

13 July 2014

Foundations: Abraham and Sarah
Genesis 11-22

God started over with Noah. The earth had become so corrupt that God had loosed the waters of primeval chaos to wash it clean, but he still loved the world, especially that most frustrating of his creatures, humanity. So he saved Noah and his family. Then he blessed them and told them to start over, which they did. They went out into a world of promise and promptly rediscovered every sin, every crime, every shameful act. Like the first man and woman before them, they set out in arrogance to make themselves like God. “Come,” said humanity in the plain of Shinar. “Let us make bricks and build ourselves a tower. We can build it to the heavens and make ourselves a name.” So they began building together. God sighed. With a gentle breath, he blew over them, and the congregation of arrogance began speaking different languages. That was all it took. The slightest misunderstanding, and suddenly people were filled with suspicion and distrust. They divided into factions, excluded those who were different, learned to hate those they could not understand, and scattered throughout the world, each group seeking a place away from those barbarians who spoke those other languages. God shook his head. It didn’t matter what they did; he was still going to love them. But he would have to find some way that they might understand by which to show them that. So he decided to start again with just one man, one man to whom he would show himself more clearly, who could then teach others. The man he chose was named Abram.

Now this Abram was already a middle-aged man, married to a lovely woman named Sarai, living in the land of Haran – part of what we call Syria. God spoke to Abram, saying, “Abram, I want you to leave your home and family and everything you know and go to a new place, which I will show you. And there I will make you a great nation and bless all nations through you.” And Abram said, “All right.” Perhaps that was why God chose him. Or maybe that was *how* God chose him – by saying that to people until he found one who said, “All right.” Either way, Abram and Sarai packed up and moved south toward a land called Canaan. They had no children of their own, which was a grief to them both, but Abram’s nephew Lot came with them. They were a pastoral people, with flocks and herds, so their migration was slow, through the forests of Lebanon, the hill country of northern Palestine, until they came to the semi-arid grasslands of the south, called the Negev. There they made their home, and God blessed them. Their flocks and their herds multiplied, and they spread out throughout the land.

In fact, between the two of them – Abram and Lot – they ran out of room to spread. There wasn’t a lot of good grazing in the Negev, and even less water, so Abram’s and Lot’s servants began to fight over the wells and pastures. At last Abram took Lot up on a hill, from which they could see the whole region and said, “Let us split up and decide who should take which land.” Lot looked over his shoulder. On the other side of the hill was a lush, fertile, populous rift valley – very different from the sparse grazing lands they’d been quarrelling over. “Why don’t I go over there?” he said. So it was decided. Abram stayed where he was, and Lot moved into the green valley, taking up residence in a city there called Sodom.

Now there are good things about living in fertile lands, but there are drawbacks, too. It turns out that where there is wealth, there are people who want to take it, and there were frequently wars in the rift valley. Once, a group of kings from the north – Shinar and Elam and Ellesar – came down to make war with the kings of the valley, the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and Admah and Zeboiim. And the kings of the north captured the four cities of the valley and dragged the survivors off as slaves. That included Lot and his family. But one of Lot’s servants escaped, making his way over the hill to Abram. His face grim, Abram called all his servants and herdsmen, “Get your weapons. We’re going to war.” Abram’s men caught up with the kings just north of Damascus, attacked from ambush, rescued Lot and his family, and recovered all the plunder that the kings had taken from the valley.

Now you may not have heard this particular story about Abram before. It's often omitted as unnecessary, but I tell it today because of one curious thing that happened on the way back home. They passed by the city of Salem, built on the hill called Zion, and the Jebusite king of that city came out to meet Abram. This king, who was also the high priest, was named Melchizedek, which means "King of Righteousness." He met Abram and said, "You are blessed by God Most High, whom I also serve." Then Melchizedek blessed Abram. You see, while it was true that God had chosen to work his will through Abram, that did not mean God was silent everywhere else.

Anyway, after these things, God appeared to Abram again, saying, "I am your shield, your protection, Abram, and I will bless you." Abram mustered his courage and said, "Yes, well, that's lovely and all, but you know, what I'd really like is a son." God wasn't offended. Instead he took Abram out to show him the sky. "You will have a son, and he will have sons. And your descendents will be as many as those stars." And Abram believed God, who counted that faith as righteousness. Abram brought animals from the flock and sacrificed them to the Lord, and together the old man and the timeless Creator strolled under the stars, and God promised him that one day all the land they could see would belong to his descendents.



Sarai wasn't there, though. Perhaps if she had heard the Lord's promise herself, she would have accepted it as easily as Abram had. Or perhaps not. Some people have a more active way of seeking God's blessing. At any rate, not long after that evening she came to Abram with a proposal: "Look, I haven't been able to bear you a son. You should take a second wife." Abram blinked but said nothing. Sarai went on, "Here is my Egyptian maid, Hagar. Take her as your wife, but because she serves me, any children she bears will be almost as if they were mine." So Abram said, "I don't see any way this could possibly go wrong," and he took Hagar to his bed, and she conceived and bore a son, as Sarai had been unable to do. Sarai went to Abram and said, "Now see what you've done! You took my maid as wife,

and now she's gone and had a son and thinks she's so superior to me! My life is miserable now, and it's all your fault."

