

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's Newfoundland

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, June 5, 2005  
General Assembly Sunday

Genesis 12:1-8  
Psalm 33:1-12  
Romans 4:13-25  
Matthew 9:9-13

Sermon: "Abraham believed God"  
Rev. John C. Duff

The story of Abraham's journey is seen by some as the beginning of history. Before his story in the Book of Genesis the story of the creation of the world and of the beginnings of humankind are painted in broad strokes, and in deeply symbolic language. From a primeval chaos God begins to order the world, separating light from darkness, day from night, the skies above from water beneath, the land from the sea, the sun from the moon. He makes creatures to swarm in the sea, plants to grow on the land, birds to fly in the air, and animals to walk on the land. At the end of the first story of creation God creates humankind, and in the glory and mystery and paradox of our being male and female he makes us to image the divine. Humankind is given stewardship over the earth, over the plants and the animals, the sea and the land. With the entry of humankind on the stage of the earth there comes the hope that all the vast diversity that God has created will become something whole, something to which humankind will bring harmony, and caring, and peace.

But in the second story of Creation, set in a garden in Eden, we see man and women surrounded by everything that they need. They are innocent, naked, and not ashamed. But there is a serpent in the garden, who tempts them to eat forbidden fruit. They lose innocence, and hide in

the bushes when God walks in the garden. In his mercy for them, God clothes them, and sends them away from the garden and into a world where women bear children only with labour and pain, and men harvest food from the land only by the sweat of their brow. Among their children there is jealousy, and then violence. The blood of Abel is shed, and it cries out from the ground. Over the generations wickedness increases, but in the midst of the genealogies it is noted that "Enoch walked with God". God comes to regret that he ever brought humankind into being. He determines to destroy the world with a great flood, but Noah also walked with God. God shows favour on Noah and his family, and through them, pairs of all the animals are also saved from the flood and emerge when the floods subside to repopulate the world. God makes a covenant with Noah, with his family, and with all the creatures on earth: he will never again send a flood to destroy them all. From Noah's family the family tree of humankind begins to branch out. And then we come to the story of the tower of Babel, the symbolic story of how humankind, trying in their own cleverness to build a tower to reach the heavens, was instead scattered across the earth, began to speak different languages, and to form the tribes and nations.

And then this story which has been painted in such broad strokes on the stage of the whole world begins to "zoom in" upon the story of one family, a family who had lived in the city of Ur between the Tigris and the Euphrates, in territory we now call Iraq, surrounded by intensely cultivated and irrigated farmlands of that region, in the matrix of a highly regulated society that was the cradle of civilization and agriculture. The family left their roots behind and went up towards the headwaters of the Tigris and

Euphrates in the mountains up north, went looking, we imagine, for more space to pasture their herd and flocks. But perhaps also they had a need for a new beginning in their human experience, for a greater freedom. They settled in Haran, in northern Syria.

And then in the next generation, as chapter 12 of Genesis opens, the focus of the story narrows yet again. From the clan of Terah, it is Abraham who experiences the call of God, saying to him, "Go!" "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Abraham believed God, and he went, as the Lord had told him. His nephew Lot went with him, along with his wife Sarai, their possessions, their herds and flocks.

God's command was accompanied by a promise, a promise that reveals why the focus of the story has become so intensely focussed on one man and members of his immediate family. Abraham is not to go in order to create a lonely society that will be apart from the rest of humankind; rather he is to go because God is to make of him a great nation, so that through him all the families of the earth may be blessed. Abraham is to go to a place God will show him, a place that, as it happens, is at the crossroads of three continents, linking Africa, and Asia, and Europe. From there, through Abraham, God will bless people everywhere.

Abraham is called to a journey that is to be an example for all of our journeys, a journey of trusting in God as he travels into the unknown, a journey of hoping in the promises of God even when the earthly possibilities for the fulfilment of such promises hang by the slightest of

threads, a journey that certainly included mistakes, like the lies he told when he went to visit Egypt. But the central reality in Abraham's life was trust, trust that God meant what he said when he said that a great nation would come from him, trust that God would accompany him in good times and bad, trust that God can fulfil his purposes even when the way to that fulfilment is hid from human eyes. The journey of Abraham was a creative journey, exploring new possibilities; it was the journey above all of a man intensely aware of God. When he came to the land that God showed him, he built an altar to the Lord, and he prayed. By God's grace, he was gifted with a single-minded trust in God, and became the father of faith, honoured today in three great faith traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

[Last fall there was a very interesting and fruitful evening of inter-faith dialogue among representatives of these three traditions precisely about Abraham. For the Jewish scholar, Abraham was notable for his challenging God's plan to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, because his nephew Lot was there, and-- should not God spare the cities for the sake of a few righteous souls living there? In his view, Abraham was calling upon God to be true to his own character, and to be subject to his own law. In his view also, Abraham should have challenged God also on the road to the mountain of Moriah with his son Isaac. It is characteristic of Judaism to wrestle with God, as Jacob did. For the Islamic representative, on the other hand, the readiness of Abraham to sacrifice the son – in their tradition, they take that son to be Ishmael – on the mountain, was an example of that perfect resignation and submission to God's will which is an honoured characteristic of Islamic spirituality.

In Paul's letter to the Romans we find one example of how Abraham is understood in our own Christian faith. As in the case of the story of Abraham in Genesis, I found it helpful to my understanding to go back to the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans, to get some perspective on what Paul is trying to do in the whole book, and then to see how his reference to Abraham fits into that whole.

Paul writes to the Christians at Rome conscious that Rome is the centre of the Roman empire, the hub of the Mediterranean world. He sees the Christian community in Rome as an beacon for the faith of other Christian communities across that empire. In the first chapter, he writes,

"I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world." (Romans 1:8).

