Islam, Abraham is not only a worshipper of Allah, he is against any kind of idol worship from the beginning (See Quran; Surahs 3:95; 6:74-79; 21:51-71; 26:70-82). In Islam, Abraham is a prophet and one of the key figures in the Quran. They cannot be spoken of in any derogatory way, because Islam, like every other religion is concerned about what man can do to be accepted by God, while the gospel teaches that we are accepted (Through Christ's work on the cross) and then we obey. There is no real need for salvation in Islam because man can attain it through the keeping of Shariah (Quranic Law). One of Islam's great scholars Azizah Y. Al-Hibri says that, *He (Abraham) came to the idea of the one true God through reason, even though he was imperfect.* As much as he admits imperfection, he also says that Abraham was chosen because he spoke out against idolatry. So in their idea of election, God chooses those that are morally strong, while the gospel story chooses men and women who are morally bankrupt and are in need of God's grace to redeem them, and their maladies. This is a fundamental difference between the gospel story, and religion.

From the Head...

Last week we saw that the person that God chose to be His progeny was barren, which is the condition of the human landscape apart from God. In our text today, we see that there was a *“Famine in the land.”* Our journey with God is one of peril, because life *“Under the sun,”* is a life of futility without God (**Ecclesiastes 1:14**).

What's interesting in our story is the fact that Abraham was about to become a “Sojourner.” The word used here has the idea of a “Resident Alien”¹ (see **Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11**), who has no legal rights or protection, but is allowed in the land to do their business. It is a dangerous place, but possibly profitable. We too are called into Egypt to avoid the famine, and we too are called into the land as “Resident Aliens” to create a world where alternative values are lived, taught and passed on to our culture. Paul gives us the metaphor of an ambassador to further that kind of image. This is not a formulation of a fortress, but the church is called to be a beacon of light to the culture, and that has to be done in the culture, yet separate from the moorings that anchor the culture. It is engagement without syncretism. If we are called to “Go,” which it seems as though we are (Matthew 28:19), then we need to go with a mentality that sees ourselves as resident aliens,; sojourners in a land that's not ours. We represent the kingdom of our Father, not the kingdom of our fathers.

The bigger question I have in regards to this story being included (Actually included 3 times; **20:1-18; 26:1-11**) is why is it here? It certainly isn't flattering to one of the most revered figures in western religious history. It certainly shows us the humanity of Abraham and biblical characters, but why is it included in God's story of redemption? I think there are a couple of things that we need to learn from this.

1. Sometimes we need to take a trip to Egypt in order to experience Cana

¹ This term is coined by Stanley Hauerwas in a great book entitled, ***Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony***, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN. 1989

Every major epic in God's redemptive story involves Egypt. Abraham went to Egypt, Joseph was sold into slavery and went to Egypt, Moses left Egypt, then went back to deliver his people from slavery, and Jesus went to Egypt. Egypt represents paganism, and idolatry, yet its integral to the gospel story. The fact is, we are not called away from Egypt, but are often driven right in the midst of it. Abram was called from his place of rest to a place of famine. We likewise are called by God to mission, not to comfort and status quo. We desire a land of "Milk and Honey," but every major movement in the scripture circumvented it for a time in the wilderness. Part of our growth comes from our experiences in the wilderness, and that wilderness involves a jaunt into Egypt, and a confrontation with the culture.

2. We can't jump start the promises of God on our own terms

There are some who believe that Abraham did what he did to protect the promise of God. I don't know if that is true, because it is conjecture, but we do know that at least two times Abraham² asked Sarah to pose as his sister in order to protect himself. We also know that Sarai was his half sister (**Genesis 20:12**), which means that Abram wasn't directly lying, but in his culture, this is deceptive, and in our culture cowardly. There are Islamic interpretations that indicate that Abram was actually divorcing Sarai because there are ancient divorce statements that say, "*You are no longer my wife; you are a sister to me.*" Either way, the act is odious even to the Pharaoh. Instead of trusting God and His promise, Abram tried to create God's will on his own. He later does the same thing when he accepts Sarah's proposal to have sex with Hagar.

In spite of God's ostensible harsh interventions of God, I believe we see an act of God's grace. He uses illness to keep Sarai safe, and save Pharaoh's court from a despicable act.

...to the Heart

When God calls us into His mission He calls us into the realization that this is His world, and He is providentially involved in the lives of His people, and the lives of the places that He calls us to. The world is primarily split into two theories of knowledge. The first is known as Monism, which espouses an idea that everything that is all there is. There is no knowledge or reality from the outside. The second theory is the one we see in Genesis, which develops a worldview that has God as its creator, and Himself as its sovereign king. The question that remains is, "Is there something outside of our sphere of understanding, or not?" Our story shows us a God who is involved, who cares and who loves His people, and it also shows us a God who will not accept injustice, and does act in behalf of the weak and the oppressed. What understanding of God do you hold to? What understanding of this life shapes your life? Are you in control of your world, or are you a player in a world created by a sovereign God?

Books for further study: *Genesis*, Walter Brueggemann, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Genesis*, Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, Bruce Waltke, *The Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, Gordon J. Wenham, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, John H. Walton, *Creation and Blessing*, Allen P. Ross

Next Weeks Verses: Genesis 13

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² He did it once as Abram (**Genesis 12:10-20**) and once as Abraham (**Genesis 20: 1-18**).