

Abraham: Father of Faith

Today I will begin a series of narrative sermons on Biblical heroes, male and female. I will seek to tell their whole story, not just an episode or two from their lives.

Today's story is of Abraham, the father of faith, the founder of monotheism, the originating hero of all three great Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

I The Call

It all begins with God's call to Abraham, Genesis 12:

Go-you-forth
from your land
from your kindred
from your father's house
to the land I will let you see.
I will make a great nation of you
and will give-you-blessing
and will make your name great.
Be a blessing.
All the clans of the soil will find
blessing through you.

Then the climactic words: "Abraham went as Yahweh had spoken to him."

Faith begins here, in obedience, as obedience. In responding to the call of God. It is hard to fathom- the courage of such a move. As *Hebrews* says (11:8), he "went out not knowing where he was to go." Faith often calls us on a journey, and we cannot know every step of the way. What kind of journeys has God called you to in your life?

The blessing to Abraham involved a land and a great heritage. None of it was in sight. Here is faith as *delayed gratification*. As *Hebrews* puts it:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

This blessing to Abraham was a blessing through which all peoples of earth would be blessed. *Abraham was chosen not for his sake alone, but for the sake of the world.*

The call was to a new kind of religion and a new kind of God. Abraham led the way from a culture of many gods to the worship of the one true God of all reality. In his culture, there were the public gods assembled in the temples and the household gods of each home. There were idols aplenty. But Abraham birthed a faith in the one God of all life, a personal god but one not bound to one person. Abraham Heschel once said,

Any god who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you is an idol.

There are a lot of idols in American life today: *my* god, my tribe's god, my nation's god.

Accepting God's call to launch out from home to an unknown land, from the known to the not-known, made Abraham the father of faith and the father of the three great monotheistic religions.

II When Faith Falters, We Falter

When Abraham and Sarah arrived in the new land, it was in drought. The Promised Land was a land of famine! So they went to Egypt seeking food.

When Sarah and Abraham arrived in Egypt Abraham anticipated that Pharaoh might desire his beautiful wife Sarah for his harem, even if it meant killing Abraham. So he perpetuated a cowardly deceit. He lied and passed Sarah off as his sister. We don't like Abraham very much here. Martin Luther wrote: Abraham "let the Word get out of his sight." He stopped trusting in the promises of God and tried to save his own skin. People of faith sometimes let the Word of God get out of their sight. Like us for example.

Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's harem. When Pharaoh discovered the ruse he upbraided Abraham for his lack of ethics. (It's rather embarrassing when the non-believers of the world call God's people on the carpet for their lack of morals. It happens.)

Remarkably Abraham and Sara were delivered from Pharaoh's grasp and returned to Canaan in safety. *When we are faithless, God is faithful.*

III On Ishmael and Isaac

God had promised Abraham and Sarah to bring forth a great nation from their loins. But Sarah remained childless. So she went to Abraham and offered him her Egyptian handmaid Hagar to bear a child. Hagar became Abraham's concubine and bore a son named Ishmael. Later, when Sarah bore a son, Isaac, she became jealous and asked Abraham to banish her and her son. Abraham acquiesced and sent them off into the desert.

But God's promise and provision accompanied Hagar and Ishmael, and God promised to make a great nation from Ishmael. So from Ishmael came the Arabic people and the religion of Islam- and Abraham became the father of *two* peoples. In the traditions of Islam Abraham accompanied Ishmael to Mecca and built an altar which would later become the Ka'aba, the holy shrine of Islam

IV Faith as Expostulation

The next scene pictures Abraham arguing with God. The dictionary defines "to expostulate" as "to reason with a person earnestly, objecting to his or her actions; to remonstrate." Abraham was the first in a long line of God's people with the boldness of faith to argue with God.

In the scene God declares his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness. By the way it was *not* for homosexuality that Sodom and Gomorrah were condemned but for rape, injustice and inhospitality to strangers. Later scripture is clear on this.

Abraham, the text says, “stood before God”. He asked God: “Will you destroy the innocent along with the guilty?” How can a righteous judge act unjustly? Here is the conversation between Abraham and God:

“Will you really sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?” Abraham asked. “Perhaps there are fifty innocent within the city; will you really sweep it away?”

Yahweh replied: “If I find fifty innocent in Sodom, I will bear with the whole place for their sake.”

Abraham then spoke up and said: “I have ventured to speak to my Lord, and am but earth and ashes. But please listen. Suppose of the fifty innocent, five will be lacking-will you bring ruin upon the whole city because of the lack of five?”

God replied: “I will not bring ruin if I find there forty-five.”

Abraham kept on with this line of questioning: “What O God if there are forty?” “I will not destroy for the sake of the forty,” God answered.

“How about thirty?”

“I will not do it if I find thirty.”

“Perhaps then there will be twenty?”

“I will not bring ruin for the sake of the twenty.”

“Pray Lord,” said Abraham, “do not be upset if I speak one more time. What if there are only ten?”

God answered: “I will not destroy for the sake of the ten.”

(Based on Genesis 18:22-33)

The passage ends, “and Yahweh went his way when he had finished speaking.” But it was Abraham who had done most of the talking, a man pleading justice in courts of the Almighty. He thus began a long and noble line of those who have engaged in passionate argument with God and God’s children about justice: Moses, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, the Psalmist, Job, Elie Wiesel, Martin Luther King, Marian Wright Edelman.

Abraham is called in Hebrew and Christian tradition “Friend of God”.

