

**Sermon Series: Insights for Living from the Old Testament**

**Sermon I: "In God We Trust"**

**Text: Genesis 12:1-9; Romans 4:13-21**

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*So Abram went, as the Lord had told him...Genesis 12:4*

While I do not keep a deep reservoir of football stories to draw upon, as a new football season unfolds, I thought I would share probably my only football story with you. It is a little dated, smells a little like mothballs, but it has to do with Ken Stabler, who back in the 1980's was the great left-handed quarterback of the Oakland Raiders. Stabler was interviewed one day by sportswriter, who read aloud to him the personal creed of the novel and short story writer, Jack London - sort of a "This I Believe." Here is what London had written: "I would rather be ashes than dust. I would rather my spark burn out in a brilliant blaze than to be stifled by dry rot, because, you see, the perfect function of a human being is to live not simply to exist. I shall never waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time."

When the reporter had finished reading, he asked the quarterback, "How does that credo strike you?" After a pause, Stabler replied with two splendid words from his world of football. "What I hear London saying, 'Throw deep.'"

I thought of those two words as I studied the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis this week. Abraham, the grand patriarch of our faith tradition, and Sarah our matriarch, were not afraid to throw deep. They may have had to wrestle from time to time with self-doubt, but they never doubted that God would be able to do what God had promised. When the visitors came to their tent and announced that Sarah, who was old enough to be a great-grandmother, was going to have a baby of her own, they did laugh a little, but they never stopped trusting God, the God who had said to them, "I want you to go to the land of Canaan, and there I'm going to make of you a great nation." And so they went, they packed it all up, the pots and the pans and the linens in the drawer, the donkeys and the goats, and they all headed out for Canaan on the basis of nothing more than a promise. It was the promise of an invisible God and One with whom Abram did not yet have a very strong personal relationship. At that time in his country there were many gods vying for the attention and loyalty of the people. Abram must have liked this God Yahweh, but he did not know that God well. Still and all, away they went.

The first thing that happened when they got to where they were going was that Abraham's nephew Lot chose the rich bottomland, and Abraham settled on the

less fertile ground. The second thing that happened was that no baby came. No baby. It is hard to imagine becoming the father of a great nation if the lights are out in the nursery. Later, of course, Isaac was born, but when Isaac was still a boy, the Lord commanded Abram, now Abraham, to take Isaac, "his only son, the son whom he loved" and make of him a burnt offering on Mount Moriah. Isaac was all tied up lying on the wood pile, Abraham had raised his knife to stab his own son to death when, at the last second, the Lord intervened and called off the sacrifice. The incident pushed Abraham to the limit of his faith and trust, and through that dark incident, it was revealed that Abraham was one who would go deeper than deep. He would go all the way for God.

There is a quotation from John Stuart Mill that I like: "One believer is worth 99 people who just might be interested." The Lord needed Abram and his total commitment. The Lord's plan of salvation was too important to entrust to someone who just would put a little toe down into the future and see if the water was cold or hot, and then decide.

Abraham, "Father Abraham," we call him, is perhaps the most outstanding person we encounter in the Hebrew Scriptures. I understand that Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin called her former pastor at the Assembly of God church, shortly after she had been elected governor of Alaska. She wanted her pastor to recommend biblical stories that revealed people who were great leaders, so that she could learn the secrets of their leadership.(1) I think the more important question is how God's greatness is manifested in ordinary people and how God guides, directs and inspires ordinary people in the fulfillment of God's gracious and divine plans. The Bible is first and last the story of God. It begins with God's calling the universe into being, in pronouncing it good; yet almost immediately, bad things begin to happen: the eating of the apple, the killing of Abel by Cain, the wickedness that so grieved the heart of God the floods came and covered the earth, and then after the floods, the building of that terrible tower of Babel, which displeased the Lord just about as much as anything ever did.

Scholar Leon Kass helps us understand what happens next. ". . .the failure of the Tower of Babel marked the end of the saga of universal human beginnings. After Babel, God has a change of plans. God abandons his plan to work with the entire human race all at one time, but he in no way abandons his universal aspirations for human beings. He pursues the same ends, but by different means. He now chooses to work through one nation as a light to all the others". (2)

One nation, no stronger than the others, no better, no wiser than the others, no greater track record than anybody else, they were tent dwellers. And for reasons known only to the Lord, the Lord chose these people, this family, to be a blessing to the rest of the world. When they set out, Sarah and Abraham had a great deal to learn. Along the way they messed up royally more than a few times, but God had a plan, and so God taught them and forgave them and guided them so that after a while, they became useful to the plan of salvation and aware that anything

good that happened, including the gift of children, was not a human achievement, but the occasion for wholehearted reverential thanksgiving to the Almighty.

