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Charme Robarts

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CHARME ROBARTS

Abraham stands tall in our memory as one whose belief made him a friend of God. The opening verses of the Abraham narratives (Gen 12:1-9) give a succinct version of God calling Abram and sending him to an unknown place with little other than promises. Remarkably, Abram, goes, builds altars, and calls on the name of the Lord.

This summarizing passage represents the general consensus of the New Testament writers as well. Paul presents Abraham as the ipso fact of justification by faith (Romans 4), and Hebrews 11 spends several verses on Abram's obedience even down to his willingness to submit to sacrificing his son Isaac.

So Abraham sets the standard for our faith. But none of this is to say that having faith is easy. The story continues with Abraham and Sarah facing issues that easily parallel our own lives. So we approach the stories about Abraham (and Sarah) with eyes open to the hazards that await the person of faith. But the threats do not stand alone—the stories also offer up possibilities of broadening faith even in the face of doubts, fears, and seeming impossibilities.

As disciples who want to make other disciples, we can use these stories of faith and struggle—as well as our own stories of grappling with the call of God—to capture the attention of our friends who are seeking faith. Passing on the faith takes place when we let others see that the things we believe may not be reduced to a set of doctrines we assent to but are things we experience at the hand of God.

The biblical story is indeed our story. It tells us who we are, why we are in the mess we are in, and who can rescue us. Serious attention to biblical anthropology as well as theology is critical to the task of disciple-making. Abraham and Sarah become our partners as we try to communicate faith to others.

THE BACKDROP: GOD'S UNREQUITED LOVE

It is important to note that the call of Abram in Genesis 12 does not occur in a vacuum. Genesis 1 and 2 have already presented God as Creator and as completely Other than his creation. And yet we are pleasantly surprised when the narrative shows us God has special longings for the people he created. We see this quickly with the announcement that humans will be made "in our image, after our likeness." Then, God moves quickly to remedy the problem of Adam's lack of a partner, creating a woman to share with him all the blessings of *Imago Dei*. It appears that God wants things to be good for his image bearers.

So the relationship is forged in Genesis 1 and 2 but unfortunately is foiled only a few words later, in chapter 3, when the man and woman end up hiding from God. From there and throughout the next eight chapters we read of the emerging culture of wickedness and murder born from a steady resistance to relationship with God.

The story of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11) precedes the call of Abraham—painting something of a summary scene of confusion and irony as the creation seeks to "transcend the limits of its creaturely condition."[1] God responds to this crisis as he did with Adam and Eve in the garden, with Cain after Abel's mur-

der, and with the contemporaries of Noah. God's response is judgment and punishment, *but not abandonment.*

It is after the mostly disastrous relationship between God and his image bearers recounted in chapters 1-11:9 that the writer of Genesis returns to a genealogy begun in chapter 10. The focus is on the family of Shem and specifically on the family of Terah and his sons Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Terah and part of his family set out from Ur of the Chaldeans and go toward the land of Canaan. They only make it to Haran (11: 10-32). It is there that Terah's son Abram hears from God.

THE CALL AND THE PROMISE

> Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 12:1-3)

The often-discussed difficulty of leaving home, culture, and household should not be overlooked. Abandoning what is familiar is something we naturally resist—sometimes to the point of pain. Abram appears to have left easily, and, taken at face value, leaving home may not have been difficult for him. After all, Terah had pulled up roots and moved, and so perhaps this was not such a great challenge. But as Abram would soon see, leaving physically would mean another kind of relinquishment. God would soon show him that leaving home meant leaving *the ways* of home.

CALLED AWAY FROM THE FAMILIAR

In this discussion, home should stand for our familiar ways of thinking about our selves, the world, and who is in charge. God assures Abram twice in six verses that he would have offspring and a land (12:2-3, 7). There was no tangible evidence of either of these because Abram's wife, Sarai, was barren (11:30) and because the Canaanites were in the land (12:6). Familiar ways of thinking demand that there be evidence that we can make our plans a reality or that there is reasonable probability of that happening. For the person following God, a new view must be embraced.

In Abram and Sarai's case, the opportunity to learn this lesson comes quickly in the narrative. A famine plagues the land God has sent them to, and they leave for Egypt to find relief. On the way, Abram instructs his beautiful wife, Sarai, to tell the Egyptians she is his sister in hopes that this lie will protect Abram from harm when the men of that country take her for their own. Sarai agrees, and things go as Abram predicted. Sarai is taken into Pharaoh's harem, and Abram receives nice gifts in exchange.

But not all "blessings" are from God. Pharaoh's gifts to Abram do not shield either man from God's displeasure over the situation. Inflicted by disease from the hand of God, Pharaoh throws Abram and Sarai out of Egypt. Without moralizing about the lie or about Abram risking Sarai's safety and her moral dignity, the story emphasizes the consequence of Abram trying to protect himself at any cost. Being a blessing to others is more than being kind and nice; it is also behaving in ways that limit the potential for sin. Abram opened the door for Pharaoh to sin against Sarai.

