

“Abraham and Sarah, Our Ancestors in Faith”
Psalms 116:1-2,12-19; Genesis 18:1-15;21:1-7
Rev. Dr. Patricia Dutcher-Walls
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Let's pray!

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen!

I don't know whether these stories in Genesis are familiar to you? They may well be. But the stories in Genesis are the stories of beginnings. The foundation of the peoples of God, and it's important to hear that 'S' the people (s) of God. In these beginnings from the stories of Abraham and Sarah, we hear foundation narratives about a family that sets out to journey to an unknown land a family that receives a child when none was possible, a family that rose to be a people and eventually to found a nation.

From these stories have developed faith traditions in three of the world's great religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And the leader of this family, Abraham has become a model of faith for millions of people over the millennia.

The story seems simple enough. It starts a few chapters earlier before the one we story we read today in Genesis 12. A man from the east from the Mesopotamia lands around Babylon was already on the move with his extended family and large flocks when he is confronted by the Lord, a God of whom he has no previous knowledge. The Lord tells him go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you the biblical narrative signals Abraham's immediate obedience to the command when it reports as soon as Lord finishes talking so Abraham went.

The Lord also makes promises to Abraham alongside the command to get up and go these promises singled this family out for a special role in God's Providence, "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 you curse, I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

When Abraham and Sarah arrive in the land to which they are called, the story shows them continuing on the move as pastoral herders with their flocks moving between grazing lands and stopping at holy sites to begin to worship the Lord the God who had just called them into the land.

At one such holy site the Lord adds another promise two your offspring I will give these lands. These multiple promises of blessing a renowned name a great nation of descendants, blessing both on Abraham and on the families of the earth and the inheritance of land for the ones now landless are woven through the stories which follow in Genesis and beyond.

Thus starts a tale that continues to this day in the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Abraham is one of the best known figures of the early traditions that stands behind these three great world faiths. His wife Sarah is likewise remembered as the mother of a long line of descendants who over the years beginning with their son's Isaac and grandson Jacob became the people of Israel and in time the people who follow Jesus a descendant of Abraham and Sarah.

These stories of Abraham and Sarah and their children and grandchildren occupy Genesis 12 through 50, so a big chunk of the book of Genesis. As the story continues A complication arises. Sarah, Abraham's wife is barren and both of them are now old beyond childbearing years. Yet God has promised that this family will become a great nation. How will such a promise be fulfilled? Can they trust that promise? Abraham and Sarah at first tried to solve the issue on their own by following a cultural custom of that time in giving a surrogate wife to Abraham, her name was Hagar who bore Abraham his first son Ishmael.

God blesses both Hagar and Ishmael protecting them and making the same promise to Ishmael as was given to Abraham, that God will make him a great nation. But our reading today presents God's promise being fulfilled directly. The Lord again visits Abraham and Sarah in the form this time of three messengers. Perhaps without even being aware that he is hosting visitors from the divine or the divine self, Abraham yet offers the customary lavish hospitality to visitors.

They in turn present another amazing word that God will indeed fulfill the promise of a child despite their advanced age. Who could believe such a thing? Apparently not Sarah for she laughs and tries to cover it up. But these visitors will not be fooled her laughter signals her incredulity her hope beyond hope that such an outlandish promise might come true and it does the story continues with the birth of Isaac a few chapters later.

Here, Sarah herself shows that her laughter of incredulity has turned to laughter of joy that will be shared by the whole community. This son Isaac is beloved but in one of the most dramatic Hebrew Bible stories God later asks Abraham to sacrifice his son this son of promise a command that Abraham begins to obey. But both father and son are spared deep grief when God instead provides a ram for the sacrifice.

The Genesis story closes with the tales about Joseph reckoned as Abraham and Sarah's great grand-son who was sold by his eleven brothers into slavery in Egypt and then the account continues beyond the pages of Genesis in the book of Exodus with the story of Moses and the deliverance from Egypt generations later.

Over the millennia since these traditions were collected and made part of Jewish and then Christian and then Islamic scripture, millions of followers have looked to this story of Abraham and Sarah for inspiration, wisdom, and challenge. Abraham is mentioned in the Bible nearly 300 times. In books like outside of Genesis, and books like Isaiah, Ezra and Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the gospels and especially the letters of Paul in the New Testament.

The traditions of these three faiths all look to Abraham in faithful ways. In Jewish tradition Abraham became identified as the first Jew and is depicted as the embodiment of faithful of a faithful Jew upholding God's commands. Traditionally Jews see themselves as the descendants of Abraham through his son Isaac and Jacob his grandson. In Jewish prayer books God is referred to as the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob. In Christianity, Abraham is revered as the prophet to whom God chose to reveal himself and with whom God has initiated the first covenants to the people.

The apostle Paul declares that all who believe in Jesus are included in the descendants of Abraham and are inheritors of the promises made to Abraham. Islam regards Abraham as a link in the chain of prophets that begins with Adam and culminates in Mohammed. Abraham is mentioned in 35 chapters of the Koran more often than any other biblical person apart from Moses. Muslims regard him as a prophet and a patriarch the archetype of the perfect Muslim.

If we as followers of Jesus who knew himself to be who knew who himself knew Abraham and Sarah as his ancestors and exemplars, if we take seriously this portrait of Abraham and Sarah for our own lives what would that look like? If we engaged if you will in a trust walk and used Abraham and Sarah as our examples. If we like generations of the faithful among Jewish Christian and Muslim communities look to the story of Abraham and Sarah for inspiration, wisdom, and challenge. What might we find that helps our journey of faith might we be comforted by the story of a family who followed where God led them and found all along the way that God was there with them and going before them.

That God is not some distant and aloof other being but rather a companion on the way, might we be challenged by the story of the immediate trust in the call of the Lord that Abraham displays so that we better understand the trust that we can put in God in our own lives. Might we like Sarah rejoice when our sorrow and incredulity turn to joy, and trust.

Might that give us the courage to trust God is always with us, might we be inspired by the willingness of a family to journey with God to places yet unknown that might in fact redefine our lives and our faith, might that journey not only be one of an individual or a family but for a whole community of congregation perhaps that is trying to live out a new commitment to faith and action a congregation perhaps that looks to a new pastor coming to lead them.

Abraham and Sarah had to leave everything they knew in order to follow the command of God to go to an unknown land. Like our ancestors in the faith might our journey with God sometimes include some losses some losses of unknown and beloved places and habits in order to strike out on a new path in following the one who shapes our lives and our journeys. Might

we find wisdom in the actions of Abraham and Sarah when they built altars at holy sites along the way, so that wherever they found themselves they could worship God.

Might we be inspired by that so that wherever we find ourselves we can always find space and time and place to worship, both literally in a physical sense but what if that was metaphorical, what if we carry that space in our hearts so that we always make space and time to worship God.

In all these ways might we find the courage to follow the inspiration to live in new ways to trust a God who is for us even before we know where we are going, might we finally pray fervent prayers to God for God's accompaniment on our journey for our willingness to live a faith and the life and a journey of faithfulness and fruitfulness, might we pray this little prayer that I want to close with as a good prayer for our journey.

Help us Lord not to be afraid to live larger and wider lives so that we can reflect your glory.
Amen!