

Lent 2A: Father Abraham (Genesis 12)

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. 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. 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." 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.

At the Erin St Patrick's Day parade on Thursday, I pulled the church float with my truck, and while driving through an enthusiastic throng of revelers, one young man yelled to me, "Hey, Father Abraham, whazzup?" Father Abraham. Another one called me "Gramps." Hmm. I wore my clerical collar in order to identify with the Irish and Catholics who claim Patrick as their patron saint, and it did help me stand out. So they called me father. But Father Abraham? Who was the real Abraham and what difference does he make for us?

Our brief Old Testament lesson this morning doesn't give us much to go on. But like Patrick and other legendary figures from history, what Abraham means to us isn't limited to historical facts. Genesis introduces us to Abraham here in chapter twelve as the first person of the particular story of Israel, God's chosen people.

From Genesis 1, the story has been general, about the history of the world, from creation, to Adam and Eve and the fall from Eden, to the story of Noah and the ark in the Great Flood, to the Tower of Babel. All these things represent pre-history, the biblical view of how humanity got to be the way it is. It is often quite general mythology, and we mostly know that Adam is not so much the first human being as he is the proto-type, the Everyman who represents all our ancestors. The Great Flood and the Tower of Babel represent God's way of dealing with the mess that humanity had worked its way into. God destroys what has become corrupt.

But with Abraham and Sarah, the Bible gets specific and personal and takes a new tack in terms of how to redeem the world: through these individuals God intervenes in human affairs in a new way, a covenant of blessing rather than the curse of destruction. God blesses Abraham and Sarah and their offspring, and they and theirs become a blessing to the world. This is the major turning point of Genesis and the biblical view of God's interactions with humanity. With Abraham, Genesis 12 begins to tell of the special role of Israel as the mediator of blessings from God to the world.

Father Abraham was minding his own business in the land of Haran in northwest Mesopotamia, sometimes called the cradle of civilization (in present day Iraq). God called Father Abraham to leave that place and go west to the land of Canaan. This was about 1500 years before the birth of Christ, and we know that there was such a migration of people in the second millennium BC or BCE. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews Saint Paul the Apostle tell of Abraham as the great exemplar of the faith that is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go.” (Hebrews 11:8)

Canaan was the land of promise to which God sent Abraham. It became so for Abraham and Sarah and for their descendants, and it became a place to which to return three hundred years or so later in the time of Moses and the Exodus and another six hundred years or so after that after the Babylonian exile and another two millennia after that when the modern state of Israel was formed. Thus it is impossible to separate the idea of Israel as a people, descendants of Abraham and Sarah, from the idea of Israel as the promised land, a particular narrow strip of land between the Mediterranean to the west and the Jordan River to the east, squeezed between the Sinai to the south and Syria to the north.

Abraham means so much to Christians in part because of what the Letter to the Hebrews and Paul said about him: Abraham is the father of faith. Abraham did what God asked him to do. He did it on faith, even though, as Hebrews and Paul say, Abraham was “as good as dead.” He was 75 years old when he set out for Canaan, and he was 99 when he received the covenant of circumcision and son Isaac was born to him and Sarah. “As good as dead,” Paul says. “By faith [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (Hebrews 11:9-11)

Father Abraham is also a common ancestor for three great world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He represents common ground in an often hotly contested public square. I took Abraham with me to Madison this past week. I was part of an annual people of faith advocacy day. Most years there are fifty people or fewer attending this event which is speakers and workshops in the morning and a little rally and lobbying our state representatives and senators in the afternoon. This year, because of all the turmoil over the state budget, there were four hundred of us. Thirty of the thirty-three senate districts were represented by people of faith from all over the state of Wisconsin. A small group of us sat down in

Representative Pridemore's office and visited for 45 minutes with a staff member. This staffer, turns out, is a conservative Wisconsin Synod Lutheran from Hartford, a member of the church there that operates the Gardens, where Delmer and Gerry Staus had their assisted living apartment. Even though this assembly staffer and our group differed on most issues, we found common ground. I was struck by what he told me. He said that he was pretty new in his position, being in the dormant building trades until this last year. He said he enjoyed meeting with other elected officials and his staff counterparts in both political parties, until a month ago. Now the climate is poison and people only speak with those with whom they agree. He said he was quite sad and discouraged about it. We talked a bit about how we can have a respectful dialogue, even when we forcefully disagree. The very fact of our conversation in that room full of Don't Tread on Me (Tea Party) flags and large framed photos of Ronald Reagan was both intimidating and promising to me. I thought of Father Abraham and his Hasidic descendants who had a saying that "all the world is a narrow bridge." Think about that. A narrow bridge. A bridge means there is a divide. Right. Got it. The narrowness means that we have to carefully pass one another in order to be safe, and perhaps we even have to wait for the oncoming traffic to come all the way to our side before we cross to the other. We have to be together, not only in confrontation, competition and conflict, but also in compromise and cooperation. The world is a narrow bridge.

Riverside Church pastor James Forbes once said, "We mustn't lower our voices [in the church] in order to raise our budgets." By that he meant that we must not avoid tackling difficult questions and sensitive subjects in order to keep people and their money from leaving. This congregation has had a mostly congenial history, but for about five years ago, when Pastor Don Niederfrank addressed a sensitive subject from the pulpit and the UCC General Synod said something about gay marriage. People got up and left. The learning from that experience must not be that we never speak with one another about important but challenging things about which we will not all agree. "We mustn't lower our voices in order to raise our budgets." Rather, we must find the common ground and the shared language and the spirit of unity and peace that makes for that narrow bridge. We must have a talk with Father Abraham.

One of the things Abraham teaches us about faith is that it is so much more than having a cause or taking a stand or supporting a position. The faith of Abraham is saying Yes to the call of God. It is receiving and accepting the blessing of God and being willing to pass it along to others. It is being able to say of us as Genesis said of Abraham, "So [he] went, as the Lord had told him." Our calling is finding common cause, reaching out to those who are not like us and may not like us and who do not agree with us. Our calling, like Abraham's is to step out into the

unknown, confident in the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen. As Hebrews put it, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go.”

We have stepped out on to the path of a Lenten journey to the day of resurrection. It is important that we follow the trail, and don't cut across and away from the valleys of the shadow of death or by-pass the hills of Calvary, the Golgothas of the cross. The Lenten journey takes us from death to life, from sadness to joy, from despair to hope, from war to peace. But there are no shortcuts. The whole world is a narrow bridge. We walk it with good old Father Abraham and Mother Sarah and Brother Delmer and Sister Shirley*. We do not walk alone.

[*References to long-time St Paul's members: Shirley Dieball died a week ago Wednesday and was buried at St Paul's last Sunday, March 13. Delmer Staus died last Wednesday and was buried Saturday, March 19.]