

FRESH START - ABRAHAM - KEEPING RESOLUTIONS  
A SERMON BASED ON GENESIS 15:1-21  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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SUNDAY, JANUARY 21, 2018  
10:00 a.m.

In Genesis 12 God called Abram.

God said to Abram, 'Leave.'

Your country. Your people. Your father's household.

Leave, and go.

Go to the land I will show you.

God took full responsibility for the outcome.

It was for God to fulfill.

God gave five I will statements in the call,

which makes the call to Abram also a promise.

"I will make you into a great nation

I will bless you.

I will make your name great,

I will bless those who bless you.

I will curse whoever curses you.

You will be a blessing.

All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

In this call there was nothing for Abram to do except go.

For us, leaving everything, trusting God

believing God,

sounds feasible, possible, acceptable,

if we could have the kind of promise,

the kind of assurances,

the kind of guarantee that Abram had.

If God would just guarantee that we would be blessed...

If God would just guarantee that he'd make our name great...

If God would just guarantee that we would be a blessing...

then sure,

leave the storage container,

clear the stuff out of the basement,

eat up the food in the freezer,

give away the old toys, the furniture,

give up the job, the networks, the people

and go to the land God shows you.

Abram had God's guarantee.

Abram had God's 'I will's

Abram had the advantage.

If had that, then yeah, sure.

Or so we like to think.

Abram was 75.

Most 75 year olds I know are considering how to land the plane,  
not trying to fuel it up for the next adventure.

A friend of mine, my exact age,

is working with his wife to have a baby.

It's been a struggle for them.

They are going to give it another go with medical help.

I think, oh good Lord, no!

A baby at 49!

I don't want that kind of fresh start.

Leave your country Abram, your people, and your father's household

go to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation.

You will be a blessing.

The name Abram means 'Exalted Father'.

It is almost a mockery of the man.

Seventy five years old and childless with the name Exalted Father.

With this message from God

Abram had to have struggled, wondering if could believe God.

This is where I gain courage from Abram's example.

He did it.

He left.

As the Lord told him.

He let his country, his people and his father's household all go.

He left and set out for the land of Canaan,

to God's intent for him.

He let go of control of what he had,

to take hold of what God intended for him.

I've stopped sermons there.

It's a good place to stop the story.

Abram went.

We should go too.

Faith, obedience, trust, courage, belief.

These are the things God calls out of the righteous.

So when God calls, go, like Abram

Abram left Haran, western Syria, and made his way to Canaan,  
modern Israel.

He built an altar there.

But the Canaanites were still there.

God spoke to him and said, 'one day.'

I will, but not yet.

So Abram kept moving.

He crossed into the Negev region.

In modern geography it is the eastern side of the Sinai Peninsula.

There was a famine.

So Abram made his way to Egypt.

Egypt often had food when other didn't,

because of the Nile and its rich Delta,

Abram, having received God's not yet,

started to make his own way.

Upon entering Egypt he came up with a plan.

Knowing his wife Sara was beautiful,

and figuring that he'd probably be killed

so someone could take her as his own,

Abram came up with the plan that they'd tell everyone

Sara was his sister.

He wouldn't be killed that way.

And sure enough when Pharaoh's officials saw her,

saw that she was desirable,

they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace.

This likely means Sara became part of Pharaoh's harem.

Pharaoh treated Abram well for her sake,

and Abram acquired sheep and cattle,

male and female donkeys,

male and female servants,

and camels.

So, based on his lie,

and at a price paid by his wife,

Abram's wealth grew.

He was making his own way.

It lacked faith.

It lacked integrity.

But he was making his own way.

Pharoah's household came down with serious diseases.

It says the Lord inflicted them because of Sara.

When Pharoah learned that Sara was married,

he kicked Abram and Sara out of Egypt,

sending them with all they had acquired there.

They all went back through the Negev to the area between Bethel and Ai.

North of Jerusalem and west of Jericho.

Here, back where he had built the first altar,

reminded of his call, and God's 'I will's

now very wealthy, but still without a child

Abram 'exalted father' had circled back around.