He sets out in this letter as in no other of his letters to make a statement of his theology, a theology that must embrace the world beyond the confines of the Judaism into which he was born, as was Jesus Himself, and all of Jesus' disciples before Jesus was put to death on the cross.

The Jewish community had for many centuries developed its traditions in such a way as to heighten the differences between Jews and Gentiles – the people of the nations round about them. The time of exile in Babylon, in particular, had hardened the boundaries and made it practically impossible for Jews and Gentiles to deal with each other. Their concept of the community of faith narrowed, and their God became too small, became the God who could only bless their nation, because only their nation was truly descended from Abraham and really observing God's law.

After the small community that continued to meet in the upper room after Easter experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them, something astonishing happened. People of other nations heard good news, trusted in Jesus, and received the Holy Spirit. And that didn't fit at all into the old world-view of Jews who had become followers of Jesus.

On the road to Damascus, Paul, who had been a zealous defender of the orthodoxy that was his birthright, and a deadly opponent of those who followed Jesus, heard the call to turn around, and he trusted in Jesus for himself. As Abraham in his own time heard God calling him to go to a place unknown to him, so Paul heard God calling him not only to physically go to city after city previously unknown to him around the eastern Mediterranean, but also to venture intellectually into entirely new territory, to develop a theology not for Jews only, but for all of humankind.

Romans is Paul's masterful expression of that theology. He begins by making the point that even people who don't have Scriptures in their hands have enough evidence of God in the creation that God has made, and in their own moral instincts, to be accountable to live trusting in God and not doing harm to their neighbours.

But people turn their back on the wonder of the Creation calling all humanity to offer worship and praise to God, and they resist the moral instincts that invite people to live wholesome lives. They turn to idols and debase themselves with sexual practices that were in ancient times associated with idol worship. Their hearts become captive to poisonous attitudes, like covetousness, malice, and heartlessness. They do things to

harm other people, like murder, deceit and gossip, and they rebel against their parents.

Having given his readers a catalogue of evils that poison the human character, Paul moves swiftly in the second chapter to a stern warning against passing judgement on anyone in thrall to them, because the truth is that all of us have been in thrall. He says that some Gentiles may well instinctively do what the law requires, and that some Jews, even though they know the law, may not keep it. So no one is really in a position to present themselves as models or lecture others about their behaviour as if they themselves stand on higher ground.

In the third chapter Paul comes right out and says it: "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (3:22); "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (3:9); and he quotes from the Old Testament Scriptures:

"There is no one who is righteous, not even one." (3:10, see Ps. 14:3)

We are not only all in this boat together, there is none of who by trying hard in our own strength can get out of this boat and make it to shore. We need something more than the book of instructions to rescue us from our predicament. And yet we are, all of us, accountable before God for having turned our back on God in the first instance, for having made ourselves vulnerable to lies and to the deceptiveness of idols, and to the intrusion of poisonous attitudes that destroy our souls and hurt the people around us.

But then Paul begins to offer the good news. God has designed a way to get us out of this boat. And that way comes to us as something utterly undeserved and unmerited. It is God's gift, God's own righteousness, which has been disclosed and offered to us and to all people through his Son Jesus Christ, who sets us free by the sacrifice of his own life. We receive the gift not by trying to reform ourselves so as to earn it, but rather by acknowledging gift as gift. God offers us the grace of life through Jesus Christ, and it becomes ours as we trust the Giver and accept the Gift.

And it is at this point that Paul turns to the example of Abraham. He reaches back to a time before there were the Ten Commandments, before there were dietary laws, and rules about what couldn't be done on the sabbath, to a time when a man heard God saying to him, "Go", and he went.

He reaches back to the obedience of faith, a singular readiness to live all of life in the presence of God and for God.

He reaches back to the existential moment that confronted Abraham, to a text in Genesis 15, before the birth of his son Isaac, before there seems any possible way he could ever have a son, let alone grandchildren and a multitude of descendants, back to a moment where God has drawn Abraham out into the black desert night, and said to him, "Look toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And then God said, "So shall your descendants be." There was awe, and then there was Abraham's response. Abraham believed God, "and the Lord

reckoned it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:1-6).

Paul reaches to that moment in the life of Abraham because all people can now share in that moment of faith, and so be saved from enslavement to sin and death, be saved to follow in a way that trusts in the promises of God, accepts the precious gift of God in Jesus Christ, be saved by God’s astonishing grace through trust in God alone.

The moment that Abraham experienced leap-frogs over all the centuries of building fences and boundaries, all the centuries of trying to prove something to God, and it comes to us afresh as something large enough that it can become a gift for all of humankind.

“It depends on faith,” Paul says (Romans 4:16), “in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all [Abraham’s] descendants,” not only his descendants in the flesh but also “those who share the faith of Abraham.”

Paul invites us outside the box and outside the walls, to stand with Abraham on a dark night looking up at the whole panoply of the heavens, to realize that God is the creator of all those stars and galaxies, and yet also the God who comes besides us, calls us by name, and offers us through Jesus, the gift of life.

Paul invites people everywhere to that moment of faith that was also the experience of fishermen along the shores of Galilee, who encountered Jesus saying to them, “Follow me”, and dropped their nets and everything,

and followed Him.

God grant us the awesome courage of faith, the courage to say "Yes" to the Giver, and to that Gift, and then grant us the assurance that our "Yes" is enough to make us the kindred of Abraham, disciples of Jesus, and children of the living God.

AMEN.

He was a man chosen and graced by God before he accepted circumcision as a sign of that choosing. He was a man who trusted God and fulfilled God's purpose for him before the Ten Commandments were given to God's people on the mountain of Sinai.