Only a friend of God can stand before God in expostulation.

V. A Child!

Next we come to the drama of the long-promised and long-awaited child.

Abraham and Sarah had gone many years without a child, and Abraham was growing discouraged about their prospects: “Lord, I will die childless and my house servant, Eliezer, will be my heir!”. God hauled him outside the tent into the brilliant desert night and pointed to the heavens. “Look up at the stars, Abraham. Can you count them?!” Abraham was silent. Then God said, “So shall your descendants be.” And Abraham trusted in God, and, as the next verse says, “God counted it as righteousness” (15:6). Abraham’s radical faith would be echoed by Paul in Romans: “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” (Rom. 4:3)

Which leads us to the annunciation scene. One day three visitors appeared at Abraham and Sarah’s tent. The text tells us that the three were in fact “the Lord.” “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers”, scripture says, “for in so doing some have entertained angels unawares.” (Hebrews 13:2). Hospitality to strangers can become a visitation of God, an epiphany. You never know. God sometimes waits for us in the stranger, the one who is “other.”

When Abraham had welcomed the three, they asked about Sarah and then made their pronouncement: we will come again in the spring and Sarah will have a son. It’s the message God had delivered to Abraham in the preceding chapter, and when Abraham heard it, he “fell on his face laughing” (17:17). Here he was, one hundred years old, and Sarah was ninety. Hardly candidates for parenthood! This

time it was Sarah who, listening at the door of the tent, burst into laughter. “I am *worn* and he is *old*,” she said to herself, trying to cover her laugh.

Here we come to the *border of the possible and the impossible*, which is often where faith is most alive. Sarah laughs at the incredibility of it all- and at the crazy, wild possibility of it all. She is laughing it off and laughing it up all at the same time. This reminds us of how the Gospel of Luke describes the disciples who met the resurrected Jesus: they “disbelieved for joy.”

How often have we given up on what God can do? We’ve already decided for ourselves what is possible and impossible, having little faith in God and only the thinnest hope in our own human capacities.

But guess what happened? Sarah laughed all the way from the retirement home to the maternity ward. The only one not laughing was the bureaucrat at the Medicare office trying to process a claim for labor and delivery! Old Sarah laughed through morning sickness and late-night cravings; she laughed through swollen feet and Lamaze classes; and when she gave birth to that beautiful boy and he was placed at her breast, she said. “I will call him Isaac (which means “laughter”), for God has made laughter for me!”

VI The Non-Sacrifice of Isaac

The next scene is thick with mystery, maybe inscrutability: There is terror and there is finally mercy. It is a nightmare from which one finally awakes. Jews call it the *Akeda*, the Binding of Isaac. Traditionally Christians call it the Sacrifice of Isaac. I call it the Non-Sacrifice or Near-Sacrifice of Isaac, for he was spared.

It is a story we can scarcely bear to hear. If I make it to heaven, near the top of the questions I want to ask God is: “Why would you ask Abraham to sacrifice his son and drag Abraham, Isaac and Sarah through all that terror only to deliver Isaac at the end?”

Genesis 22:1 announces the story’s purpose: to *test* Abraham. Here is what is recorded:

God called his name,

“Abraham.”

Abraham said,

“Here am I.”

God said,

“Take your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Morich and offer him up as a burnt offering.”

Abraham said nothing- no expostulation here- but rose early the next morning, saddled his donkey, took the wood for the fire, two servants and his son Isaac and set off toward Moriah. After a three day journey they arrived at the foot of the mountain. Abraham took his knife and coals for the fire. The wood he placed on Isaac’s back for him to carry.

Isaac then said his first words:

“Father.”

Abraham said

“Here am I.”

Isaac said,

“Here is the fire and the wood. Where is the lamb to be offered?”

We cringe.

Abraham choked out his hope:

“God will provide.”

When they reached the place of sacrifice, Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood and bound his boy atop the pyre. He reached out and took the knife. As he raised it up, an angel of God called from heaven:

“Do not stretch out your hand against the boy. Now I know your fear and reverence for God. You have not withheld your own son, your own son, from me.”

Abraham lifted his eyes and saw a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. He cut the boy loose, bound the ram to the altar and offered it in place of Isaac. Thus Abraham named the place of sacrifice “Yahweh-Jireh”, which means “God-will-provide”.

What can we make of it? Jewish and Christian interpreters stress the faith of Abraham. Muslim interpretation stresses the obedient faith of the son who surrendered to God’s will. “Muslim” means “surrender”. (Muslims identify the son as Ishmael.)

Some say Abraham only *thought* it was God asking him to sacrifice Isaac, and that the real Yahweh shows up at the end. (I have an original copy of the Broadman Commentary on Genesis which the SBC recalled and shredded because the scholar suggested such.)

Some say the story marked the end of child sacrifice: the God of Abraham does not require -as other ancient religions- child sacrifice.

It raises the question: Does God ever command something that is morally abhorrent? The end of the story says no. The story pronounces the end of violence as a way of serving God.

Moriah and Golgotha, the place of Jesus' death, unmask every form of sacred violence and put it to an end.

We are still learning.

It was Jesus who refused violence as a way of doing God's work. It was Jesus who said:

...it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (Matthew 18:14)

And it was Jesus who by an extraordinary faith, like Abraham's, trusted his future into God's hands, no matter what, and said in Gethsemane's garden:

Abba, Father, all things are possible with you; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will. (Mark 14:36)

Lord, give us such faith.