

New Sermon Series – Summer 2023

Sunday 30th April 2023 – Destined for Blessing. Genesis 12v1-7

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I am excited to be beginning this new sermon series on the journey to the promised land. As I have prayed and reflected on these scriptures from Genesis through to Joshua, I think the Lord has a particular message of encouragement for every one of us over these next few months as we head in to a new season of opportunity. For those who are guests and visitors let me explain a little of the background by way of introduction.

From what we know of All Saints there has probably been a Christian church meeting here in Weston for over 1000 years, faithfully ministering to generations of Westoners and people living around Bath. At its core this is a local family church, welcoming people of all different ages and stages, socio-economic backgrounds and life circumstances. Many churches including this one experienced a great wave of renewal in the 1990s through the ministry of John Wimber, Alpha and the Toronto blessing and this propelled churches to share the life and message of Jesus with new styles of worship, generous hospitality and concern for the poor. In many ways we are still riding that wave today, but overall UK church attendance has declined and we find ourselves increasingly caught up in the crossfire of cultural dysphoria. As the 20 something Gen Zs now begin to become influential in society, they are on a quest for authenticity, looking for genuine spirituality and caring community. They are 2 generations removed from a generation that routinely read the Bible so coming to church will feel like an alien experience to most. Some have observed that every 500 years or so the church goes through a radical shake up, and so perhaps we are overdue another reformation. The core message of the cross of Christ and the truth of the gospel doesn't change but perhaps the way church operates will look very different in the years to come. And yet here we are at All Saints today worshipping in a place that has seen centuries of changes and challenges, but remains committed to sharing the life and message of Jesus with the next generation.

So we continue to invest and prioritise our work with Children and Young people. It has been a delight to see youthwork on Mondays and Wednesdays growing, with now nearly 30 on the books for the Drop-in and a similar number

for Rendezvous. Peter Heywood and I have been exploring partnering with World Sport Ministries and Get Sported to offer sports coaching and Christian mentoring to young people using the facilities at the Hub. The Open the Book team has the privilege of sharing Bible Stories with hundreds of children every month at WASPs and our outreach via the Community Café and Food club blesses dozens of people every week. Imagine what we could do in here once the pews are removed and we can use this space flexibly midweek. Children's clubs and Mums and toddlers are clearly a priority! But for me our journey to the promised land begins when we recognise a holy dissatisfaction with the way things are and obediently take a step forward towards where God is calling us to be. For me the promised land looks like some verses from Isaiah 49 which say 'you will be too small for your people... The children... will yet say to us in your hearing, 'this place is too small for us; give us more space!' ... See I will beckon to the Gentiles, I will lift up my banner to the peoples; they will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their shoulders.' The promised land is all about blessing future generations with the presence of God.

Yet it is clear we still have a long way to go - we haven't yet reached the promised land or seen the passionate revival God wants to bring to the whole town.

So I think the Lord is preparing us all for a season of change, and prodding us all to leave our comfort zones and go on a new journey of faith. But this is the way of the Kingdom. God loves us just as we are, but he loves us too much to allow us to simply remain the same. Just as there comes a certain day when Eagle chicks are pushed out of the nest by their mother, so the Lord decides the right day for us to leave behind the things of the past and learn to fly towards a new future and a new hope.

So with this in mind let's begin with the story of Abraham, or Abram as he was originally called. Abraham is revered by over half the world's population, not only Jews and Christians, but Muslims as well. He is known as the Father of faith not because he always got everything right, but more because he continued to trust in God in spite of his doubts and human weakness. Why God particularly chose to call Abram over many generations of his forbears, we will never know, but perhaps it is because he was the first to respond to God's whispers and actually do something practical about it.

Genesis 12:

¹ The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go 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 left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.

⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

⁶ Abram travelled 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.

In 1889 The Wesleyan Methodist Church sent out a group of missionaries to begin the first mission work in the world in Sierra Leone and they packed their belongings in cases that would become their own coffins. They struggled to start the mission. Six of the team members died in the effort to establish the church and five more died shortly after returning home. Yet Sierra Leone now has over 200 churches, over 30000 members, a hospital and a Bible college – all down to the faith and courage of a group of young people who were willing to leave their home comforts and go.

In the world's eyes the mission might have appeared to be a suicidal waste of time but in God's grand scheme of things their faith has been rewarded hundreds of times over. The results of their faith can only be appreciated over the long term and from an eternal perspective. When we consider the life of Abraham, we discover a man who didn't always get it right, but trusted God's promise for the future, and in one sense we are only sat here today thousands of years later because of Abraham's sacrificial obedience.

In Matthew 22v14 Jesus said 'many are called, but few are chosen' and I believe that if you are a follower of Jesus here today, there is a unique call upon your life – yet it seems that relatively few really discover the depth of God's call or indeed comprehend the sacrifice it may entail.

