

Abraham, Father and Pilgrim (Part II): Called into Right Order

Rev Jeremy Bergstrom

Abraham, the father of those who believe, is the prototypical believer in pilgrimage through this world, chosen and called by God out of the chaos of human culture to learn God's new way of life ordered in righteousness. Through their sojourn in the wilderness, Abraham and his wife Sarah unlearn the world's wisdom about family and learn God's new way of married life.

Introduction

- NT on why we have the images of the OT narratives: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope." Rom 15.4
- in our first talk, I mentioned how we need good wisdom and judgment to be able to make our way through this life; we need examples, we need instruction, in order to be able to make sense of how God would have us live, and how to orient our lives to the Gospel
- Let's look to Abraham "for our learning," and learn with him as he makes his way out the chaos of corrupt society and family life into the ordered ways of God
- by the grace of God, in Abram mankind begins to grope its way out of the chaos into a sense of order according to divine principles
- As Fr Dunbar noted last week, Abraham is the beginning of the restoration of the world; he's the prototype of the Christian, and the predominant image of Abraham is as stranger and pilgrim
- as we see in the familiar passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews,
11 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. 2 For by it the elders obtained a good report.... 8 By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. 9 By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: 10 For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. 11 Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable. 13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. 15 And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. 16 But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

- Throughout Genesis we see the Promises of God to Abraham:
 - Opening Promise* (Gen 12.1-4)
 - 12 Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: 2 And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: 3 And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. 4 So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him...
- promises given to Abram, requiring first that he be isolated from the patterns (really, chaos) and ways of his 'native' homeland in order to build again, on a fresh foundation... "Get thee out... and I will make of thee..."
- much like after the flood Noah was able to make a fresh start, with only his family

Great Covenant and Promise (Gen 15)

The word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward... And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness. And he said unto him, I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it... Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age.

- The Promise has been given, but to what end? It's about more than having a successful and prosperous family; it's really about building a nation that will be different than the other nations of the earth. It will be the beginning of a people who live according to the will of God.
- We see this in his mysterious encounter with the three angels of the Lord in Mamre, where God decides to include Abraham in his council concerning the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.
- He is included because God has known, i.e. *chosen* him, for a specific purpose:
 - "That he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him." (Gen 18.19)
- God is educating Abram, to the end "that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him," 18
- this has its *foundation* in Abraham's faith, and is *built* through growing in knowledge of God's will; Abraham's path is ours: we begin with faith, with hope in the promises of God, and this love reorients our lives according to the will of God

Learning with Abraham

- What sort of a sojourner was Abraham?
- re: the education of Abraham, we see that the goal is to build a nation... and it starts as a family, "that he may charge his children and his household after him..."
- we see that in his relationship with Sodom and Jerusalem, Abraham has profound integrity as a prince; and allows Lot first choice of the land; he's a good man, and devout

- Abraham might be a great prince, great at international relations, but he has quite a bit to learn about the interior workings of his own ‘nation’, or family; this is primarily what God brought him out into the wilderness of a foreign land to accomplish: to make his family different from the other nations of the earth, and to rightly order creation again in his lineage... an order that one day will restore the entire earth, not just one people

What does Abraham learn about marriage and family?

The Sanctity of Marriage—Marriage is God’s Means to Realizing his Promises; as we’ll come to see in Christ, it’s wrapped up in the very mystery of the Gospel itself, and proclaims it

- Abraham is hardly the man we’d want to look to for a role-model; but in his and Sarah’s example God is laying a foundation for us
- for example, we have two instances of Abraham lying, trying to pass off Sarah as merely his sister in order to save his own skin during his various journeys in foreign lands—“they will kill me because of my wife”
 - First he tries it with Pharaoh, and then again much later with a King in Palestine named Abimelech; each time, the king does indeed take Sarah into his harem, and each time the Lord reveals to the kings that she is in fact Abraham’s wife; Egypt is afflicted with plagues, and Abimelech is threatened in a dream and cursed by God: “Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife.” Gn 20.3; furthermore, all the women in Abimelech’s kingdom are barren as long as Sarah remains in his household
 - both kings rightly protest their innocence, for they acted out of ignorance; and both men restore Sarah to her husband, and confront Abraham to the effect of: “What have you *done* to us, and what did *I* ever do to *you*?”
 - what *was* Abraham doing? he was putting his own life above his marriage; Isaac’s birth of Sarah had already been prophesied, he even valued his own perceived safety above the promises; Sarah was barren, and perhaps he thought she was expendable? Regardless, he had very little regard for his marriage
 - what’s perhaps most fascinating here is not Abraham’s indifference to his marriage; after all, he was most likely acting as his ancestors had; great men didn’t have trouble finding wives. He was surely acting in accord with the spirit of his age
 - no, the most fascinating thing is that God uses foreign kings, voices from the outside, to correct and rebuke Abraham’s attitude towards his marriage (and ours); he learns the sanctity of his union with Sarah from foreign kings... and indeed, it doesn’t seem he learns the message too well—the message is at the very least for our benefit. Wives are to be respected, because marriage and family are his chosen means for bringing about the salvation of mankind
- On a related note, Sarah doesn’t seem to have much regard for her marriage, either; at one point, she despairs of her ability to bear children, and orders Abram to conceive a child by her Egyptian maid, Hagar
 - Hagar conceives, and then begins to despise her barren mistress; for her attitude, and surely out of jealousy, Sarah promptly kicks her out of the household into the wilderness—how unjust! And Abram meekly allows Sarah to do all this.
 - The Lord, however, cares for the woman and her child, and eventually restores her to the household for a time
 - what’s to admire here? nothing. scheming for children without regard for marriage, abusing her husband and her maid, jealousy, rage, etc. And Abram’s no better, as Sarah’s