Genesis 12 begins, “I want you to go from your house and your kinfolk in your father’s house and I am going to make of you a great nation.” It all sounds nice until you think of what has to be left behind. They are leaving their secure world and stepping out toward God knows what. But, as one scholar says, “Such a departure from security is the only way out of barrenness. To stay safe is to be barren, to be without life. But to leave in risk, is to have hope. (3) One cannot help but think of the invitation of Jesus - *Those who want to save their lives will lose them. And those who are willing to lose their lives for my sake and for the sake of the gospel are the ones who will find their life.* Anybody want to come? History’s hinge is right here. History hinges on those who say yes or no to the hopeful future that God offers.

If I had to come up with a motto by which I might live, here would be the words I would use: Live by faith; throw deep; risk it all in the service of hope. I have learned by stepping out and then stepping out again and then stepping out again, particularly in seemingly hopeless situations. I have learned that God can be trusted. I have never been sorry that I let go of what was, so that a new thing God wanted to do could be born.

A *New Yorker* cartoon several years ago showed a woman lashing storage jars on the donkey and explaining to her neighbor, “We’re moving to someplace called Canaan. It’s going to be a whole new concept in group living.” I like that.

I also like this version of stripping the story down to its bare bones. Here is the whole plot: Act I – “Go.” Act II – “We’re going! We’re going!”

At the behest of God, the camel train pulled out and the world has never been the same again. In Romans, Paul took the long view. He saw what it meant that God chose Abraham and his descendants, the children of God chosen in the first place, and then the Gentiles who later were included in the covenant, co-inheritors of the gracious promises of God. When God makes a promise, that promise will be kept, even if it takes the son of God climbing up on, or being nailed to a cross. When the hammer is raised and the nails are about to be driven into Jesus’ hands and feet, the loving Father of us all does not say, “Stop!” The plan all along had been to redeem the world, and if it took God’s own son to get the job done, then so be it.

What are we to do with this story of Abraham in a world that is as unlike Abraham’s world as we can possibly imagine? But is it really? Anybody here have a little bit of anxiety about the future? A little worry about what’s going to happen next? Who the next president will be? Who will lead us? What direction our country will go in? Whether our economy is going to sink into recession,

whether our world so full of hot spots is going to catch on fire with anger and hatred?

We are in a way like Abram and Sarah, aren't we? We have no way of knowing what's ahead, but one thing we do know is that God needs us. God needs us to help create the future that God has in mind. God is not picky about that kind of thing; God is looking for people who will say yes, not people who are perfect. God is looking for a new generation, who not only will be heirs of Abraham but who will be willing to be a part of the new family of humanity that God is creating in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yes, this old story applies to us. It applies to our church here at Morningside as we move into unknown territory, and, holy smokes, the challenges that are before us! Some of us might be tempted to say, "No thank you, I believe we'll be staying right here where we are." We could stay where we are, but we have the sense that we also can respond as Abram and his family did with faithfulness, letting go of our need to have everything stay just in place, so that we can become, listen, we can become the hinge on which history in our little part of the world turns. Imagine, if the faithfulness of this congregation became the transforming power of in town Atlanta! It is possible if we draw deeply from our spiritual resources and muster the courage to face what is ahead, knowing that our security lies not in the *status quo*. Our security lies where it always has been, in the steady, strong hands of a mighty and gracious God.

I just passed over three pages of this sermon because I want to say two things before I close. I think of the children, the over 100 children that are a part of our community these days. I think of the children in a Sunday school class, whose teacher asked them two questions: "Do you love God?" and "Why do you love God?"

All the children said yes to the first question, but then they were silent. No one could think of an answer, until one kid had a light bulb go off and raised his hand. He said, "I think that kind of thing runs in our family."

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Mary and Joseph, generation to generation, we teach our children that God can be trusted, that God is love that God cares, that the outcome of history is in the hands of a gracious God.

Then this, to end closer to the other end of the spectrum of life: A man I've always admired is a man named Dr. Henry Mitchell, an outstanding African-American preacher and teacher of preaching. Several years ago he found himself undergoing angioplasty. Afterward, he wrote this. "I lay on the metal table, and I watched the cardiologists move a balloon inside my heart. He opened up a most important artery inside that had ceased to function. I watched with utter awe as the balloon passed painlessly back-and-forth. I could not help thinking that what I was seeing in my heart in that cardiologist's hand, was the

providential hand of God, using a gifted doctor to lengthen out the threads of my life. My sometimes feeble faith was so affirmed and so strengthened that tears of joy flowed down my cheeks throughout the entire angioplasty. I had the feeling of fullness. It was like that feeling of the old people in my home church, who still fill up to the brim with praise and thanksgiving to God.” (4)

There are moments when life itself throws us deep, and then we sense so clearly the divine grace that undergirds absolutely everything. As Paul put it, “By the grace of God, I am what I am, and God’s grace toward me is not in vain.” To that I say, Amen!

(1) *New York Times*, 9/6/08.

(2) *The Beginning of Wisdom*, Free Press, 2003, p. 247.

(3) *Genesis*, Walter Bruggemann, John Knox Press, 1982, p.118.

(4) *The Living Pulpit*, April-June, 1992.