

**Sermon: February 21, 2016 – Lent II – Genesis 12: 1-9**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Our Hebrew Scripture reading for today's worship service contains the promises to Abram and Sarai. The question that will guide the message this morning as we engage these verses is, "whose story is it?" That may seem like a strange question, but I see at least three answers to the question.

- The first possibility is that the story is what it appears to be: it is Abram and Sarai's story, the story of a most unlikely pair to be chosen to be the parents of the promise.
- The second possibility is that this story belongs primarily to the people of Israel – for it is a story that defines their origins as a people, their relationship with God, and their claim on a land, all explicitly stated in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis.
- The third possibility is that it is a story that is less about Abram and Sarai and the promise of land, and more about the God who makes the promises.

So with that structure laid out, time to get back to that first possibility: that our focus in considering the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis should be on Abram and Sarai.

For many of us who have come to Canmore in the "second half of life" there is a resonance with a couple who left their settled life when Abram was in his mid-70s and Sarai in her mid-60s. The book of Genesis makes a point of telling us that this was a permanent move, they brought everything and everyone attached to their household. As one whose garage is still largely a "moving box garage" rather than a "park your car in it garage," I feel a special connection with this couple who were called to leave the predictability of hearth and home for something else.

The Bible speaks of this couple as settled and prosperous. They weren't needing to move because of war or famine, there is no suggestion that they were itching to relocate. In their present location they were surrounded by kinfolk, while the vague location to which they were called was far removed from all that. This must have seemed like the most unwanted and unnecessary call – they had built the life for themselves that they'd wanted.

What's interesting, though, is some other stories and traditions about Abram suggest that things might not have been as smooth as they seemed. The Jewish Talmud speaks of the unique piety of Abram, as related by Jewish author Nissan Mindel:

"At the age of three... Abraham recognized that there was, is, and will be but one G-d, the creator of heaven and earth.... Abraham was the one and only man on earth who knew G-d and worshipped Him.... Soon the 'G-d of Abraham' came to be known by more and more people. Every man who left Abraham's tent, and every woman who left Sarah's tent, had learned something about G-d, and went away blessing the 'G-d of Abraham.' Even to this day, when we address ourselves to G-d in our...prayer three times daily, we pray to the 'G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac and the G-d of Jacob.'"

Perhaps this unique piety enabled Abram and Sarai to pick up everything and follow, without question, when God called. If these folks were, in essence, early evangelists of a generally unknown God, this could have been the guidance they were looking for.

And yet... Abram and Sarai were childless. That was a problem in that patriarchal culture, but an even more acute problem when the promise that God is making to you is a promise of descendants. In today's reading from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, Abram and Sarai are promised, "I will make you a great nation." That promise implies that you will have children to carry on your name, so why not choose someone who already has at least a child or two... or if picking someone currently childless, choose someone in their 20s rather than their 60s or 70s.

For me, then, Abram and Sarai represent people who did not let themselves be limited by circumstance. They allowed neither the attitudes or their society or their own self-understanding or even the biological realities of their bodies block them from doing things that sounded ill-advised and perhaps even impossible. Abram and Sarai could think of dozens of people more likely to succeed in this venture than them, but they had spent enough time in God's presence to be able to discern God's calling, even if it seemed ridiculous or futile. And furthermore, they offer no resistance to the call, no counter-argument, immediately beginning the process of assembling their goods, enlisting the assistance of their nephew

Lot, and heading out for a destination unknown. They let go of the predictability and consistency that many of us yearn for in life, in favour of a holy disruption that would change every element of life.

The second approach to this story I have a bit more trouble relating to, but is way too important to leave unspoken. In the faith life and the national understanding of the people of Israel, our ancestors in the faith, the call to Abram and Sarai and their faithful acceptance of God's mission is nothing short of the establishment of a people.

And indeed, God's promises to Sarai and Abram were not just personal, they were national: "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great," says Genesis 12:2. And when they had travelled as far as Shechem, God has them look around and says, in Genesis 12:7, "to your descendants I will give this land."

Later in the book of Genesis (ch.22), the promise is reiterated, and strengthened.

The right for the people of Israel to occupy land, then, specific land, is embedded within the covenant between God and Abram, sealed at the altars of Shechem and Bethel. But it begs the same question for me now that was raised by a classmate back in our seminary days: "what about the Canaanites, though? God promised land that already had people on it."

In these days when us "settler" Canadians are searching for a helpful way forward with our first nations sisters and brothers, this divine gift of already-occupied land makes us uneasy. And if we wish to further complicate matters (and why not, let's make it as messy as we can), as we muse on God's promise of numerous descendants, we must recall that Abraham fathered two children, not just one. The Jewish nation looks back to Isaac, child of Sarah and Abraham, while Arab and Muslim nations look back to Ishmael, child of Hagar and Abraham. Without getting into all the details, surely this impacts the promise of land to Abram and his descendants?!?

