

Genesis 11-22

Abraham: Surprising Modern Man*

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The Congregational Church of Needham

The origins of our faith begin in the dark recess of time, where storylines emerge from the deep woods of memory like fertile creeks that feed the rivers of history. Sitting as we do next to the oceans of information about how civilization began it is good from time to time to hike into the undergrowth and see the streams that form the source of all that we have come to know of as the Judeo Christian tradition.

Long, long ago, Abram* lived in Mesopotamia, a region between two rivers on the border of modern northeast Syria and Iraq. With abundant water, it was a good land with fertile pastures for flocks of livestock. Abram and his family counted themselves fortunate in a region of the world where most people had to contend with dry dusty land, and their livestock went thirsty too often. Many people envied Abram and attacked his territory to take it away. But Abram was a strong man and a good leader. His people always prevailed against those who sought to interlope.

One day at dawn Abram saw a sign which he interpreted as a message from a god. A cloud was pointing in a new direction and with it came a voice saying – “Leave your country and go to a new place that I will show you. Follow my direction and I will make your tribe into a great people.” Now, the influence of the gods was important in those days so Abram directed his whole extended family to pack their belongings and start a journey. His wife Sarai*, his nephew Lot, all their servants, flocks of sheep and many possessions formed a great caravan of refugees. Abram led them to the west to Canaan,

**Abraham was originally named Abram and Sarah was Sarai. They changed their names mid-way through our story when they formed a new covenant with God.*

which is modern day Lebanon and Israel, leaving a good land that Abram and Sarai enjoyed and had kept with so much effort.

In Canaan again Abram heard a voice promising to care for him and his people. Abram was shocked and ran to tell his wife, Sarai, because the god he had heard in Mesopotamia had the same voice as the god he heard in this place. In those days everyone knew that different gods dwelled in different regions. They had been traveling for days, but Abram was sure, "It was clearly the same god, using the same words and speaking with the same voice". Sarai looked confused: No one will accept this. Gods do not connect to a tribe or family and follow them."

This new land was not as good as Mesopotamia had been so times were hard and food was scarce. Abram advised his nephew to leave them and take his flocks to the nearby city of Sodom, so they would not compete with grazing. Abram had heard from the caravans that there was food in Egypt and took his family to south. Before they arrived in Egypt Abram told Sarai that he was afraid Sarai's beauty would prove a liability to him. People might kill him in order to marry her. So he suggested they pose as sister and brother so the people at court would curry his favor instead. Her beauty was renowned and Pharaoh, himself, was taken with Sarai and gave Abram slaves and livestock to have her hand in marriage and bring her into his harem. As soon as he did the Pharaoh endured a string of bad luck and tragedy came upon the royal court. Wise men told the Pharaoh his misfortune was caused by Sarai and Abram's god so Pharaoh banished the couple to change his luck. A shrewd man, Abram left Egypt much richer than he was.

At this point in the story I want to stop to remind you that the Bible is no moral allegory. From the very beginning no one's lives are sugar-coated. While it can be upsetting to consider that the heroes from the past who started our faith, are so human and, at times, so flawed, there is also a level of

comfort deep in the marrow of these bones of our tradition. The Bible's candor reminds us that life is complex. We all make trade-offs. No one is without some regrets.

Having returned from Egypt, Abram again heard God speaking to him. It was at night that God spoke to him. Perhaps he heard the Lord because his soul was at peace, or maybe Abram was lying awake listening to Sarai's breathing and thinking about the things he had done to her in Egypt, or questioning why they took this trip at all. Who knows? But that night, he heard God say, "Abram, I have been watching over you and since you have been so faithful I want you to have everything your heart desires. Abram replied, "What do I care about riches? Sarai cannot have children so we have enough for ourselves and I cannot leave an inheritance to anyone." God said, "Abram look at the sky this night." It was a night when the firmament was ablaze, so full of stars the heavens were twinkling. God said "Your descendants will be too numerous to count, as many as these stars. In time, I will give you this land of Canaan where you are dwelling now. "

Abram replied, "I am so old, so I am not sure I understand but I want to believe what you are saying." The next morning Abram talked to Sarai about his vision and she felt badly that they could not have children, so she suggested he go to her maid Hagar, which was the custom when people had no offspring and wanted to consolidate their endowment and pass on their land and cattle. So Abraham and Hagar has a son named Ishmael. Abraham was happy; but it was hard for both women. Hagar felt contempt for Sarah, and Sarah was angry so she mistreated her servant.

When Ishmael was still young three visitors came to the tent where Abraham and Sarah dwelled. Abraham recognized that these three were holy men and messengers sent from God. So he instructed his servants to kill a young savory lamb and prepare it. While they talked and ate together, the three messengers predicted that Sarah would have a son. Abram was astounded and Sarah laughed out loud as she eavesdropped on the conversation, because she was way too old to have children.

