

June 11, 2023
Romans 4:13-25
Genesis 12:1-9

Hoping against Hope

In the beginning, there was hope. God created everything good and hoped that it would be good. God made all of life and it was a blessing. And God made us to be blessed too. God put us in the world and said “Here is my creation. Enjoy it. Appreciate it. Take care of it because I did my best on it.”

But we humans did not live up to those hopes. We took creation and we wanted to control it. We wanted to possess it. Almost as if we were God ourselves. In the book of Genesis, there was hope but then people got greedy and selfish. Things had hardly started with Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel and already there were lies, betrayal, and murder. It just went downhill from there. And it got to a point where things felt hopeless. Why had God created anything at all? God told Noah to build a boat. God would flood the world and start again. Maybe things would be different next time. Maybe this time the world would be better. God wiped out everything. But after it's done, after the devastation and

destruction, God vows never to do it again. “Never again will I flood the world, God says. Life is too precious. There is too much to lose.

God starts again. This time, God will not give in. God will not give up.

But people still live to control and possess. They decide they will build a tower that will reach into the heavens. They say, “We will make our name great.” But this is not the hope that God had. So God scatters them and confuses their language and dilutes their power yet again. Why can’t people just enjoy creation? Why can’t they appreciate life and be blessed by God?

God made life to be enjoyed. And God made humans to be blessed. And God is determined it will happen. And in our reading from Genesis, we meet Abraham and Sarah or Abram and Sarai as they are first known.

They are settled comfortably in Haran. Their family is prosperous. They have productive land and flocks and many servants. Abram and Sarai are blessed, it seems. But not really. They don’t have something important.

Abram and Sarai have no children. And to have no children in their time was to be cursed. It was to be deficient. In their day, children were the greatest sign of God’s blessing. To be fruitful and to multiply was the

greatest purpose there was. But here they are with nothing. No children, no future. No honor or respect. No full participation in the blessings of life.

Things feel hopeless for Abram and Sarai. Abram is 75. Sarai is 65.

There is little they can do now. And God understands. Of all people, God knows what it's like to have your hopes dashed and your dreams disappointed. God knows with Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, and all the people made in God's image who don't act like people made in the image of God. God knows life feeling lifeless and barren. So he invites Abram and Sarai into something new. A new kind of promise. One built on hope and trust in God. God says to Abram and Sarai. "Trust me," God says, "I will give you a family. Trust me and your descendants will be like the stars. They will be like the grains of sand on the beach. Trust me and you will be blessed and all the families of the earth will be blessed. You won't need to make your own name great. I will make it great. Because I am God."

Abram and Sarai, a hopeless couple, put their hope in God. They are the first people to trust in a promise from God. Their story is the first story

of faith. It is the beginning of our trust in God for Jews and Muslims and Christians. The story of Abram and Sarai gives us three important questions to ask ourselves when we feel hopeless and barren. Can we let God be God? Can we trust God's promises? What do we need to let go of and leave behind?

The first question of faith is, can we let God be God? Abram and Sarai are the first to really ask themselves this. And the first to make a deal with God. God will do this, and we will do that. But all they have to do is trust God and listen to God. And they will have blessings. They will have children and grandchildren and a name to be remembered. BUT Abram doesn't have any reason to believe in God. He has no reason to trust what God says. He has no Bible stories to lean on. No examples of faith. No people around him to guide him. Only the world telling him that if he wants to be blessed, he should make his name great.

The world tells us to trust only ourselves. To look out for ourselves. If we want blessings, we must go out and get them. If we want good things, we must go on and get them. Take them. Possess them. Have them. Control them. This is Tower of Babel thinking. Thinking that says

we don't need God. We are strong enough. We can be God ourselves.

But all it takes is one building collapse, one storm, one illness, one devastating loss and it all crumbles to the ground. Our aspirations of being like God are a dream. Power and control are an illusion.

God tells Abram, I will make your name great. Don't worry about making your own name great. I'll do it for you. But not for power or might. Not for fame or fortune. I will make your name great. I will make you known for faith and hope. I will bless you not only with what is possible, but what is impossible. I will do it. Not you. I just need you to trust me. So will you? Can you let God be God?

This is the first question of faith for Abram and Sarai and for us. Can we let God to be God? And the second question is, Can we trust God's promises? This is the question of the apostle Paul and the early church.