As one who struggles to understand how and why nationalism is such a force in our world, I search the words of Genesis 12 looking for the silver lining. And I do find a point of some hope: Genesis 12: 3, "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed," implying that the gift of land is offered with hopes that Abram and Sarai's descendants will evolve into the kind of nation that draws people closer to their loving and eternal Lord. The blessing that is to result is for ALL families, not just THEIR family.

Much as I don't get that kind of territorialism and nationalism, at no point do I wish to trivialize the huge struggle for territory in the Holy Land. For them it is far more than just political – it ties in to their relationship with God, founded in promises that go back nearly 4,000 years, in addition to the partition plans drawn up after the genocide of world war II. I lament that differing understandings of God's intentions continue to contribute to the bloodshed over land claimed by many peoples of many faiths. I offer my prayers, that all who live on the sacred lands once known as Canaan may some day be blessed with the sound of weapons falling silent.

So we return to our initial question: in the final analysis, whose story is this? Is this the story of Abram and Sarai, unlikely candidates for the promise? Is this the story of a nation born, and the land of Canaan forever and always given to Abraham and Sarah's descendants?

Or is this more God's story, than a story about human actions and reactions?

I'd like to show you a music video clip that shifts the focus from the ones receiving the promise, to the one who makes the promise. It expresses Abram's wonderings, and then Sarai's wonderings, about the promises that God is placing in front of them. The song is called "Who but You" (performed by Mark Hall and Megan Garrett of the Contemporary Christian group, "Casting Crowns...") (watch from 0:45 to 3:50 of [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmfEM6lb\\_jM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmfEM6lb_jM) )

In the lyrics of this song both Abram and Sarai ask God the same question: "Who but you would ever choose to dream your dream in me?" And while that may seem to keep the focus on Sarai and Abram and their limitations, for me it turns it around because it's not THEIR dream that's being lived; it is GOD's dream that unfolds as they live their lives.

Last November, you may recall that I discovered a new favourite preacher. His name is Dr.H. Beecher Hicks Jr, "Senior Servant Emeritus" at Metropolitan Baptist Church in Washington DC. In an essay entitled "Maybe God's trying to tell you something," Dr. Hicks wrote,

**“In trying times, it is important to listen for the lesson and hear the voice of God within it. The task ... is not to see God in our stories but to imagine our story in God’s, learning somehow to see our humanity in divinity.”**

God invited Sarai and Abram to be blessed, not for their own benefit but so that God’s goodness could be seen by others. God offered Sarai and Abram the promise of land and descendants, not so their nation could stand on a pedestal, but so that God’s beautiful vision of Shalom would have a place to dwell. God stepped over everything humans would consider impossible to say, “in YOUR story, that might be impossible, but in MY story, nothing is.”

When I invert my thinking in this way, and, to use Dr. Hicks’ words, “imagine my story in God’s story” it jolts me out of any sense of God’s blessings being given as a commodity to reward the righteous, and moves me into a much more communal understanding of the love of God. When we perceive life – my life and all lives – as participants in God’s goal of universal love, life changes. If I view the story of Abram and Sarai as God’s story – whether I understand God in personal and personified terms, or as the power of love in the world, or as the power of Spirit in the universe – the promises of God start looking a lot less like a contract, and a lot more like pure blessing.

However we take it, the story of Abram and Sarai carries much for us to ponder. May God’s love be known in our understanding and our living. Amen.

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+ TODAY’S PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE...

God of the pathway, God of the seas, we pray for all who are at pivotal times in life’s journey.

We pray for all who are making big life decisions: decisions about career, about relationships, about medical options, about downsizing or making a big move.

We pray for those nearing the end of life’s journey: those in hospice care, those at bedside, those making difficult end-of-life decisions, and those who mourn prior losses.

We pray for those at the beginning of the journey: moms seeing first ultrasounds, newborns and their freshly-minted parents, with a special prayer for those who need supports that are not yet in view.

We pray for those who are literally on a life-and-death journey at this moment, seeking escape from Syria or Libya, often by sea. We pray for surrounding nations who struggle with the rush of desperate newcomers, and for peace in their homelands.

We pray specifically for our refugee family in Lebanon who look forward to a new home once their paperwork clears. We pray for the volunteers here in Canmore making things ready.

And we bring you our prayers, Holy One who journeys with us, laying before you the deepest concerns of our hearts...

As we move through life, bring us together in you, and in that spirit hear our family prayer, saying:  
The Lord’s Prayer