And Abram said, "But . . . I'm sorry, dear. Deal with it however you want."

So Sarai set about making Hagar's life miserable, which of course she had the power to do, until Hagar took her child and fled into the desert, preferring possible death to certain oppression. But Hagar didn't get far. A messenger of the Lord met her by a spring in the desert. "Hagar, go back," he said. "I know it's hard now, but Lord has heard your cry. Your son will be a great nation, and the Lord will bless him. Call him 'God hears.' Call him Ishmael."

Years passed, and God came again to Abram, affirming again the promises he had made. "Abram, you shall become a great nation. Your descendents shall be like the stars in the sky and the sand of the sea. They shall inherit all this land, and all nations will be blessed through you and through the son that Sarai shall bear to you."

And Abram said, “Say what?”

“All nations will be blessed by —”

“No, after that part. About the son that Sarai shall bear.”

“Yes?”

“Well, I don’t know if you know a whole lot about women, but after a while they stop . . . I mean, they can’t . . .”

“I know about women, Abram. Sarai shall bear a son by this time next year. You think that’s funny?”

“Who me? No!”

“Hmm. When your son is born, call him ‘He laughs.’ Call him Isaac. In fact, let’s do new names all around. Your name shall be ‘Father of a multitude,’ Abraham, and your wife shall be ‘Princess,’ Sarah.” And Abraham and the Lord made a covenant that day.

Shortly after that, Abraham was sitting outside his tent and saw three men approaching. Now in that culture, no virtue was more important than hospitality to strangers, so he hurried over to beg them to stop at his tent to refresh themselves. He did not realize that these three men were, in fact, the Lord and two of his messengers, but they were pleased to accept his hospitality, and after they had eaten and drunk, God said to Abraham, “So where’s Sarah? Having trouble with morning sickness?”

“My wife is . . . no, she’s just in the tent. No . . . no problems like that.”

“She will. Remember, by this time next year, she’ll have a son.” Then he raised his voice. “I hear you laughing, Sarah!” He smiled at Abraham. “Remember what to name him: *He laughs*.”

Now, as it happens, God and his angels were not just passing by. They were on their way to visit the cities of the valley, Sodom and Gomorrah, which they had heard had become evil beyond measure. The two angels went on alone and came to the city of Sodom as night was falling. There, in the square, sat Abraham’s nephew Lot. Seeing them approach, he rushed forward and begged them to come and stay at his house. “No, that’s all right,” they said. “We’ll just sleep in the square.”

“Oh. No, really, I think you should stay with me. The neighborhood is . . . please.”

Soon they learned why Lot was so insistent. As the night drew on, the men of Sodom came and banged on Lot’s door, calling out that they’d heard he had some strangers staying with him and demanding that he send them out to them that they may do with them whatever they pleased. Lot begged them to go away, to remember their sacred duties of hospitality and care for strangers, but the men only laughed and reached for Lot. The angels pulled Lot inside to safety and said, “They’re worse than we’d heard. Lot, you and your family get out of town. Tonight. Don’t look back. This city’s time is done.”

And Lot left. Behind him he heard the roar of destruction, but he did not look. The next morning, when he and his surviving family looked over the valley, it was no longer lush and green. It was filled with a stagnant lake in which no creature could live, and all around the lake were pillars of salt curiously human-shaped. Lot crossed the River Jordan to a new home.

And Sarah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Isaac, and once again she laughed, but this time her laughter was brighter. Isaac grew. Abraham's first son, Ishmael, also grew. He became a great hunter, and when he was old enough to care for her, he and his mother moved to the land of Paran. Isaac, instead of his older brother, became the child of blessing. And God came again to Abraham. "Do you believe now that I will care for you?" he asked.

"Yes, Lord," said Abraham.

"And do you trust me?"

"I do, Lord."

"Then do what I say. Get your son Isaac whom you love, take him up on Mount Moriah, and there build an altar and sacrifice him to me on those stones."

And Abraham was still, inside and out. He did not speak. But slowly, like a man sleepwalking, he prepared to obey. He loaded wood on a donkey, packed a knife, then took his son by the hand and started the journey to Moriah. Along the way, Isaac chattered happily. "Silly Daddy, you have the wood and the fire, but you forgot the sacrifice! Where is the lamb?"

"The Lord will provide, my son," Abraham said huskily.

They came to the mountain, and Abraham built an altar. Then he took his son's arm. He did not understand what God was doing. He knew that people in nations all around sacrificed their children to their gods, but this did not feel like the God who had led him and protected him and made covenant with him. But, he decided, he had not been asked to understand, only to trust. He lifted Isaac up onto the altar.

"Stop!" said the Lord. "Enough! Now I know that you trust me more than love itself, and now I promise that you always can trust me. Hear me Abraham: I will never ask you or your descendents to do such a thing. Never. Lift your eyes."

There, caught in the brush nearby, was a ram. Abraham took the ram and sacrificed it to the Lord, and he called the name of that place, 'The Lord will provide.' And he believed that. All his life he believed that, and that day he had believed it to his very core.

And the Lord saw that faith, and he reckoned it to Abraham as righteousness.