

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 12:1-9
SECOND LESSON: Romans 14: 18-25
June 11, 2023

“The God of Ridiculously Impossible Things”

Sermon © Lisa C Farrell

The author of this pithy little piece of wisdom is unknown. I only tweaked a little of it. When we feel like God couldn't possibly use us, we should remember:

- ~ Noah was a drunk
- ~ Abraham was too old
- ~ Isaac was a daydreamer
- ~ Jacob was a liar
- ~ Leah had bad vision and was homely
- ~ Joseph was abused
- ~ Moses had a stuttering problem
- ~ Gideon was afraid
- ~ Samson was a womanizer
- ~ Rahab was a prostitute
- ~ Jeremiah and Timothy were too young
- ~ David was an adulterer and a murderer
- ~ Elijah was suicidal
- ~ Isaiah preached naked
- ~ Jonah ran from God
- ~ Naomi was a widow
- ~ Job went bankrupt
- ~ John the Baptist ate bugs
- ~ Peter denied Christ
- ~ The disciples fell asleep while praying
- ~ Martha worried about everything
- ~ The Samaritan woman was divorced (*more than once*)
- ~ Zacchaeus was a religious outcast
- ~ Paul kept getting arrested
- ~ Timothy had an ulcer, and . . .
- ~ Lazarus was dead!

This morning we are on person number two—Abraham!

This summer we're going to do something a little different for Penn Wynne, and it's my fault. It's my fault, because most of the time I have a bias towards preaching from the New Testament. The Old Testament passages relate, but they are not the center of focus. But in this current day and age it seems to me that less and less people are familiar with the stories of the Old Testament. Not everyone went to Sunday School. Not every Sunday School

taught these stories. So this summer we are going to spend some time with the classics, starting with Abraham and his descendants. We're going to look at how the God of ridiculously impossible things works.

Abraham originally came from a place called Ur, although he moved with his family to Haran. This means nothing to us, but these were major cities between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Today they are in Iraq and Syria. Ur was located on the Euphrates River about 150 miles northwest of the Persian Gulf. Haran was 600 miles northwest of Ur. Both communities were major city states. Abraham did not come from some rural backwater.

God told Abraham, then known as Abram, to leave his family and land behind and go to a new place, saying, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." This, quite frankly, was insane. Abram's country was a place he had lived his whole life. His people, that is all of his extended family kin, lived all around the region. His father's house was his immediate family. People didn't just leave. There was no welfare system or emergency services in this world. Everyone relied on neighbors, extended family members and especially immediate family members for help. Complete strangers were going to be no help at all. Not only was God asking Abram to do something emotionally wrenching, God was asking him to do something that was also quite dangerous—to let go of everything and everyone who provided security and safety.

The scripture describes Abram as being 75 years old when this happened. Was he *really* 75 years old? Do you want my honest opinion? My honest opinion is no. Numbers are very tricky things in the Old Testament. The further back in time the larger the numbers get. Methuselah was supposedly 969 years old. But for these people numbers were highly symbolic. They meant something other than literal years. And unfortunately, we have lost the key to that symbolism. More than one system was at work, and we don't possess the meanings any more. Sometimes numbers mean what we think they mean. Other times numbers had sacred meanings. For the ancient patriarchs all of their ages end with 0, 2, 5, 7, or 9. That eliminates half of all possible numbers and is statistically extremely unlikely. Abraham's age has seven **and** five.

My guess is that Abram was in his 40s when he left Haran, making Sarai in her 30s. Sarai may have been 40-45 when she had Isaac, certainly past the age when most women have their first child, and definitely at the point where everyone would have concluded she couldn't have children. Abram would have been in his fifties. For all of these ideas, however, **I have absolutely no proof.** I offer it purely as my opinion. But it would make sense, because Sarah was allegedly quite beautiful, so beautiful that twice Abram tried to pass her off as his sister because he feared a local ruler would kill him to get her. Once a foreign king even took her, temporarily, before God intervened. No offense to those of us getting older, but I find it highly unlikely that would have happened to a woman in her sixties. A stunner in her thirties on the other hand . . . is feasible.

Abram obeyed God and set out, with no actual destination. God said God would show him. There was no roadmap. Isn't that just life for you? Abram was given instructions one step at a time. God's promise was that Abram would

become the father of a great nation. In order to do that, Abram needed people and land, and he had neither. He and Sarai must have been trying to have children for years. When they left they took their nephew Lot with them, the closest thing to a son they probably had. Abram had two brothers, one of whom had died, and Lot was his son. Abram had obviously taken him under his wing.

God told Abram that he would be a source of blessing to others. God also said that God would bless those who blessed Abram, and curse those who held Abram in contempt. That is what the words “whoever curses you I will curse” actually mean. Anyone who despised Abram would pay a price. He traveled as far as Shechem. The Canaanites lived in this land. It was already occupied when God said, “To your offspring I will give this land,” but Abram himself never owned more than a small portion. He bought a small piece of land with a cave to bury Sarah in when she died. (Genesis 23) Abram never saw his promised inheritance. But wherever he went he worshipped God, building altars and offering praise.

Why did God choose Abram? He was far from perfect. We know that because he tried to pass his wife off as his sister twice. But God obviously saw something in Abram. And God chooses imperfect people. Sometimes God chooses people we would never choose! I am certainly imperfect. Please do not put me on a pedestal. It’s guaranteed that I will fall off at some point and I might break my leg in the process. But despite my flaws, God persisted in calling me and wouldn’t take no for an answer. That is what God does. God calls each and every one of us. Even if we don’t feel worthy, even if we think God must have made a mistake, our loving God has a plan for our lives.

God also never tells us the whole plan. Imagine packing up and moving far away from everyone and everything you know without having a clue as to your final destination. That is what Abram and Sarai did. Most of us are not happy with this arrangement. But hindsight tells me that if I had known half of the things that lay ahead I would have sat myself down and refused to budge. I would be convinced that the task was impossible. But whenever I have come to a challenge, I have discovered that the only way out is through, and one day at a time God has given me the strength. The impossible has become possible. When I thought I couldn’t endure another day or another moment, I did.

Finally, God’s plan is also always bigger than us. Abram received an amazing promise, one that he never saw fulfilled. There are many things that come to fruition in the world long past the life of the one who worked for them. Sometimes it can take generations to achieve justice. We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. And someday, if we are faithful, others will stand on our shoulders. Amen.

Genesis 12:1-9

12 The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

2 “I will make you into a great nation,

and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. **5** He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. **7** The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

8 From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.

9 Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

Romans 14: 18-25

18 Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”^[b] **19** Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. **20** Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, **21** being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. **22** This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” **23** The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, **24** but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. **25** He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.