When the travelers had rested they travelled on to Sodom. Abraham came too. As they journeyed the messengers predicted that God would destroy Sodom, because the people were so cruel and evil, there. Abraham was appalled that God would kill a whole city because some of the residents were evil. There has been much debate about what type of evil characterized Sodom. A close reading of the text shows that the residents of Sodom were known to abuse their power, especially the power they had over strangers and sojourners. When strangers came to town the men were known to take advantage of them in the most deplorable ways. When they got to Sodom the three holy men stayed at Lot's house but Abraham remained on the outskirts of the city because he had a bone to pick with God.

He questioned the Lord, "Why would you destroy a whole city just to punish some of the residents? What if some residents are innocent? Are you not abusing your power?"

God said "if I find 50 good people in Sodom, I will spare the entire city".

Abraham was not satisfied. "What if there are 45 decent people will you spare the city?"

God relented but still Abraham persevered. "What if there are 30 good people?"

They went back and forth like this until God agreed that if they found 10 good people in Sodom, the city would be spared.

Abraham went home.

When the men of the city heard that strangers were under Lot's roof they surrounded the house and demanded the men come out so they could have their way with them, as was their custom. The crowd grew sinister and vicious, threatening to bang down the door, so Lot was terrified and torn in his responsibilities to his own family's safety and to the holy men under his roof. In desperation, Lot offered his daughters to the men outside. But before the girls were sacrificed, angels blinded the men and told Lot's family to leave the town immediately, and not look back, because the Lord was about to destroy the city. If you are seeking a modern explanation for what unfolded in Sodom that day, my best guess is that a volcano erupted and hot molten lava covered everything. Lot's wife did not see the danger or heed the angel's warning. She stayed to gather more belongings and the fire rained down and lava crusted over everything and everyone.

It was not long before Sarah gave birth to Isaac and, as her son grew, Isaac and Ishmael played happily together. But Sarah was jealous and before long she demanded that Ishmael and his mother be banished to the desert. It was a sad day for Abraham because he had hoped to enjoy watching both his sons grow up together but he felt he must send Hagar and Ishmael away into the desert. Life in the wilderness was hard indeed and they might have perished but God brought them to a hidden spring and promised to protect them. The nation of Islam traces its roots to this young man, Ishmael, which makes all three religions – Jewish, Christian and Muslim, come from one man- whose descendants were as many as the stars of the heaven.

What are the lessons we can learn from the story of Abraham?

In the first place the story of Abraham reminds us there is more to life.

The first thing that surprised me about Abraham was that he was so prosperous before God called him. Yet he left his life of success to wander in regions he did not know, to take risks and court danger. He was secure in every way but he left all that security for an adventure. He was living in the Tigris Euphrates River valley, the cradle of civilization because it was the Fertile Crescent. He had it all - money, success, power. But he must have had something else that we often under-estimate. He was wise enough to know he did not have it all. The story of Abraham reminds us that even when you have everything you thought you wanted you may yet search for meaning, or purpose you cannot find, even with success. Even the best house, the right lawn, the good schools, may not scratch this itch. Even an enthusiastic trainer who gets results may not do it. Even well-rounded kids may not satisfy everything you yearn for. There is more life than the right neighborhood or the trophy family.

Bob Dylan wrote, “it may be the devil or it may be the Lord” but you will worship something. If you worship your body you will never be fit enough. If you worship money you will never be rich enough. If you worship the intellect you will never be smart enough. If you worship power you will

sacrifice many things for your ambitions. But there is a lie hidden in all of those endeavors, the lie of self-sufficiency. There is more to life. The Bible portrays Abraham as mature, and wise. Abraham did not start out on a spiritual quest because he was gullible, but because he knew that this journey was worth the sacrifices. He was so intrigued by a voice that called to his restlessness, and pulled into a deeper river of understanding. That is what brings us to worship when we could be doing other things. We come because we recognize that getting everything right is nothing if we forget the life of our spirits.

In the second place the story says that God seeks us as much or more than we seek God.

Abraham knew he was not stepping into the void. There was someone there. God initiated this conversation and God persisted in talking to Abraham. As they began to talk through prayer or dreams or visions or intuition or whatever, a two-way conversation developed. Most of us assume that the burden of faith is all on us. We think we need to entreat God, or curry God's favor.

But this story depicts a friendship with a remarkable level of equality. When Abraham argued God listened and even relented. When Abraham advocated for the good people who might be living in Sodom, God was persuaded. When Abraham pushed God, God gave in. I am not sure I would have been as patient with a seventh grader who pushed me the way Abraham pushed God. But God is easy going, reasonable, flexible, and slow to anger. It is not a master servant relationship. These two could talk. Abraham shared his dreams and disappointments; God did the same. When they gazed at the stars of the heavens God's hope was that there would be whole host of people to talk to one day. God is hoping to hear from more of us. This opportunity to form a relationship with that voice you cannot see but hear in whispers in the night – is available to each of us.