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Melville Junction
Sunday 9th May 2010 - Morning Service
Steve Briggs

The Story of God and Us - Stars in the Sky: A Look at Abraham's Journey

1. Introduction

- We continue in our series of the 'Story of God and Us', with this morning's message officially launching 'Chapter 3' - entitled 'Sapling'. To recap, we have spent the last 8 or so weeks covering Chapter 1 (called 'Wholeness') and Chapter 2 (called 'Paradise Lost').
- We continue to look for the 'bigger picture' of how God has always been working out his plan for the salvation of all mankind, and also of the planet and creation. How all space time and matter, in other words, matters.
- And we, in short summary of the past two chapters, we have seen how things were created (and declared by no less than God) to be 'good', but that people started to make some really bad choices, which resulted in all sorts of things going badly wrong. We ended last week by looking at the story of Babel - the story of humankind trying to create God in his image, and utilising their best efforts (through the technology of their day, tar and brick) to 'build a name for themselves'.
- So today we begin to explore how God starts to put this broken picture back together again. The story we start with really marks the first obvious intervention by God, to create a specific people, through whom all of creation would be put back to rights. We start of course, with the story of Abraham (initially only called Abram), a nomadic pagan (complete with camels, tents, and concubines), who God reckons as one 'having faith' and thus the 'Father' of the nation of Israel, which in time becomes the plan, vehicle and metaphor for God's intervention, love and creative redemption for all of us.
- I need to start with a disclaimer first though. Up to this point in our series, we have been dealing with expositional preaching, going through the first 11 chapters of Genesis almost on a line by line basis. This morning, we are going to



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cover 10 whole chapters of Genesis (virtually doubling the pages covered) simply on Abraham's life. And no, we are not keeping you here all day! Accordingly, I am simply going to choose certain key bits of the story, highlighting what the bigger picture might be. However, I encourage you to go back and read all the stories.

- Let's get started!

2. A look at Abraham's life (Gen 12 - Gen 22)

2.1. The covenant God makes with Abraham

- We are going to deal with Abraham's life in three distinct sections this morning, which will assist us in drawing out the story of God dealing with us in his redemptive project. The first will focus on the *first* time God makes a pretty big promise to him; secondly, we will look at the adventures Abraham embarks on through trying to live faithfully in obedience to God, but with his humanness painfully on display; and lastly, we will look at the story of Isaac and how Abraham's faithfulness to God almost got tested beyond, well... that would be giving the story away.
- Gen 12:1-5

The Call of Abram

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.



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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 [a]I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

- Let's set the context: for the last 8 chapters of Genesis (from Ch 3 to Ch 11) humankind has been getting it pretty wrong! And now, out of the blue, so to speak, God calls a nomadic wandering patriarch and promises some pretty amazing things to him:
 - .1. A call to leave. In fact, God calls Abram to move 'back West', which is in contrast to the steady movement 'east of Eden' to this point. This geography is symbolic of a return to God.
 - .2. Blessed to be a blessing. Abram is called, not for his own wealth or riches, but for God to bless 'all peoples on earth'.
 - .3. V7 'to your offspring I will give this land'. God's blessing is specifically through family... Perhaps an appropriate thing to remember on Mothers' Day.
- Why does God choose a wandering Nomadic pagan (yes, you heard me correctly, a pagan) to launch his redemption plan? We don't really know, however the writer of Hebrews (11:8-12) says:

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

¹¹ By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he [a] considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

- A couple of pointers:
 - Abram responded in faith. Just like we do today, consciously, at each decision point, to respond to God out of a place of faith.
 - What do we do with this?