When God called Abram, he stated his intention to bless all people and for Abram to be the source of blessing. The old familiar ways of thinking do not include responsibility to be a blessing to others. But Abram is being called away from the familiar.

The disciple who is turning toward God is called out of self-preservation to trust in God for survival and to concern for the well-being of others. Life under the call of God is not "all about me." Most of us would readily admit that, but in the day-to-day grind of survival, it is easy to capitulate into ways of self-preservation—as Abram did in this instance. Abram's sin jeopardized Pharaoh's household. God cared about that.

Being a blessing has to do, in part, with the example we set for others. When I was young, this was stressed sometimes to a legalistic extent. And the emphasis was clearly on doing or not doing certain things that would be a poor influence on others. In casting off some of this legalism (which sometimes looked like a messiah complex bound up in frantic definitions of perfection), it is possible that we have now turned to an apathetic disregard for our responsibility for the spiritual well-being of others.

Being a blessing to others by integrity, compassion, wisdom, and courage is still a characteristic of faithful discipleship—and reflects the nature of God to the world looking on. Abram's failure in this is accented when the narrator reveals that it was Pharaoh who demonstrated concern not to sin against God in regard to Sarai. Pharaoh showed more God-fear than Abraham!

What Happens after Failure?

Expelled from Egypt, Abram, Sarai and Lot return to Canaan and to Bethel, where Abram had previously built an altar. For the second time (12:8, now 13:4) Abram called on the name of the Lord, an obvious reference to worship but also perhaps indicating that Abram, in spite of his recent failure, is seeking the Lord who called him and made the great promises. This time he does not hear a word from God.

The narrative doesn't end here, but it gives us pause to linger. Abram has experienced the trauma of Pharaoh's wrath. We speculate about his relationship with Sarai since he put his own safety above any tenderness for her. As he trudged back to Canaan did he wonder about his previous encounter with God? Will God speak to him again? Did Abram wonder if he understood the promise? After all, though his possessions were increasing and though he was moving about the land of Canaan freely, he was hardly a great nation—he wasn't even a father! And as for having a great name, it seems doubtful that Pharaoh praised Abram as great. Did Abram wrestle with his failure? Did he understand it?

Returning to the altar and calling on the name of the Lord is a good sign. Abram has faith, but as we imagine experiences with Pharaoh (and Sarai) and as we wonder with Abram about his wife's barrenness, we can identify with the problem of doubt. Self-doubt perhaps pushes to the top. It seems that Abram has been called to a task he is poorly prepared to perform. In the case of Pharaoh and Sarai, Abram was not a blessing.

Who among us in the following of God has not felt the sting of failure? The sting threatens to prompt us to abandon the path. But Abram calls on the Lord. We wish with him for a word from God again, but the text doesn't provide it here.

Discipleship is like that. There are times when God seems silent. Times when the failures of life cause uncertainty and when the word of God can seem muddled in our heads. What to do? Worship. Call on the Lord. The text leaves open the possibility that God will seem silent, but it also invites us to go to God. This ambiguity is instructive, reflecting the real life experience of embracing the call of God.

Does Discipleship Always Mean Clear Vision?

Though Abram does not hear from God at that moment in the text, the narrative does continue. We see Abram and Lot moving around Canaan together but then deciding to separate so each can have enough room for herds and flocks. Abram gives Lot the choice of the land. Is Abram being generous and mannerly, or is he carelessly risking the land God has promised to him? Has he learned from the experience with Pharaoh that trying to preserve his interests in his own way will not work?

Does having faith in God mean we always know the best way to handle every situation? If Abram is being generous, does that mean God will reward him for this virtue? We know our own discipleship does not always work that way. Are we willing to admit that discipleship is not always simple? As we teach others about discipleship, we must be honest about our uncertainties. No, it's not that we must muddle through the life of faith hoping to understand some great riddle God has placed before us, but it is dishonest to say being a disciple means that all decisions suddenly become easy or that we become endowed with super wisdom.

The situation with Abram and Lot reflects real-life difficulties of day-to-day problems. Tensions mount between people. Trying to be just and fair is a difficult task. We have long felt comfortable conjecturing that Abram was being generous by giving Lot the choice. It is equally possible that he just didn't know what to do. Sometimes people of faith don't know what to do.

In this story, the writer brings God's purpose to the forefront. Though neither Abram, Lot, nor readers of the story know what is best, God is focused on his promise to Abram. Lot chooses the land beyond the Jordan River. So Abram, good to his word, goes the other direction. Now the Lord speaks again, renewing the promise that Canaan will belong to Abram's offspring. Abram is told to look in every direction to see the land God will give him, and the promise of offspring is repeated using language of immeasurability, "they will be like the dust of the earth."

A Story (Life) Framed by Worship

The story of the division of the land is bracketed by two scenes of worship (13:4, 18). The first falls after Abram's failure in Egypt and just before he tells Lot to choose the land he wants. The second worship scene rounds out the story. Within the brackets is a situation familiar to all of us in which there are more questions than answers. We wonder if Abram should offer Lot the choice. We wonder if virtue will be rewarded or if foolishness will bring problems. We recognize our own lack of clarity in some situations. In spite of this, will we turn to God in worship as a way of admitting our inability to know everything? Will we seek the refuge of worship when we have failed as Abram did in the case of Pharaoh?

