

The Call of Abraham – Genesis 15:1-6

If you've watched serial dramas on television – like *Mad Men*, *Game of Thrones*, *Downton Abbey*, or *The Americans* – you'll be familiar with a certain phrase that begins each program. "Previously on Mad Men..." and then comes the one-minute recap to catch you up on key elements of previous episodes to prepare you for the one you're about to watch.

And sometimes I think this would be super helpful to do in our sermons. I mean, we don't always hear the biblical stories in order and, even when we do, there are lots of names and characters and plot lines to keep straight. So that's what we're going to do with this passage, found in Genesis 15, following, obviously, 14 earlier chapters of characters and action. So, here we go: "Previously in Genesis," we heard about God's good creation, where God creates and blesses this world and everything in it, and, "previously in Genesis," we heard about the fall of Adam and Eve, the story that tries to explain why there is pain and suffering in the world and why things so often don't seem to be the way they should.

These earlier stories are important because they paint the history of the world and the story of humanity with the biggest brushstrokes possible. The creation of the cosmos and the fall of humanity – these are huge themes. Today's story, by contrast, zooms in to focus on just one person and gives us an intimate picture of what the life of faith looks like.

That person is Abraham, a wealthy landowner and rancher who, when he was seventy-five years old, was paid a visit by God. During that visit, God told Abraham to leave his land and home behind and travel to a new country, far away, and that God would give that land to Abraham and that his descendants would live there forever. And Abraham went, taking his wife Sarah and all their household.

It's been a pretty amazing story up to this point, filled with some ups and downs, some narrow escapes and some close calls, but Abraham and Sarah eventually make it to their destination and begin to settle down.

And once there, God comes to visit Abraham a second time, in the verses from chapter 15 that are before us, and declares once more God's plan to bless Abraham. This time, though, the story plays out a little differently.

Previously in Genesis – in the eleventh chapter, to be exact, which describes the first time God comes to Abraham – God says, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” And then the story continues with four words that are as remarkable as they are few: “And so Abraham went.” No doubt, no questions, no conditions. God promises, and Abraham simply trusts, obeys, and goes.

This time, though, just a few chapters and about a year later, while God's part is pretty much the same, making another grand promise – “Do not be afraid, Abraham, I am your shield and your reward shall be very great” – Abraham's response is quite different. “O Lord GOD,” he says, “what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

Previously in Genesis, you see, we learned that Abraham and Sarah had no children and, at 75 years old, were pretty sure they'd never have children. Which, in the ancient world, wasn't just a disappointment, but was considered a curse. No children to inherit your wealth. No children to continue your line. No children to remember you after you'd gone. The calculus in the ancient world was clear and cold: No children, no family. No family, no future. Which might just be why Abraham was willing to follow God's kinda crazy directive in the first place: “Leave everything and everyone I know to go to a far-off land? But did you say I'll have family, descendants, and blessing. Let's go!”

But it hasn't happened yet. And Abraham's not ready to swallow the Lord's promises quite so quickly this time 'round. In fact, he pushes his point home “You have given me no offspring,” he complains, “and so

one of my servants is going to be my heir." Not my child, not my descendant, but a servant.

Sometimes, faith comes pretty easy. You hear God's promises and you just believe. Maybe it's because life is going pretty well already, or because the promise is just what you'd hoped for and feels like an absolute gift. But sometimes, God's promises can be really hard to believe, even if you want to or have tried to or have prayed to. Maybe, for instance, you've prayed for children, and that prayer hasn't been answered. Or prayed that your child would escape addiction, or get in a healthier relationship. Or maybe it was for a better job and a better future. Or maybe you've just hoped for good health, for a cure, only to have a recurrence instead. Sometimes faith comes easy, and sometimes it's really hard.

Interestingly, God's response to Abraham's skepticism and doubt... is no different than God's response to his belief. God doesn't get mad, or frustrated, or threaten to cast Abraham aside if he doesn't get a better attitude. Instead, God just repeats the promise, this time making it even more tangible: "This man will not be your heir," God reassures Abraham. "No one but your very own child will be your heir." And then, in a moment of tender patience and care, God brings Abraham outside and says, almost whispers, I imagine, "Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are even able to count them. So shall your descendants be." And then, the narrator of Genesis continues, "And Abraham believed the LORD."

Now, just to be clear, Abraham and Sarah won't actually have that child for another **14** years, when they are on the verge of turning 100 years old. Which means I'm pretty sure there were other times when Abraham found faith hard, when he found it was easier to doubt rather than trust God's promises. But I wonder how many times when, just as he was about to give up on God, he'd walk outside once again and try to count the stars over his head and, with this tangible reminder flung wide

across the sky, find a measure of both comfort and courage and discover he could believe once again.

God promises that Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. And history has proven that promise reliable, as Abraham and Sarah will have Isaac, child of the promise, and Isaac will have Jacob and Esau, and Jacob will have twelve children that grow and multiply into the twelve tribes of Israel. And one of those descendants, Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, descended through Joseph all the way back to Abraham, will declare God's grace and mercy to all the world, and be the blessing God promised so long ago.

And you know what, that story isn't done yet. Because through our baptism into Jesus, you and I are now also counted as children of the promise and descendants of Abraham. You are I, that is, represent and make up those stars in the sky God talked about so long ago.

Sometimes, faith in God's promises is easy. When that's true for you, come here, to your church, in order to give thanks and to let your faith shine as bright as a star in heaven and encourage those around you. Sometimes, though, faith in God's promises is hard. And when that's true, feel free to go outside and look up at the stars and remember God's promise to Abraham. Or, even better, when faith is hard, come here, to your church, and see some of those stars of the heavens now scattered throughout this congregation. God has given us to each other, you see, precisely so that we can remind each other that, while it sometimes may take a long time, God *always* keeps God's promises. For in Jesus' cross, we see just how far God will go to prove God's great love for us, and in Jesus' resurrection we see that God's love and life are stronger than all things, even death itself.

Previously in Genesis, God made some extraordinary promises to Abraham, called Abraham to be and do more than he could have ever imagined, and gave Abraham reminders all around him to help keep him in faith. And God is not done. God is still doing that: still making

promises, still calling us to be more than we'd imagined, still giving us reminders, still keeping us in faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.

—*David J. Lose* © 2019