Verse 1 of chapter 12 tells us that God said to Abram 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.' It's only one sentence, but the implications are huge.

In those days to leave your Father's household and travel to a foreign land was a highly risky thing to do. There was no police force, and bandit raiding parties would prey on vulnerable nomads stealing livestock and people as slaves. So God called Abram to leave the safety of his gathered community, his **security**. But not only that, he also called him to leave his **identity**. The only way Abram could establish his rights and credentials in society was to reference his place in his Father's lineage. To move away would risk losing his credibility. We hear stories about the horrors of identity theft, but in our day you can appeal to the authorities to be identified through fingerprints and DNA testing. But without witnesses in Abram's time, you could easily become a nobody, stripped of all identity. But God asked even more of Abram. He even asked him to surrender his **destiny**. 'Go to the land that I *will* show you.'

How often have you set out on a journey without any idea of your final destination? Not often, I suspect! A few years ago I remember dispatching a chap called Mark to go to London to pick up a chilled display cabinet in a hire van for the Lighthouse Cafe. But in his enthusiasm to get going, he set off without the address! Thankfully of course I was able to text it to him en-route, but Abram was called to leave all that he had known for an unknown destination, called to surrender his security, identity and destiny into the hands of God.

And it's not an easy decision to go, especially when Abram's family were pagans who worshipped household gods and would be suspicious of this call. We learn from Stephen's speech in Acts that Abram waited until his father Terah died before he responded. The name Terah can mean several things but one of its possible meanings is *Loiterer*. Terah started the process of moving his family out of Ur towards Canaan but they settled at Haran, which is only halfway. It maybe

that Abram thought his family was heading in the right direction, but actually he was loitering, stationed in compromise.

Are you waiting for something to happen before you respond to God's call?

Maybe you are thinking 'I just need to wait until the children have finished their education', or 'I just need to pay off my mortgage'. I knew a guy who looked me straight in the eye and said 'Tom, I will serve the Lord at some point, but I just need to make a million first!'

God didn't give Abram the specifics of his plan, but he gave him personal promises instead. Now to live a life of faith we need to get this. Through Jesus, God has made promises to you that he will never revoke or change. For example, Jesus said in John 6v37 'whoever comes to me I will never drive away' then in John 10 'my sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.' So even if you feel far from the Lord today or if you have never come to him before, ask him to forgive you, restore you and raise you up to serve him and he will because his word guarantees it.

But then there are personal promises too. Like God's personal assurance to Abram for his presence, provision and purpose.

God promised to go with Abram by his presence: *I will* make you, *I will* bless you, *I will* bless the nations through you.

In other words, just as Jesus promised his disciples 'I will be with you, to the very end of the age'. The word for *I will bless you* is about provision too. Now I hope you know that I don't preach what is known as the prosperity gospel, (in other words if you sow £10, the Lord will give you back £100). But I will preach a message of provision. One of the names of God from Abraham's story is Jehovah Jireh, God provides. If we commit our needs to the Lord and play our part by not being lazy, he will provide for us. As we pray together for the financial needs of this church over the coming year, the Lord will provide what we need. He will move people to give, he is God our provider. Where God calls, he provides. He always pays for what he orders.

Finally, Abram was given a higher purpose. 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.'

Our purpose at All Saints is to simply share the life and message of Jesus, see souls saved and lives transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is rooted in the blessing God promised to pour out through Abraham's descendants. But we have to have faith that God wants this church to grow, both in depth and in number.

In verse 7 God says to Abram 'to your offspring I will give this land'. And herein lies Abram's most obedient step of faith. In the previous chapter we are told Abram's wife Sarah was barren. She had no children. And yet Abram believed God's promise and Romans 4 tells us that God credited it to him as righteousness. Abram trusted in God despite the apparent impossibility.

We've come a long way and God has been gracious to us, but I have been praying for God to give personal promises to us for the future. Whilst we celebrate all that God has done I think he is asking us not to dwell on what is past but to press on towards our heavenly goal. I think he is calling us to invest in future generations. I think the Lord is calling us to be even bolder about sharing our faith.

As we face the future with all its uncertainties, let me conclude with Philippians 1v27: 'Above all you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the good news about Christ. Then whether I come and see you again or only hear about you, I will know that you are standing together with one spirit and purpose, fighting together for the faith which is the good news. Don't be intimidated in any way by your enemies.' Let's not be put off by the challenges.

Living a life of faith means trusting God to provide for all our needs. God promised to bless Abram, to make his name great and to make him a blessing to the nations. It took 25 years until he saw the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise through the birth of Isaac, but Abraham held on to God and faithfully put one foot in front of the other. That's our call to go too. Let's stand to pray.