The wealth shared between Abram and his nephew Lot had become so great, that they had to split the tribe apart.

The flocks were too big to support them all.

The herdsmen were fighting between each other for grazing land.

The Canaanites and Perizzites were still in the land.

Abram let Lot choose first.

Lot took his people and herds east,

down to the plain of the Jordan,

obviously the better land.

Abram built another altar at Hebron,

kept his options open with God

as God kept making promises.

Down in the plain of the Jordan where Lot was,

there was a Game of Thrones moment happening.

Four kings against five kings,

think a war of tribes,

all in the plains,

and in it all, Lot was carried off,

along with all his possessions.



Getting word of this,

Abram gathered up over 300 men and went to get Lot.

He did.

He defeated the four kings.

Abram brought Lot and all Lot's possessions home.

The leader of the five kings came out to meet him.

The king of Salem also came out to meet him and bless him.

'Blessed be Abram by God Most High,

Creator of heaven and earth.

And praise be to God Most High,

who delivered your enemies into your hand.'

Abram was a political force now too.

He was entitled to keep all of his spoils of war.

But instead, he rejected it,

not wanting someone else,

like the king of Sodom to take credit for his wealth.

Abram would make his own way.

So he said to the king of Sodom,

'With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the Lord, God Most High,  
Creator of heaven and earth,  
that I will accept nothing belonging to you,  
not even a thread or the strap of a sandal,  
so that you will never be able to say, "I made Abram rich."  
I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten  
and the share that belongs to the men who went with me.'

This is where today's text began.

'After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.'

The Lord who said 'go from your country.'

The Lord who said I will

make you into a great nation, bless you, make your name great,  
bless those who bless you, curse whoever curses you,

The Lord who said to your offspring I give this land.

The Lord who said, 'look around from where you are

from north to south, from east to west

All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring  
for ever.

I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth,

so that if anyone could count the dust,  
then your offspring could be counted.

Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land,  
for I am giving it to you.'

The word of the Lord came to Abram,  
who had just defeated four kings  
to Abram who had just walked away from the spoils he deserved  
who was wealthy enough and confident enough  
to let his nephew have first pick of choice land  
to Abram who was crafty enough  
to make his wife his sister and walk off  
with some of Pharaoh's wealth,

The word of the Lord came to this wealthy  
defeater of kings  
to this man making his own way,  
taking control of his future.

You might expect words of warning.

Don't forget me.

Don't be arrogant in your success.

Don't think you did this on your own.

You might expect maybe words of explanation.

Why it is taking so long, this promise.

You might expect even words of repetition.

This is the land I am giving you.

But that's not what God says in the vision to Abram.

God said

'Do not be afraid.'

I am your shield.

I am your very great reward.'

Do not be afraid.

it begs the question.

What is the wealthy, defeater of kings, resident of the promised land,

the maker of his own way,

possibly got to be afraid of?

Abram is transparent with God.

Sovereign Lord, what can you give me

since I remain childless

and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?’

Abram said to God, ‘You have given me no children;

so a servant in my household will be my heir.’

Lord what can you give me?

You have given me no children.

Abram is afraid,

that what God has promised will not happen.

Abram is afraid that God’s words have been empty words.

Abram is afraid that he is going to have to keep making his own way.

He can generate wealth.

He can defeat kings.

But he can’t make a child.

So the question lurks.

God, what can you do for me?

There is no heir.

What can you give me?

What can you give me that I can't get for myself?

God said 'Don't be afraid.

I am your shield.

I am your very great reward.

God said, Eliezer will not be your heir,

but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.

God took Abram outside and said,

'Look up at the sky and count the stars –

if indeed you can count them.'

Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'

This leads us to "a moment" in the Bible.

Genesis 15 is a "moment."

This is a 'Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.' moment.

This is a 'I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse.' moment.

This is a 'You can't handle the truth.' moment.

It is a defining moment.

This is a Bible passage that you will hear other Bible passages quote.

In Romans.

In James.

In Galatians.

In Hebrews.

Because it is a moment that echoes across generations  
to us.