accomplice; and later, he even tries to put forward Ishmael as the promised heir, the bird in the hand, even after God tells him that the heir of the Promise will come by Sarah, his wife. It's no good trying to get what you want outside marriage. and it's no good trying to get what you want outside the Promises of God; it simply reveals a carnal rather than spiritual ambition.

- But surely God is establishing the sanctity of marriage yet again in his use of Abram's *wife* to bring about the child of Promise; not just any ole woman will do! It's not about having a genetic descendent; it's about marriage making it legitimate, and family relationships; and against all odds, too... a barren wife and a miraculous conception and delivery in her old age. God is making a point.
- Furthermore, it's about maintaining the boundaries of the household. The integrity of his household matters; God's refusal to bless the illegitimate offspring of a foreign woman is powerful testimony to God's intention that Abraham not enmesh himself in the lifestyle and affairs of the other nations, not to be like them; everything about his family needs to be distinct, and oriented towards the Promise

This brings us to a second lesson Abraham learns, this time about the raising of children...

Loving the Life to Come, not just the Children to Come—He knows that his own good lies in what God will do through his descendants, those who will “keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice”

- this involves learning that children are a gift of God, not a commodity to be managed or arranged for our own benefit, our own pleasure—they're born for God's good pleasure, and to bless the church
 - there's no denying—as sad as it was for Ishmael, the carnal nature of his conception had nothing to do with the Promises of God, with God's plan to restore the earth through Abraham
 - young Isaac had no virtue in and of himself, as baby Ishmael had no necessary moral defect; but it was imperative that the family have its foundation in faith rather than in worldly striving. Only Isaac could be the heir for this single, all-important reason. It has to be built upon the will and wisdom of God, not the will and so-called wisdom of man.

Once Abraham has accepted Isaac is the heir and puts all his eggs in that one basket, he has moved up a level in his understanding and trust.

- Sarah commands him to put Ishmael and Hagar out of the house once for all; he balks at such unkindness, but the Lord reassures him, which gives him the strength to do what was necessary;

Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed. (Gen 21.12-13)
- it's very possible Sarah was motivated by simple jealousy, as before; but it's also possible that she too was beginning to recognize the nature of the Promises of God, and that it had been reserved to Isaac

Abraham's final exam, wherein he learns the most and demonstrates his faith most perfectly, is in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac.

- You're all familiar with the story, I'm sure...
- in both the 'sacrifice' of Isaac and in him as the chosen heir that God is pointing Abraham beyond the boy himself and even beyond this world, to the Promise he was going to bring about *through* that boy; it's about listening to God and trusting in him, not trying to make our own way.
- And in believing in the Promises of God beyond Isaac, he gets his son back, as if from the grave, and has laid the sound foundation for the recreation of the human race, for the reordering of the world according to the will and pleasure of God, not the will and lust of men

In his sojourn, I see a succession of three events that finally make it 'click' for Abraham:

- trusting that his marriage is sacred, the Promise is about what it will produce (21.9-13)
- sacrificing Isaac (22.15-19)
- the death of Sarah (23.1-4)

After all these things he embraces his identity: "I am a stranger and sojourner with you..." (23.4)

And he refuses to find a wife for Isaac from the nations around them, but insists on taking a girl from his old family, taking her out of her homeland and making her a sojourner with them

So we have it that a man with no land and only one son becomes the beginning of the work of God, restoring order out of the chaos of mankind; by faith, and embracing his identity as a "stranger and pilgrim in the earth," he refuses to lay the foundations of something as temporary and fleeting as a house or a city, but instead prefers to live in tents, travelling light through this world and longing for the life to come, for the blessing of his descendants; and in so doing, "he looked for a city which hath foundations," everlasting and immovable foundations, "whose builder and maker is God."

Abraham didn't pass on any land to his descendants, but he did pass on the beginnings of the Kingdom of God; and in their longing for the heavenly Jerusalem, true descendants of Abraham can begin, through the grace and faith, hope, and love, to "keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."

Only by being children of Abraham, sharing his faith and obedience, can we begin to understand God's purposes for marriage. Only through faith can we love our wives, only through faith can we understand marriage as something holy, as a powerful sacrament which proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ; only through faith can we raise children with the right motivations, that is, with the Gospel in view; only through faith and embracing the mindset of a sojourner can we give our children an inheritance greater than houses or cars or an investment portfolio.

And by sharing Abraham's faith, now realized in Jesus Christ, we become active participants in God's ongoing work of reordering creation, and begin to crawl out of the darkness and chaos of this world and into his light, health, and joy.