2.2. Adventures of Abraham (the faithful)



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- I am going to condense eight of the ten chapters into a few points. I want to start this with a PG label, and to mention that Abraham is extremely human in how he continued to live his life post his call from God. And we need to take note here!
- So here comes the darker side of Abraham (not the Sunday School version).
 - .1. He repeatedly lied about his wife's being his sister (first to Pharaoh, and then to Abimelech, the king of Gerar (Gen 20:1). He did this purely for self-preservation.
 - .2. He was subjected to his world being turned upside down by genocide, land pressure and scarcity of economic resources (Gen 13:5-7).
 - .3. He and Sarai went through moments of intense doubt in God, and God's promises, to the point where both of them separately laughed at God (Gen 17:17; Gen 18:12).
 - .4. Their sexual ethics and choices were not what we would consider typically consider acceptable (aside from concubines, there was wife-swapping). And this is not even touching on the story of Lot...
 - .5. He was known to enjoy a bit too much wine, on the odd occasions (Gen 19:30).
 - .6. He was even prepared to engage in child sacrifice.
- On a more serious note, I have been struggling to engage the happenings in my world with how God is seemingly at work in it:
 - .1. I am on the board of an upmarket Dullstroom trout lodge, which is wrestling with the struggle of crime, urbanisation and social deprivation (driven by the desperate poverty of people living less than 3 kilometres away, stealing from wealthy Sandtonite guests in their SUVs, who bring the latest fishing gear and fancy hi-tec toys). In addition to this, I am watching the local municipality's sewerage system collapse and become a real challenge for water quality at the lodge, to the point where the board has threatened to lay criminal charges against the municipal manager for gross negligence.

This story is very South African and I personally find it desperately difficult to see a way forward.



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- .2. I have watched the company whom I work for, make decisions (some of which I have been part of) which have been ill-informed and desperately off the mark. With all the consequences of a Wall Street meltdown. Just a lot smaller.
 - .3. I see South African politics becoming increasingly polarised, our national identity and social cohesion as fragile the little flags we stick on our car side windows.
 - .4. I watch BP trying to stem one of the worst maritime oil spills off the coast of Louisiana, with little success.
- And I cry out to God saying ‘where are you?’ How does this fit in with your gig of putting the world to rights?
 - I am reminded that our faith in Christ (of which Abraham was the forerunner with his faith in Yahweh, for which is was credited to him as righteousness) is not a ‘global aspirin’, but rather is the lens through which we need to see life as it really is - often the ambiguous play of death mixed in with resurrection; light with darkness; faith with honest despair.
 - I am reminded that ‘true’ Christian spirituality is the realisation that the restoration of the Kingdom of God, starts within us, and only after we have engaged properly with Christ.
 - And I am reminded that we are invited, essentially, to our own crucifixion in Christ, a crucifixion which encompasses our dying to our mental, social, spiritual and economic realities. We are called to sell it all, lay it down, and follow Christ to the Cross, and only through crucifixion, to experience resurrection. It is indeed an ‘unspeakable mystery’, this engagement of our faith, with God’s purposes in the world. Abraham also struggled...

2.3. The story of Isaac

- The story of Abraham ends essentially with God asking him, so to speak, how much does he really trust Him?
- Gen 22:1-15

¹ Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"
"Here I am," he replied.



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² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

⁸ Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

¹² "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram ^[ao] caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring ^[ap] all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

- We know this story well, but let's look at a few points:
 - When they both go up the mountain Abraham promises to Isaac that they will both come down (v5). This is most likely a faith statement - in that God could resurrect Sarah's womb, he could resurrect his son as well.



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- They were going up to worship - the sacrifice is an act worship (there was no understanding of 'atonement' linked to sacrifice at this point of the grand story).
- By this, God implies that 'you don't need to worship by sacrifice - your worship is sacrifice'. God is not saying 'because you haven't killed your son, you have to kill the goat'. There is no compulsion to actually sacrifice anything... 'all the nations shall be blessed because you obeyed my voice'. You shall be blessed because - God's rounding out the story of establishing a people with this example of faithful obedience.
- The point is obedience (22:12) not some future notion of atonement.

3. Conclusion

- Abraham's call was the start of God's plan to get things back on track with 'project creation'. And in this amazing story of ten chapters of Genesis, we see the how faith and humanness mix in very flawed ways, but in God's amazing way of doing things, births the nation of Israel, which telescopes into today's message of God's good news for all creation.
- Let's pray...
- **Benediction:** Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.