God said, a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.

God took Abram outside and said,

‘Look up at the sky and count the stars –  
if indeed you can count them.’

Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’

And the moment.

Abram believed God and God credited to him as righteousness.

This is a conversion, a transformation, a pivot.

This is a moment of transition from control to call.

It is a moment from determining and authoring and controlling  
one’s own future and one’s own path,

to accepting and receiving God's call  
and God's control and direction and path.

Abram believed God.

Whenever you hear the word believe in the Bible,  
you need to beef up that word from how we use it.

We throw it around lightly.

Can you believe what Trump said this week?

I can't believe it.

Except he did say it. And you do believe he said it.

So the word believe has become just a way to express  
what you think, or what surprises you,  
or what passes through your mind.

Believe in the Bible is a word of weight and substance.

Belief is something that will hold you.

Today's word believe, says,  
'oh yes, I believe that chair will hold me.'

The Bible's word believe says, 'have a seat'.



It is the difference between intellectual ascent  
and deep trust.

Abram believed God, and God credited it to him as righteousness.

This is belief that can hold weight.

This is belief that will determine or change a path.

This is belief that will risk, trust, try and maybe even  
in that hardest of moments in faith,  
wait.

But even here, in this 'moment', Abram still questions.

Which gives us the confidence that if the father of faith has questions,  
maybe it isn't a sign of weakness that we do too.

Abram asks God,

How can I know that I shall gain possession of the land?

How can I know?

How can I know that your 'I will's will come to be.

How can I know that you will follow through God?

I believe you.

How can I know?

God adds his own weight to Abram's moment.

And it becomes a God moment

God adds assurance to Abram's acceptance.

my making a covenant.

It is now God's moment.

And one of 'the' Bible moments.

God has Abram get a heifer, a goat and a ram as well as a dove  
and a young pigeon.

Save the birds, these were cut in two  
with the halves laid opposite each other.

Abram fell into a deep sleep,

and God gave him a picture of a long difficult road ahead.

But a road to be travelled by Abram's  
very own descendants.

Then a smoking fire pot with a torch,  
which almost every interpreter will say represents God himself,  
passed between the pieces.

In ancient times,

a binding agreement was made,

when the two parties passed between these halved animals.

The sentiment was

“may this be what happens to me

if I break my promise, the covenant.”

This was a sitting down to sign the treaty.

This was a signature on the contract.

Except God didn't need Abram to walk through.

God made and would keep the covenant,

entirely independent of Abram.

On that day,

the Lord made the covenant with Abram.

One signature. It was on God.

And Abram, 'Exalted Father'

would indeed become Abraham,

'Father of the Multitude'.

We are afraid.

We want control.

We want to have and provide wealth and security.

We want to ensure outcomes.

We want to make it all okay, eliminate pain and eradicate suffering.

We want to make dreams come true,

to effect justice, and to create a future of promise.

But even when we have control,

or a semblance of control,

or the illusion of control.

The questions can haunt.

God, what can you give me?

God, how can I know?

God how can I know that your call,

your promise,

your covenant,

with me is trustworthy.

What can you give me?

God's willingness to walk through the halves

of sacrificed animals,

and not even needing Abram to walk with him

to make that covenant

it is a moment that assures us of God's character and intent.

There is another moment in the Bible.

Another splitting in two,

this time a curtain in the temple

which opened and revealed the spot where God dwelt,

the curtain to the Holy of Holies,

torn in two at the moment of Jesus' sacrifice

and death on the cross.

There in the middle, was God himself revealed.

The sacrifice and the covenant.

God what can you give me?

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

God how can I know?

John further wrote,

This is the testimony:

God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God

so that you may know

that you have eternal life.

We want control.

But what we need is to hold onto, remember and grip our call from God.

Who is our shield.

Who is our very great reward.

For when you have God

a God who promises himself to you,

you never need be afraid.

That it isn't going to work out.

God has made covenant.

God has given himself in Jesus Christ.

God has torn open the veil.

And he is your very great reward.

Believe God. Trust God.

It will be your righteousness.

Amen.