Paul is looking back on the story of Abram and Sarai and sees God's promise to make the barren fertile, and the empty full, and the dead alive again. God has made a promise of resurrection and redemption in Jesus.

And faith means believing that God will do it. No matter how bad things seem. Faith does not mean faith in religious practices and rules. It means

belief in a promise. Paul says, Look, Abram and Sarai believed before there was a law or a Bible. Before Moses and all the Commandments. Faith isn't about obeying the law. It's about trusting in God. Abram and Sarai were as good as dead, Paul says. They had no children and their lives were over. But they BELIEVED that God could still do something. They BELIEVED God could do something they couldn't see. And take two hopeless people and give them all the hope in the world. What did they have to lose? What else was there to believe in but the promise of God?

So, what about us?, Paul asks. What about our faith? Don't we believe that God can keep a promise? Don't we believe that God has promised us a blessing? Don't we believe that God can forgive us and redeem us and save us? That God can take whatever is hopeless and empty and barren and make it beautiful? That God can take the rejected and scorned and crucified and cursed and call it good? That GOD'S promise is the promise you can trust?

Faith means taking a risk and taking a flying leap. Faith jumps from the sure footing of what we know into the uncertainty of what we don't

know. Without knowing how things will go or where we will land. It means going, and leaving something behind. Like Abram and Sarai, who had to leave their country, their kindred and their father's house. They had to let go of what was for what would be. And that's the third question of faith: To trust in the promise of God, what do we need to let go of and leave behind?

Abram and Sarai had to let go of life as they knew it. The place of promise was not in the location they were. It was somewhere else. Somewhere beyond. It was something they could not yet imagine or comprehend. And they couldn't stay where they were to receive it. They couldn't accept life as it was if they are going to have life as it would be. They would have to go and leave behind whatever they possessed or were in control of. And the same is true for us. To have faith, we must leave something behind. We must let go. Whether it's a job, a relationship, a dream, a habit, an identity, an entire ideology that holds us captive. There is something we will need to leave behind so that God can be God and God's promise can be true.

This summer, there won't be any camps for kids at Camp Burnamwood. For years and years, our church camp was such an important thing. I have fond memories of going to a church camp myself. It's where I began to feel a calling to know God more deeply. But this year, our camp had to close. Not enough volunteer counselors. Not enough campers. No directors to live on site. There isn't enough of what is to make things what they were. But maybe it's time to leave that behind. And stop turning back to what was and let it go. Faith isn't about a place. It's about a faithful God that we can trust. A God who keeps promises. A God who connects young people and old people and all people to the blessings of creation. Maybe it's time to set out to somewhere we have never seen and trust that God will be God. Sometimes it's only when we have nothing left to lose that we understand that. Only when we are desperate. Only when we are utterly dependent on God. Like Abram and Sarai. God was all they had and this was their last shot. It's different for those who have their lives together. Those who have blessings galore and opportunities and resources. Those who have the families they dream of, sons who send gifts and daughters

stopping by and grandkids playing around their knees. They have their promise. They have their blessing. They need to go anywhere or take a risk for God.

But Abram and Sarai need to. They want to. Because they have nothing to lose. They will set out for a new place. They will say yes to any possibility that they might have a family. They will take a leap of faith because they want the blessing so badly. And they will leave everything behind. The safety and certainty and control. They can leave it because they know it was never theirs to begin with. The promise of God is all they have and will have to be enough. Because it's all they have.

So the question for us is, is the promise of God enough for us? Is it enough for us to leave our old life behind? What is it we need to let go of to have hope and blessing and joy? So that we will no longer be empty but full? God has made a promise to us too. God has promised we will be fruitful. That we will know strength and abundant life. That we will have a place of our own, a place to belong. But we can't stay HERE if God is taking us THERE. So what have we got to lose? Our anxiety that we will fail? Our fear that we won't make it? Our worry that there

won't be enough? Are we ready to let God be God or not? Do we believe God's promises or not? Do we want to live by faith, or not?

Maybe, like Abram and Sarai, we have nothing left to lose. Maybe we are ready to believe and hope in God and the impossible things God can do. Because with God, all things are possible. It is possible that we are loved. It is possible that God could make something great of us. It is possible that we will be blessed. And in God all the families of the earth will be blessed. Just have faith. With God, there is still hope.