

Beginnings

Genesis 12:1-3; Psalm 8; Acts 2:42-47

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How do you make decisions? Are you a person who usually intuits how things are going to work out and you make a plan for action? Maybe you are a person who has a difficult time making a decision because you feel that you never have enough information to make a good decision. Maybe you are a person who doesn't like the responsibility and the accountability for making decisions. A student once told me that she had an assignment in her class to write a paper about making decisions. She was having difficulty deciding how to begin.

The accounts that were read this morning are records of major decisions that were made. These decisions have had influence over history for thousands and thousands of years. The decision of Abram links all of the families of the earth at that time with the later history of the great nation of Israel and with all of the other nations of the earth. Abram was a 9th generation descendent of Noah so he is the link between those who "were" and those who "will be." Abram was 75 years of age when God called him.

Although Abram will never see all of the future that God talks about, his response to the invitation of God will shape it. While Abram lived in Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, he would have been polytheistic, a worshiper of multiple gods, just as those around him were. But on a day in history, somewhere between 2100 and 1900 B.C., Yahweh appeared to Abram and it is the fulcrum upon which all of spiritual history is turned.

God's words to Abram are an imperative, a divine directive, for what God wants Abram to do. If God is to be able to do with Abram what God desires to do, Abram must be willing to move from the place where he now lives; he must leave the homeland of his family. Abram cannot do what God has planned for him to do if he remains committed to where he now is. Yahweh establishes with Abram what is known as the Abrahamic Covenant.

God says to Abram:

- I will make you a great nation;
- I will bless you;
- I will make your name great;
- I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you;
- In you all of the families of the earth will be blessed.

God promises a new community and a new name for Abram. His name becomes Abraham, meaning "Father of the people." Yahweh also makes a promise about Sarai. God says, "As for Sari, your wife, you shall not call her name Sari, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall come from her." (Genesis 17:15-16) And so it was.

The prophet Isaiah would long afterward write saying, "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, who seek the Lord; look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were

dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain; when he was one (person) I called him, then blessed him and multiplied him.” (Isaiah 51:1-2)

God’s choice of Abraham will lead to blessing for *all* of the families (all of the nations) of the earth. What finally counts about God’s promise is that it continues throughout the ages to the community of faith in later generations, including the age of the Church, including us.

Part of that covenant, part of those promises that God made to Abraham was fulfilled following the day of Pentecost. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came with power to dwell within the lives of all who would become followers of Jesus Christ and the Church was born.

Luke writes the stories of the new-born Church in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Luke writes in such a way that he intends to instruct his readers about what would be the normal expected standards for the faithful rather than writing simply a historical narrative.

After Pentecost most of the 3000 souls who decided to follow Jesus as Lord went back to their countries. Those followers who lived in Jerusalem formed the local congregation. We do not know the number of people. We do know that there was a nucleus of the 120 who had been in the upper room. Those who lived in that city joined together as one body. Those who lived in that city became a caring, supportive community.

Luke goes on to describe other characteristics of that Church, and of any church, that he considers normative. Luke says that the people

- listened to the apostles teaching,
- worshiped in the Temple,
- ate with one another, fellowshiped with each other,
- prayed,
- had a good reputation in the city.

It is only within the body of the Church that one finds people with so many different interests, so many different personalities, so many different views of life. The presence of the Holy Spirit, then and now, is a transforming presence that unites all of us into a common *koinonia*, a fellowship that holds everything in common. Luke lifts a phrase from Greek philosophy, saying that they had “all things in common,” indicating a special friendship. A fellowship of believers shares more than common beliefs and core values. They display a profound regard for one another’s spiritual and physical well-being as a community of friends.

Those people knew, and we should know, that we have a responsibility to become more knowledgeable about the God whom we serve and the teachings of Jesus, whom we say we follow, and the Holy Spirit that now in-dwells us. We can spend all of our lives learning from God’s word and never know all there is to know. It was the Apostles who taught them because, as yet, there was no written record of the teachings of Jesus. There was as yet no written New Testament that could be placed into their hands.

The people of the Church took meals together. There was fellowship and support for one another. They had experienced something about which they needed to talk to one another. They also shared the resources that they had and provided for one another. They did not let one another be in need. They prayed. That’s all that we are told, but we can surmise that their prayers included

- praises for their new-found faith,
- prayers for their common needs,
- prayers for the needs and concerns of one another,
- prayers that they would continue to be faithful and become the people who Jesus wanted them to become.

As the Apostles and others left Jerusalem and became the agents of Jesus to share the Gospel, the growth of the Church would move like a wave over the known world. People in other countries would find hope where hope was needed throughout the Roman Empire and in other countries as well. Ironically, it was the Roman Empire that made it possible for the Church to spread so quickly.

The Roman Empire was modern for its day in that

- it had constructed roads,
- it had ships that sailed the Mediterranean Sea,
- it had trade guilds for almost everything.

But these new followers of Jesus traveled into a world where there were

- both slave and free people,
- a justice system that was based on what one's socio-economic and political standing was,
- a world where emperors demanded to be worshiped as God.

As the Church grew and as it included believers beyond the Jewish community in Israel, life became more difficult. For example, if one wanted to be recognized to work within a trade guild, once a year that person would come to a statue of Caesar, put a pinch of incense into the fire at the base of the statue, and declare, "Caesar is Lord." The Jews of Israel had been excluded from this requirement in order to keep peace in Israel. At first, Rome did not differentiate Christianity from Judaism, but as non-Jews in other nations became believers, they were not excluded from that requirement. Christians could not bow before the statue of Caesar and call him lord. They had only one Lord. This led to unemployment in the guilds.

Many were martyred for their faith, the first being Stephen. James, the brother of John, was killed by Herod. All of the disciples except John were eventually martyred.

The writer of the Book to the Hebrews records that many believers were

- tortured
- mocked
- beaten
- imprisoned in chains
- stoned
- sawn in half
- put to death by the sword
- driven to poverty and destruction

for the faith that they refused to deny.

I wonder how any of us would respond to such hardship in our lives.

As the church grew, they were sometimes forced to

- meet in the catacombs, the underground cemetery in Jerusalem,
- forced to meet in homes at night.

Those are our beginnings as the Church of Jesus Christ.

The message of the Church today is the same as that of the first Church. The message is the same as that first sermon of Peter. Jesus, the Son of the living God, came as the promised Messiah. He lived among people, was crucified by the Roman government until dead, was buried, was raised to life by God on the third day, and now is in heaven with God serving as our advocate. If anyone would become a follower of Jesus, they must confess their sin, their spiritual separation from God, accept the forgiveness of God through the death of Jesus, and follow Jesus as Lord.

The Church universal may go through periods of trial and periods of persecution, and periods of being ignored, but the Church of Jesus Christ continues as it began, by faithful people who follow Jesus.

Sometimes there arises the question by a local church, "Will our church survive?"

The answer is really found in asking another question, "How much do you believe that everyone needs to know the Good News of Jesus Christ, and how willing are the church's members to invite those who are unchurched to come into the fellowship?" If we really think the second question is important, and we respond to the mission of Jesus for us in the world, we will not have to ask the first question. If our work is like that of Abraham and Sarah, and the 120, it will not be finished in our lifetime.

Because of those two beginnings, the faithfulness to respond to God by Abraham and Sarah, and by those 120 people, we are here today in this congregation worshiping God.

For Abram, the land of Ur was a comfortable place. Canaan was the land of promise. For the early Christians, the promise of Jesus was all of the promise that they needed.

May we be faithful to respond to the call of God when God desires that we help to bring about something new.

Amen.