

The Threshold of Abraham and Sarah: The Dangers of Star Gazing

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April 12, 2015, FCMF # 1

Scriptures:

Genesis 15:1-7 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless... You have given me no offspring..." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Then he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess."

Genesis 17:1-10 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him... No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham... I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations... And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God." ... As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised."

Genesis 17:15-17 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

Sermon:

Welcome to the fifth Sunday of Easter.

That's right, as I have mentioned before

Easter is not just one Sunday but an entire season.

And even though its a new season

we are sticking with our Lenten theme

"Crossing the Threshold for Transformation."

After all, what could be a bigger threshold

for transformation than the Easter story,

where death is transformed into life!

This morning is also part two of a five part series
that began during Lent with the story of Noah.
This morning I want to look at the story
of Abraham and Sarah and God's covenant with them
as another monumental threshold crossed
in humanities attempt at understanding the Divine.
It is a threshold, that certainly fits our earlier definitions,
"as a place of wild possibility... a place that invites us to stop,
to imagine, to dream, and to question.

Now allow me to remind you
of a few things that I said about rainbows.
First, in spite of some troubling scientific concerns
(the impossibility of covering the entire earth with water)
and some theological concerns
(drowning all but a handful of land creatures),
I felt that the story of Noah's flood, was worthy of our consideration
as a story of a monumental transformation
in humanity's understanding of the Divine Creator.
I introduced the word covenant and that in this instance,
God's solemn promise to never, ever again to flood the earth.
Now I acknowledged, at the time, that this
might not seem like all that big of a deal to us,
but for those in the ancient world who would have
first told this story, this would have been a really big deal.
In that ancient world view, God had no limits whatsoever,
He was the unquestionable source for all that was good and evil.
A solemn promise, then, by God to actually limit himself,
would have been a monumental shift in human understanding.

Secondly, that covenant was between God and only one family.
All Noah and his children had to do
to fulfill their part of the bargain was to build and fill
that ark - one and done you might say.
God's sign of that covenant was a rainbow,
a recurring symbol to remind us all of the hope
and optimism that God has in us.
It can also be a reminder to us that God has never
and will never give up on us.
And that no matter how bad things seem to get
or how much we may mess things up,

God will always be able to find something within us
worth saving and worth redeeming.
But God's covenant with Noah was not, however,
frozen in perpetuity once all that water had dried up.
Not at all, for God's covenant actually undergoes
several significant changes in how humans understood it.

And this is what is happening in our story
this morning about Abraham and Sarah.
God is beginning this expansion project
with his covenant in several significant ways.
First it expands from one chosen family of Noah
to an entire nation of chosen people, Israelites.
A nation that is called to resemble the stars in the night sky,
and that is to be both distinct and yet limitless!
And the ultimate purpose of these distinct chosen people,
is to assist God in the ultimate quest to bless the entire world.
This story, like Noah's, is essentially also about redemption.
Through Noah and his family, God saved just enough people
and other land dwelling creatures so that God could start over.
Now, through Abraham and Sarah's faithfulness
God will use an entire distinct nation of folks
to save humanity from its proclivities towards self-destruction.

Maybe this time, with an entire nation of folks
listening to God's voice and walking in God's ways,
God's peace, love and joy will infiltrate through out the world,
just like spices in a recipe, or yeast in bread?
And as real world examples of walking with God,
distinct like cities upon a hill top, or stars in the night sky,
other nations will too seek to walk in God's ways.

The sign of God's covenant with Noah was the rainbow,
but for Abraham it was the sign of male circumcision.
Now this may seem quite crude if not downright unpleasant to us?
But let's see if we can't try and understand it in another way?

We know that all people groups, whether they be nations,
tribes, or even fans of a particular sports team,
develop distinctive languages, dress and norms of behavior.

By participating in these common behaviors, language
and dress, individuals feel a sense of belonging and connectedness,
and we can also distinguish, who belongs to what group.
Knowing you belong is important
and distinctions can provide handy shortcuts.
But of course we know that there can be
many negative consequences to these group markers.
We see this with in our own historical group of Mennonites and Amish, where there are
numerous subgroups with in this larger movement.
Many of these subgroups not only share in markers
that distinguish them all from the larger culture,
but simultaneously each subgroup has distinctive markers
that distinguish them from all the other sub groups.

So lets look at two key distinctions that maybe most Mennonites
could actually agree on, service and simplicity?
We know that simplicity is expressed,
and sometimes vigorously enforced, in many different forms.
At one end of the spectrum, some cannot use zippers,
or can only drive buggies, or women must wear a head covering
and all the men must trim their beards in a certain style.
For these folks, keeping up with the latest styles and technologies
only serves to make our lives more busy and complicated
and thus leaving so much less time to serve God and others.
For us here at FCMF we might interpret simplicity differently,
while also making a direct connection to serving others.

Our building and sanctuary isn't nearly as fancy as most other churches.
But by keeping our space simple,
we are reminded not only to stay humble,
but we are also maintaining a building which is more practical
and thus it can be used to serve others and other purposes
not only on Sunday but through out the rest of the week.

But back to Abraham and Sarah and all of their subsequent progeny.
God, wants people who will distinguish themselves
from all those other folks around them.
And God seems to not just want a distinctive that is obvious
but distinctions that are, as it is in this case, irreversible.

A mark, a choice, that can be a daily reminder
of where and to whom one's ultimate allegiance lies.

Of course I think we all know the potential problems
with these kinds of cultural markers.
Folks too often quickly forget the original meaning of the markers
or they can fail to sufficiently inform subsequent generations
of the original purposes of such distinctions.
Rather than leading us to the original meanings
the markers become ends in themselves
and actually begin to stunt that freeing force in our lives!
We forget that in its purest motivation,
outwardly distinctive markers of looking and acting differently,
are meant to enable each of us to maintain
our ultimate allegiance to God's Kingdom
and to keep our focus on what should be
our deepest desire and that is to belong to God's people.

Abraham and Sarah had already crossed one threshold
when they left their homeland in Ur
to emigrate to this new land that God had called them to.
And now God is calling them to cross over another threshold
one that will make them a part of God's
salvific and redemptive plan to bless all of creation.
God is calling them to a whole new way of being,
by developing new customs, new rituals
and above all a new understandings of the Divine.
But as we see even Abraham finds this new threshold,
a bit hard to fathom and so ludicrous
that he can't help but fall to the ground laughing!
Come on God, let's be real, one hundred year old men
and 90 year old women can not have babies!
Or as the prophet Jeremiah expressed it,
"Can... the leopard change its spots?"
Well, no, all of those things are impossible
at least impossible for people and leopards to do,
but all things are possible with God!

In Peter's epistle we see this same call to those who are followers of Jesus.

☐ "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own "peculiar" people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God." 1 Peter 2:9-12

And just like Abraham and Sarah's progeny,
we too may not always live up to the purest motivations
in our attempts at living out the call to peculiarity.
We know that far too many churches are parochial and judgmental
and thus end up hurting far more folks than they bless.
As Peter says, our purpose is to be "God's own people"
so that through us God's great love
can be better understood and experienced by everyone.
We are as, Jesus said, to be the leaven in the bread
or as those who like Cajun food might say,
"the hot sauce in God's Jambalaya!"
We look and act the way we do
not so that other might feel judged,
but so that others will see in us just a little portion
of God's active redeeming presence in this old world!
And perhaps they too may experience just a little bit
of the truest form of love that, like stars in the night sky,
is not only distinct from any other form of love
but also, like those stars appears limitless.
But is a love that is only complete and full
when we are able to share it freely and abundantly!