

A God You Can Trust!

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Ordinary 10A: Genesis 12:1-9, Romans 4:13-25

If the Genesis scripture is the story of Abraham and Sarah, then the Romans Scripture is the theology that we receive as Christians from that Story. Abraham is claimed as father of three major world religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. In Romans, Paul is interpreting to us Christians the importance and meaning of Abraham for our faith journey.

Genesis 12

1 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan,

6 Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

8 From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord.

9 And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Romans 4

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

14 If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

15 For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us,

17 as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

18 Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be."

19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,

21 being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

22 Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness."

23 Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone,

24 but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,

25 who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Sermon

Remember who you are and where you come from. Who you are is about identity and where you come from is about place. Both suggest that you are who you are because of the relationships you have to others and the particular place from whence you come. We all claim who we are based on our experience of place and the ties that made us into the person we are now.

In the old Jan and Dean song, there is the little ol' lady from Pasadena. The person is tied to the place.

In college Chuck roomed with a guy who introduced himself as "Phil from Pickens". "Phil from Pickens" is Phil Ulrich. Who he is, is entirely connected with the place where he grew up. Ironically, since Phil graduated from Presbyterian College, he has lived in Clemson, SC, Cary, NC, Myrtle Beach, SC New Jersey, Houston, TX, Michigan, and now Peachtree City, GA. His job requires him to travel to China and India, as well. But I am sure whether spoken or not, Phil will always be "Phil from Pickens." His hometown shaped who he is. It identifies him. The person is tied to the place and that place gives meaning to the person.

In our faith, Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem (from the lineage of King David), journeying toward Jerusalem where the Temple was. The temple curtain will be torn and the worship of Almighty God expanded to include Jews and Gentiles. Each place is significant and telling about WHO Jesus is and what his PURPOSE is. The bible is full of significant places which are full of meaning.

Today's Scripture focuses on the one called the "father of the faith," Abraham. Abraham is a man without a place, but one who has a Promise from God. Abraham is the one about whom we sang at camp growing up, "Father Abraham had many kids and many kids had father Abraham. I am one of them and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord!"

Abraham is a man without a place—but with a promise!

In Genesis today, Abraham is introduced. He is no one in particular, with no place in particular to call home, but he is chosen to receive a promise to be blessed and to be a blessing. God would make a place for Abraham. God would make Abraham a great nation, with as many descendants as stars in the sky. God promises to make Abraham's name great (and here we are talking about him thousands of years later). But the promise does not stop there, Abraham will be a blessing to others. Abraham is located in Haran and ventures forth to a new place, Canaanland, trusting in a promise that God makes to him.

Eugene Peterson in the *The Message*—a Bible paraphrase states it this way from Romans 4:

That famous promise God gave Abraham—that he and his children would possess the earth—was not given because of something Abraham did or would do. It was based on God's decision to put everything together for him, which Abraham then entered when he believed.¹ (The Message, from Romans 4, p. 2038)

Isn't that a great way to put it? Abraham was nobody who did not receive this promise on his merit. But God chose Abraham, Sarah and their family for a mission and a purpose. God

put everything together for him and Abraham entered the promise when he believed or trusted.

Again Peterson puts it this way:

For Abraham is father of us all. He is not our racial father—that's reading the story backwards. He is our faith father. We call Abraham "father" not because he got God's attention by living like a saint, but because God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody.² (The Message, from Romans 4, p. 2038)

Not many of us get God's attention by living like a saint! At best we are a motley band of followers seeking to follow God in Jesus Christ.

We are saints and sinners.

We are gracious and unforgiving.

We are faithful and fearful.

We are generous and selfish.

We are called and closed to hearing God.

We are both God's children and the children of Abraham, our true inheritance. Abraham was not chosen on his merit, but when he trusted the promise, he became our faith father.

Abraham was chosen to be blessed and to be a blessing. When God made that promise, God was once again putting his faith and trust in people. God was giving people a second chance, or third chance. Remember last week God chose Noah and sent the flood because the world had become violent and corrupt. Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, had just murdered his brother, Abel. Cities were being built to insure security for people, but they were centers of injustice and conflict.

Well, I hate to report to you that things did not improve much after the flood. Noah's son Ham built cities again for security, but they were places of oppression for some. Ham's descendents then built the tower of Babel to "make a name for themselves" and to unite heaven and earth, in other words, to be become like God. God passed judgment on Babel and its people for doing so.

Our human tendency toward being violent and wanting to be like God is why Presbyterians believe in *Total Depravity* or the innate tendency towards sin. But even with all this sin, God does not give up on people! God made a promise to Noah and gave the rainbow as a sign. God chooses Abraham, a nomad, and decides that Abraham will be a blessed to be a blessing. And God's promises are to be trusted!

Abraham does not even speak when God chooses him for this mission. Abraham simply went. He picked up the family, animals and servants and went. Abraham is given a promise. He trusts in that promise and he is a man on a mission that is marked by following and worship.

The story goes that Abraham trusted that even in the face of their age (75) and their lack of children that God would provide Abraham and Sarah many descendents. Abraham trusted that even though the land was unfamiliar and the land was occupied that he would live and his family would be provided for. But not only did Abraham trust, he knew he had a clear mission. He was sent out. There was no secure home, city, and buildings. He had

something to do and somewhere to go. The scripture talks about Abraham's following the promise as a dynamic journey.