Building altars and worshipping has punctuated the story thus far. And God's visits to Abram have been steady. The narrative is persuading us that God is seeking Abram and Abram is seeking him. God is the constant and perfect partner, repeating the same promise, returning to Abram in spite of failure. Abram's part is by no means perfect, as the narrative will continue to show, but he keeps seeking. The honesty of the narrative speaks to us. As we share the story with others and add our own similar struggles we can connect with those we are teaching.

Who Is the Story About?

Chapter 14 is a tale that presents Abram as a war hero, a story that seems to be out of sync with the preceding and following stories. But it is perhaps this oddity that draws our attention to the real point of this section. Abram gathers up a small number of men from his camp to pursue a coalition of Mesopotamian kings who have captured Lot and the citizens of Sodom. Abram is victorious, rescuing Lot and the others, as well as recovering all the possessions lost in the battle. What follows are four successive declarations of God's name.

From nowhere, Melchizedek, identified as the priest of the God Most High, honors and blesses Abram in the name of God Most High. Then the priest blesses God Most High who had delivered the enemies into Abram's hand. In the same scene, the king of Sodom appears and tells Abram to return the people to his land but to keep the booty for himself. Abram answers no, swearing by the Lord, God Most High that he will not take the things that do not belong to him.

Abram is pictured as a successful warrior, but the story by the fourfold repetition of the name leans toward God as the real power. It is as if the narrative is persuading us to trust God. God is persuading Abram to trust more, and now we are pulled in too. True, Abram's victory is impressive. We take notice of power and victory. We appreciate the valor and the family loyalty. We can imagine ourselves spiriting away in pursuit of bad guys to rescue our loved ones.

Although the narrative doesn't put this image down, it does put forward the real power. His name, Most High and Creator of Heaven and Earth, states that he has no equal. It would be foolish to trust in one's own power in the face of his.

The narrative teaches us about faith by giving us a window into Abram's life. But it is a mistake to focus solely on him. God captures the scene as one who is not limited to dealings with Abram but who is also God of Melchizedek,[2] and Lord over armies.

Stories Like Our Own

The Abraham narratives continue with further episodes of faith and trial. They invite the reader to imagine the scenes of awe when God speaks and appears, repeating his promises and challenging Abram to wait for their unfolding. Abraham's (and Sarah's) response draws us in as we struggle with them to understand what trusting God will mean. We recognize our kinship with them as they reach for the obvious solutions to Sarah's empty womb. Why not Eliezer? Why not rent a womb from Hagar? We easily feel Sarah's jealousy when Hagar becomes pregnant, and we know the temptation to use the power at our disposal just as she did. We pause and wonder, "what kind of people has God chosen to bear his blessing?" We are forced to admit he didn't have better choices.

We take our place in the narrative as people also called by God, though like Abraham and Sarah we can do nothing about our own barren souls. We see ourselves as given to the familiar ways of taking matters into our own hands. But we also feel the pull of this faithful and powerful God who makes promises. We see ourselves like Abram and Sarah limping along in faith, but in faith nonetheless.

These stories seem to me to be appealing to the post-modern imagination as it seeks for something beyond this world. Our collective inability to solve our own dilemmas, to see everything clearly, have forced us to abandon the black-and-white, simplicity of the past that pretended more control than we could really muster. The complexities and failings of life can lead us to God Most High who spoke to Abram with promises that had to do with things bigger than one person.

The stories of Abraham and Sarah resist a "do these 7 things and you'll be successful" strategy for faithful living—and so does the postmodern mindset. For Abraham and Sarah—and all of us—the way of faith in a God who is simply not on our time schedule (25 years pass before Isaac is born) is a road marked by trial and error. But for those who persist, the road does lead where God said it would.

Postmoderns and our ancient father and mother have another thing in common—the tendency to try to be our own gods. This is an apt description of Sarah's idea to rent out Hagar's womb. Postmoderns suffer under the delusion that we can make anything happen because we have the know-how, the technology, the money. But just as Abraham and Sarah soon saw they couldn't bring about God's promised child by themselves, so postmoderns eventually fall into the abyss of self-governance with nothing to show but love letters written to themselves.

Abraham and Sarah were called to a purpose bigger than themselves. The promise of God connected them to the redemption of the whole world. Though the postmodern culture has tendencies toward self-absorption, it is also caught up in the sea of globalization. The call of God makes that interconnectedness truly eternal, answering the inner longing of the image of God placed there so long ago.

So, these ancient stories touch our own existence in very real ways. Perhaps we should give them a chance to speak to us and to be our friends again.

Charme Robarts
Mrs. Robarts is involvement minister at Skillman Church of Christ in Dallas, Texas.

Endnotes

1 Robert Alter, *Genesis*, (New York: Norton and Company, 1996), 47.
2 Melchizedek's appearance from nowhere, his name meaning something like righteous king, as well as his role as priest of God, suggest in every way that though God is in special relationship with Abram, he remains uninhibited.