

## A Humble Beginning

Sermon by John Strommen on Genesis 12:1-9 Sept. 16, 2018

In this opening sequence from the “Sound of Music,” did you notice how it begins with a sweeping shot of the majestic Austrian Alps with a woman in the distance? Then the camera zooms in for a close up of the woman – Maria – who is singing and dancing. And the camera will stay on her, for this story is going to be about her, one particular person whose story suddenly takes center stage.

This opening shot is very reminiscent of our lesson today about Abraham. The first eleven chapters of Genesis is big, like the Austrian Alps, very cosmic in scope: God creates the heavens and the earth, God sabotages a skyscraper built by the people of Babel, God sends a flood to cover the earth. God created everything, entrusted human beings to take care of it, watched as we messed things up, then responded with retribution.

In chapter 12, the camera lens moves from a wide-angle panoramic lens to a zoom lens and a very tight focus, from the global to the particular. God decides to begin a movement through one person, Abraham, who will become the father of a nation.

People have always wondered “why did God choose Abraham?” What made him so great? There’s nothing in his profile to suggest such a lofty appointment.

Winston Churchill had his own way of saying it. He once said about one of his rivals that “he was a humble man with much to be humble about.” Well, Abraham didn’t seem to be anybody special, either.

The way this story is being told, zooming in on this seemingly insignificant man from ancient Mesopotamia, also tells us about God’s emerging character. As we learned last week, God has decided to never again flood the earth to kill the life he has created, no matter how messed up things are on earth. On the contrary, now God intends to get up close and personal with the troubled children he has created and work with them. And it starts with Abraham.

It says God just started talking to Abraham. He asked Abraham to get up, leave his home, and go to where God was going to lead him. OK, this is all well and good – except for two things. Abraham is 75 years old, not the greatest time to hit the road and wing it, *and* he and his wife Sarah have no kids. Didn’t God mention descendants?

How would you feel if you were Abraham?

These verses are so important. This is where the Bible, the Judeo-Christian story really begins. Israel won’t be a nation yet for many generations, but it has to start somewhere, so Abraham is the start of it all. He is “Father Abraham” for Jews, and the “father of our faith” for Christians, our first role model. When God said, “pick up and go,” Abraham picks up and goes in faith; and continues to follow God’s leading and believe his promises - with a few stumbles along the way.

However, in this story today, Abraham is not the main actor - God is. God makes three promises to Abraham and states a grand vision, bigger than the Austrian Alps!

1. God says to Abraham that he – God – will make Abraham’s name great and that a great nation will come from him. That nation is Israel.
2. God will give Abraham’s descendants land, the land of Canaan, the original “promised land.”

3. Abraham and his descendants will be blessed by God. And they will be blessed *in order to be* a blessing to all the families of the earth.

*Why?* Why is God doing this? Because God just thinks Abraham is really cool? No. The answer is found in promise number 3: the promise of a nation, of land, of continual blessings is not just because God wants Abraham's descendants to have good things. All these good things are *for the sake of the world and all the people in it*. This is a huge move God is making here. God is choosing to have a personal relationship with an ordinary person with all kinds of flaws in order to start a movement and change the world. This movement, this chosen people, will be a testament to the God who cares, who seeks to reconcile the world to himself. And so, God will bless his creation instead of drowning it. God's purpose is global, but it's accomplished one person at a time.

Do you see where you fit in?

Abraham and can either have faith in God's promises or not. But pay attention to what faith means here. Faith is not just intellectual assent, "sure I believe in God. I agree with all the stuff the church says about God." No. Faith means following with your whole life because faith *is a relationship* – a relationship of with God.

The reason we are here today is that this same God has called out to each of us personally - to bless you so that you will be a blessing to others. And our response is *faith*. Living in a trusting relationship with God day by day. That's what church is.

Abraham's story is also a vision for the future - *our future*. We at Mt Carmel have been led to four strategic priorities as a part of our vision for the future and present, and the Abraham story points the way with all four.

They are 1) growing faith, 2) growing faith together, 3) responding to God's callings to you, and 4) blessing our neighbors.

Again what was Abraham known for? Faith. The father of our faith. For any Christian church, and certainly for Mt Mt Carmel, we are in the faith business, aren't we? That is our first priority. You've probably heard me or Paul Lathrop or someone talk about "faith practices."

How many have heard us talk about faith practices? Raise your hand.

How many are really excited about this?

How many are not sure what this stuff really is?

How many really don't like this faith practice stuff?

Let me ask you a question. Anyone here play an instrument or a sport at any point in your life? Did you ever, or do you ever *practice*? Why? To get better at playing that instrument or that sport.

You do faith practices to grow your faith, which is learning how to develop your relationship with God, to trust God more and follow his leading, and like Abraham, it's not just believing certain things in your head. It's following with your life!

Those practices include what?

dwelling in the Word,  
 praying,  
 learning about God and discussing it with others,  
 sharing hi's and lo's with each other,  
 sharing how your faith journey is going with someone,  
 sharing what you're grateful for,  
 discerning what God wants you to do,  
 practicing hospitality.

Part of growing our faith happens when we're at home or alone. We will soon be sharing a congregation-wide initiative to help all of you build your faith in the privacy of your own home through devotions, prayer, and some other activities. The truth is, faith practices might sound intimidating to some of you, but practicing alone at home is a bit less so.

Let's move on to number 2, growing faith together. God promised to Abraham that he was going to be the father of a great nation, a people. Why? Because in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we are a people first, individuals second. Yes, God works through us individually for sure, but there's a reason it's God's chosen people, not God's chosen individuals.

Our vision is first, growing faith, but it continues: growing faith *together*. The power of the Holy Spirit among us multiplies exponentially when people are in community with one another, practicing the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints – you and me. That's why you will see more and more opportunities for you to be together with others in learning or serving or discovering capacities. As we know from our fireplaces, an ember by itself will lose heat quickly, while an ember with many other embers will hold onto its heat much, much longer. This is why we need each other to grow our faith. And it doesn't mean if you're an introvert that you have to become an extrovert. True community allows space for both introverts and extroverts and values each one.

Third, God calls each of us to certain tasks and empowers us to respond. Even though Abraham was an ordinary man, God called Abraham and formed a partnership with him. God decided with Abraham that God would work through regular people to accomplish his purposes. It worked with Abraham only because Abraham had faith and knew where the power was coming from! It's no different with us: God calls each of us into partnership with him. All we do is have faith and offer our gifts and God does the heavy lifting. So that's why we have the GPS course, which starts on Oct. 11. It's all about discovering how you're gifted and what God might call you to do with your giftedness.

Fourth and finally, Abraham was blessed to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. We, too, are blessed at Mt Carmel, and our blessing does not end here. We are blessed to be a blessing to our neighbors. How do we bless our neighbors? There are many ways, but it surely involves listening to them, getting to know them, finding common cause and community with them. This is what the Lord is

up to and for us to discern. Neighborhood Night Out and Carmel fest are good starts to sending a signal to our neighbors that God's blessing is for them, too.

One really important thing that we will discover in all this: our neighbors will bring a blessing to us, too. It's not just about the blessing we bring, because God is loose in the neighborhood already. We're not bringing God to them.

So, Abraham's story and ours are about faith, together, being called, blessed to be a blessing. Amen.