Do you think the Church of Jesus Christ knows its dynamic mission? Do you feel like the church, as heirs of Abraham, is trusting in the promise of mission—to be chosen, blessed, to be a blessing?

Are we at Oakland Avenue trusting that promise? We Presbyterians claimed to be chosen by God, by God's grace. But we also claim that we are not chosen and blessed for our *own* benefit. We are chosen and blessed to be about God's mission. I think sometimes we stop at chosen and blessed—that's comfortable and nice. But Abraham and family were on the move, they were pitching tents along the way, and moving on. In fact, Genesis describes the mission as "journeying by stages." In the New Testament the word church, *ecclesia*, means called out. What are we called out, sent out to do? How are we journeying by stages and getting closer to our call as Christians?

Let me remind you what we believe about our calling. First, all baptized Christians are claimed by God and called to be ministers. I know we call the clergy ministers, but in truth the Book of Order, calls us pastors who are ministers of Word and Sacrament. If we are ministering through Word (teaching and preaching of Scripture) and the sharing of the Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper), who is called to do all the other works of Ministry in response to God's call up on their lives? You are.

The church needs ministers of Word and Sacrament, the church and God's world needs ministers of mercy and caring, ministers of teaching and nurture, ministers of evangelism, ministers of justice and peace, ministers of organization and administration, and the list goes on...which kind of minister are you?

Susan Andrews, past Moderator of the PC(USA) says this:

The purpose of the church is not to ensure the survival of a religious institution, but to ensure the survival of God's good creation. Naming gifts, empowering faithfulness, clarifying values, and commissioning people to be ministers—that is what the church is called to do.³

What do you think about that? Is that the church's call? Well, if you follow that line of thinking, then the church is called baptize and to train people to be ministers.

Andrews continues:

If all baptized Christians are ministers, then all baptized Christians are missionaries; those who are sent to preach and to live and to become the good news in all corners of the world. In the corridors of government and the courtrooms of law, in the typing pools of offices and the classrooms of schools, in the locker rooms of country clubs and the boardrooms of banks, in the rocking chairs of nurseries and the laboratories of universities, in the agony of the soup kitchens and the chaos of day care centers—the mission of the church is to incarnate (to embody) the love of God.⁴

Have you thought about the church that way? Have you thought about yourself that way? Susan Andrews gives us all something to ponder over and reflect upon.

In light of that, Abraham was the first missionary sent out. We do not know his doctrine or his belief system, all we know is that he was chosen for a promise and a purpose and the amazing thing is that he simply WENT. He followed. That is faith. Paul in Romans 4 teaches us that Abraham became a father. He wasn't one and had no reason to believe at 75 that he would be a father. Again from *The Message*:

*He became a father because he dared to trust God to do what only God could do: raise the dead to life, with a word make something out of nothing. When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding not to live on the basis of what he saw he couldn't do but on what God said he would do.*⁵

Or as the NIV bible says, "Against all hope Abraham in hope believed." I think belief is better defined as trust. It's pulling up stakes and moving toward a promise. Do we trust God's promises enough to imagine how God is calling all of us ministers to mission not only in each of our daily lives and each mundane place, but as a church to be in mission together, to be a blessing?

Your Session, in fact, perhaps against all hope, made a decision with the help of some who discern a call to mission for us. We as a church are offering Project HOPE [Helping Other People Effectively] a home since they are without a building for use. Project HOPE is a non-profit formed 35 years ago to respond to the needs of our neighbors who at that time were in dire straights because the mills and textiles that had sustained Rock Hill's economy and families for years, were shutting down or moving overseas. HOPE provides groceries and financial assistance for rent, medicine and utility bills. It was begun by Christians in our town. Many strong champions of HOPE in the beginning and over the years have been members, excuse me, my mistake, MINISTERS from Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church along with folks from Oakland Baptist and others. HOPE will operate out of the house behind this church across the street at 411 Park Avenue. This is a property which we have rented, but will provide rent free to HOPE so that its mission of serving emergency needs of those most vulnerable can continue. We will be bringing that old house up to code for public use as required by our city. This work will be going on in the next 6-8 weeks so that hopefully, HOPE will move in late July. We will also be collecting food to stock the food pantry as well. I hope you will consider how you can participate and respond.

I cannot think of a more hopeful response to the good news of Jesus Christ. May it be said of us as it is said of Abraham,

*He plunged into the promise and came up strong, ready for God, sure that God would make good on what he had said. That's why it is said, "Abraham was declared fit before God by trusting God to set him right." But it's not just Abraham, it's also us! The same thing gets said when we embrace and believe the One who brought Jesus to life when the conditions were equally hopeless.*⁶

This is God's word—a word to us that can be trusted and believed. And all Abraham's children and all God's children said...AMEN.

¹ Peterson, Eugene. *The Message; The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Navpress, 2002, p. 2038.

²Peterson, Eugene. *The Message*, p. 2038.

³Bullock, Robert, ed. *Presbyterians Being Reformed; Reflections of what the Church Needs Today*. Geneva Press, 2006. Susan Andrews, *The Power of Paradox*, pp. 17-18.

⁴Bullock, Robert, ed. *Presbyterians Being Reformed; Reflections of what the Church Needs Today*, p. 18.

⁵Peterson, Eugene. *The Message*, p. 2039.

⁶Peterson, Eugene. *The Message*, p.2039.