

Lessons from the Patriarchs sermon series

“Abraham”

[Genesis 12:1-4](#)

Today we are starting a 4-week sermon series called “Lessons from the Patriarchs.” The dictionary defines a patriarch as a male head of a family or tribe, a person who is regarded as the founder of a colony or religion, and simply a man of great age and dignity. The biblical patriarchs are the family line of men God used to establish the nation of Israel, and narrowly defined, they are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s 12 sons. This sermon series includes the first three patriarchs, and Joseph, one of the 12 sons of Jacob.

The stories of the biblical patriarchs that had been handed down by word of mouth for many generations until they were recorded in the book of Genesis are more than just biographies. Instead, they are stories of the patriarchs’ faith and trust in God. They tell us about the relationships between God and God’s chosen people. And so as we read and reflect on the stories of the 4 great patriarchs of the Bible, we will seek to learn something about God and our relationships with God as well.

Let’s now turn to the story of Abraham. Here are some facts about the first patriarch that tell us about his significance:

1. He is revered in the traditions of three major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
2. He is considered to be the founder of the nation of Israel.
3. His name is mentioned about 300 times in the Bible.
4. As the first patriarch, he is the most important person in the Old Testament.
5. In the New Testament, its first book, the Gospel of Matthew begins with these words, “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Jesus spoke of Abraham’s faith, and so did the Apostle Paul over and over again.

As we heard from Today’s scripture Jacob beautifully read for us, the story of Abraham in Genesis begins with his encounter with God. We do not know much about his life until he was called by God except for the fact that he was the son of Terah and husband of Sarah with no children, as recorded in chapter 11. One day, God appears and says, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great... I will bless those who bless you and the ones who curse you, I will curse; and in you, all the families of earth shall be blessed...”

This promise of God to Abraham marks one of the most dramatic transitions in the Bible. In the chapters of Genesis leading up to God’s calling of Abraham, we see that the world is filled with corruption, violence, and destruction. Throughout the stories of Adam and Eve’s fall in the garden of Eden, their son, Cain killing his brother Abel, Noah and the flood, and the tower of Babel, there is a pattern of humanity’s rebellion and sin being met with God’s judgment and grace.

In chapter 12, we see how God seeks to address the problem with a new strategy. God chooses Abraham (and also his wife Sarah as we find out in following chapters) to start over again. And, God does so through a blessing.

We all love blessings, don't we? Tomorrow is New Year's Day according to the lunar calendar, which is observed in many Asian countries. As I wrote in the Midweek Message last month, while we say in America, "Happy New Year!", the new year's greeting in Korea is "새해 복 많이 받으세요," which translates into English as, "Many blessings in the new year!" So, on the eve of the lunar New Year's Day, I would like to say to you, "새해 복 많이 받으세요!" "I wish you abundant blessings of God to you, your family, and all your loved ones!"

Though we Americans do not use the word blessing in our new year's greeting, we actually use it every day. When someone sneezes, we say, "Bless you!" At the end of a conversation, we say, "Have a blessed day!" Responding to the question of "How are you today?", we say "I feel blessed."

And the word blessing is an important word in our faith tradition. In the story of creation, human beings are blessed by God (Genesis 1:22 & 28). They lose the divine blessing through their rebellion (Genesis 3). But, then, God blesses them again through Noah (Genesis 9) and again through Abraham (Genesis 12). About this pattern of human fall and God's redemption in Genesis, Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman writes in the introduction of *The Story of God Bible Commentary*, "Thus, the book of Genesis lays the foundation for all of the history of redemption... this story of God's work of redemption continues throughout the Old Testament." (p. 16)

And, as we see in the story of Abraham, the characters in the story of God's work of redemption are not the usual suspects. Rather, they are the least qualified persons, the people you would least likely suspect to be used by God for great things. Abraham was 75 years old when God appeared to him. Though anyone in their 70's and even 80's are considered young nowadays, in the world of Abraham, I am sure he was just an old man. As I am sure his wife was thought to be an old woman. And to this old couple, God makes a bold promise, "I will make of you a great nation... and make your name great."

It's a most unlikely couple that receives this blessing. From the outside looking in, it seems to be impossible. How can this couple with no children, with even no capability to have children receive such a promise? Here, we see another pattern that is found throughout the Bible: God's mighty acts of deliverance in the face of impossibility - a way where there is no way. God's promise to make a great nation of Abraham and Sarah is to be fulfilled by God.

Just a chapter prior to the call of Abraham and Sarah, we have the story of how the builders of the tower of Babel sought to reach God through their efforts. They sought to make their names great for themselves, but their pride and self-centeredness led them only to confusion and scattering.

In God's promise to Abraham that his name would be made great, we see that it is the other way around. It is God who reaches us. It is the experience of being delivered out of the impossible, the experience of receiving a blessing beyond what we thought possible that helps us to see this reality. Indeed, we are who we are through God's blessing.

And the promise given to Abraham, the blessing that God will fulfill is not just for Abraham's name sake. The blessings extend outward, reaching other people. Not just some privileged people, but all families of the earth "shall be" blessed through Abraham, not "will be" as many other translations read. Blessing others was not a prediction but a command for him to fulfill.

Friends, God who called and blessed Abraham and Sarah to bless the world calls us, too. Yes, God calls you and me to bless God's children. God's blessings we receive are not to be stored for ourselves but to be shared with others. God calls and blesses us too because God is still committed to blessing all of creation and all of humanity. It's is a divine command and expectation for us.

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great" Long ago, God spoke these words of blessing to Abraham. Today, God whispers them into our ears, too. Do you hear them? Do you hear the small, still voice of God, reaching out to you?

But, for God's blessings to Abraham to be actualized, there was one condition that had to be met. God said to Abraham, "Go from your country, and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Yes. Abraham was asked to take a leap of faith. He was asked to trust in God and go into the unknown. To a place that he did not even know yet.

Most of us have experiences of leaving our parents' home and moving to other places - different towns, different states, and even different countries. Perhaps, for some of us, they were rather traumatic experiences. But, at least, we knew where we were heading to. Abraham left his hometown and country without knowing where God was leading him to. Abraham's response to God's promise of blessing shows us his complete surrender and obedience to God's will.

Did you notice that the text does not tell us what Abraham said to God in response? It just says, "So, Abram went, as the Lord had told him..."

Campbell family, in order to receive God's blessing, in order to be a blessing to all nations, our yes to God has to be more than through our words. The yes that God seeks from us is with our actions, with our lives.

And in order to say yes to God, we must be willing to embrace the unknown with the fullness of our lives. We must take a leap of faith, leaving behind what we know in exchange for something new, something God is seeking to show us if only we are willing to follow.

May we learn from the example of Abraham and respond to God's call by giving our total commitment, our complete obedience and surrender.

Amen.