

Abraham: Hearing God's Call

Genesis 12:1-10

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Two nuns were coming home from the hospital late one night. They ran out of gas on a lonely stretch of road but fortunately they saw a gas station about a mile ahead. They rummaged around the car trunk and found an old hospital bedpan to carry some gas then set off down the road. They came back and were putting the gas into the tank when a pair of Methodist ministers driving back from the Annual conference came around the bend. Their headlights caught the two nuns pouring from a bedpan into the gas tank. One preacher exclaimed, "Man, I wish our people had faith like that!"

Which brings me to Abraham: He is the quintessential man of faith in the Bible. Jews, Christians and Moslems consider Abraham to be their father in the faith. He is the first monotheist—the first one to believe there is only one true God. What is faith? What does it mean to have faith? How hard is it to keep the faith? Why would anyone want to be a person of faith? The answers to these and many other faith questions can be found in the example of Abraham.

His life story is found only in the Bible and it stretches from Genesis 11 to 25. It takes place around the year 2000 BC. His travels take us across the entire arc of the known world of the day—what we call the Fertile Crescent—from Iraq to Syria to Lebanon to Israel to Egypt and back. Along the way he acts as a prophet, a priest and a king. He meets up with a multitude of nations and peoples from Babylonians and Egyptians to Hittites and Philistines. He is surrounded by colorful characters: selfish Lot, hot-tempered Sarah, faithful Elieazar, mysterious Melchizedek, and many others. We can learn about faith by listening to life, especially by listening to Abraham's life.

The first thing we learn is that faith is a response to God's initiative. People don't develop their own faith. They don't plan it out and then build it like a house. It is a response to something God does. In Genesis 12:1 it says, "The Lord had said to Abram..." God spoke first and then Abraham responded.

The township fire trucks work on a response-only basis. They don't cruise the streets looking for flames. They sit parked in their buildings until there is a call. The fire happens first and then the trucks respond. So it is with faith. God does something first, he speaks or acts. Then human

beings must decide to respond positively to God's action and when they do respond, that response is called faith. The fact that faith exists at all is therefore evidence for the existence of God. The burden of proof is on the atheist who says there is no God to explain why billions of people have faith and this faith has persisted for more than 4000 years. The easy explanations of ignorance or stupidity don't really fit the facts. Faith is the evidence for the reality of God. Given the facts, I'd say it takes more effort *not* to believe in the God of Abraham than it does to believe.

Did you know that God has spoken directly to you? He sent Jesus Christ specifically for you personally. He calls you to believe in him and to follow him to the place where he is going so that you might be where he is. Have you responded?

Faith involves change, big change. Abraham had to leave his country, his people and his father's household. He had to start all over again in a new country, learn a new language and all with out any friend or relative to support him. Hebrews 11:8 says, "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going."

Many people don't understand this principle of change when it comes to faith. They think that faith is just another activity to fit into a busy life like season tickets to the Kirtland Fine Arts series, getting into a golf league or applying for a bear license this fall.

Paul wrote, "So I tell you this...that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking...you were taught with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self...to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." (Ephesians 4:17, 22-24)

Neglecting your prayers for weeks? That is a pagan practice and you can't follow Christ and live that way anymore. Judging and picking apart your neighbors behind their backs? That is what pagans do and you can't live that way anymore. Wasting gas, electricity and water without concern for the poor or the environment? That is a pagan practice and you can't live that way anymore.

Real faith is going to change you, push you, and drive you out of your comfort zone. It's not a hobby you pick up. It is to launch a permanent and comprehensive life change.

Faith is a vision of the future. God gave to Abraham a vague outline of the future: a great nation; a great name; a great blessing for all the peoples of the earth. (Genesis 12:2-3) Christians know that this vision is coming true in Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "God redeemed us in order

that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit...If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:14, 29)

I am told that bald eagles have vision that is 8 times more powerful than us. From 300 feet, an eagle can spot a penny in 6 inches of grass. Vision is seeing what others can't or won't see. Faith is the vision God gives us to see his purpose for our lives, our churches and the world. A Hebrew proverb says, "Without a vision the people perish." (Proverbs 29:18). Many people as well as churches are just drifting through life like dandelion seeds in the breeze. They have no vision and so they are dying in spirit if not in also body. Vision gives direction and purpose. Without banks a river is becomes a swamp. Vision is what makes life move with meaning, purpose, direction. If you need a vision for your life, you should seek it from God because God's vision is the only one that is true and lasting.

Faith is a struggle. Look again at Genesis 12:10, "Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe." Just like that Abraham bailed out at the first big disappointment! God called him to the Promised Land, not to Egypt. This is the first of many faltering and cowardly moments in Abraham's life. He was not superhuman in strength of will but he was indeed like us.

It is not a small thing that near the end of Matthew's gospel he says, "When they saw the Risen Christ, they worshiped him; but some doubted." (Matthew 28:17) We tend to put Abraham or the Apostles into stained glass and believe they were somehow stronger than we are or they had it easier than we do. But the Bible takes pains to tell the truth: no, the tension between faith and doubt runs through every believer in every time and place.

After her death, it was discovered that Mother Theresa experienced seasons of great doubt and depression in her spiritual life. She wrote about them in her personal dairy and talked about them with her spiritual director. Many newspaper reporters where convinced that breaking this story would ruin Mother Theresa's image among the faithful. Little did they know it actually endeared her all the more to us, who share her Christian faith. Because now we know she struggled just like us and yet did great things for God. It's amazing what God can do with a flimsy life like yours or mine if we dare to believe and follow Jesus Christ.