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The Story: Finding the Scarlet Thread
Abraham
Genesis 12-35

When we took our son Cooper back to Whitworth a couple weeks ago, we stayed two nights in a hunting cabin in Sprague in the middle of thousands of acres of land. One of our favorite things to do is four-wheeling; exploring the rugged landscape... finding the settler's derelict shack and the beautiful stone duck blind on Alkali Lake. But when you explore 50 square miles of land, it is easy to get lost.. and I have ended up miles from the cabin! But I've discovered the solution. When we're ready to go back, we drive to the top of a hill and survey the horizon. If I keep the gas towers on my left, the cell towers on my right, the clump of trees behind me and aim for the solo cell tower, it will take us home. I've learned to climb high to get the bigger view.

That's what we are doing this year as we explore this... *The Story*. This year, instead of focusing each week on a few Bible verses, we are climbing up for a big-picture view. When we do, we discover that the Bible is one story. We see how God is at work from the earliest moments of creation until the final moments of re-creation. We are able to point out the landmarks of the story, from beginning to end. And we find what we are calling the Scarlet Thread that weaves throughout the Story... the cameo appearances of our hero, Jesus.

Last week we launched this journey with the 3-act story that lays the foundation for the rest of the Bible. If you missed it, I urge you to download it. Do you remember the three acts? Creation, Fall, Redemption. God creates everything out of nothing! He speaks, and it appears! And the highpoint of that creation... you! Humanity... created in God's image... created on purpose and for purpose. Our popular culture says that you are just an accident: Slime plus Time! But Genesis declares, "You are the special and beloved creation of God!"

God places Adam and Eve in a paradise and enjoys a perfect relationship with them, until the Devil comes along and convinces Eve that God doesn't really love them. That he is holding out on them. So they eat of the forbidden fruit, and everything comes crashing down. Sin enters the world and they are expelled from the Garden. What do we call this moment? Fall.

Right here, this broken relationship sets the stage for the Story. For the rest of the year, we see God implementing a plan to vanquish the Devil, destroy the power of sin, and restore relationship with his beloved humanity... redemption. Remember

those three sad words God spoke when Adam and Eve were hiding? “Where are you?” Everything from this point forward is an echo of those three words—God crying out to humanity, “Where are you?”—and reaching out to say, “I still love you, and I am going to fix this.” So that’s chapter 1. How many of you read chapter 1!

This week in chapter 2, you will be reading about the first step in God’s plan to fix things. God will build a nation of people through whom he will bless the whole world. Who are those people? The Jews... the chosen people of Israel. And how will God start that nation? In a most unlikely way... with a most unlikely couple.

When you think of God’s Story, Abraham is one of those giant landmarks. His story takes up 24 chapters in Genesis. And thousands of years later in the New Testament, his name is mentioned 70 times! Cyndi and I were in Burien two weeks ago to visit a friend, and we kept running into the name “Ambaum.” It was all over the place. Turns out Mr. Ambaum was one of the key players in the founding of Burien. His name is everywhere.

So it is with Abraham—or Abram, as he was called before God gave him a new name. Abraham is the father of the Jewish nation, and he is the first step in God’s plan to restore the relationship broken at the Fall. This is a massive story but I want to prepare you for your homework by looking at two of the great highpoints in the Bible.

We might summarize Abraham’s story in one word: Faith! The story of Abraham is the story of a man who had faith in God. Who believed God, no matter how crazy or foolish or unlikely God’s promises were. Abraham just kept on believing. The first glimpse we have of this spectacular faith comes in Abram’s call, Genesis 12.

¹The LORD 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. ³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” ⁴So 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.

Out of the blue, God appears to Abram in Ur, a city in what would now be southern Iraq. Without any warning or introduction, God tells Abram that from his offspring, He will make a great nation. He repeats this promise in Genesis 15:5, [God] took [Abram] outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

That’s quite a plan. Starting with one couple, God is going to grow a great nation of chosen people. But why are they chosen? So they can say to the un-chosen people, “Nyah, nyah... I’m chosen and you aren’t!” Why does God choose to create a great

nation from Abram? Look back at 12:3: "...all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you." What is this talking about? How will God bless all peoples on earth through Abram's family? Jesus, of course! Here's another glimpse of the Scarlet Thread! God calls Abram to form a nation that will teach the world about who God is and how we are to live—and will ultimately produce a Messiah—who will save the world. This is the hilltop view of the Bible. God calls Abram to make a great nation through whom to send Jesus to save the world and restore the relationship that was broken at the Fall.

That's the plan. Sounds great, right? Except God could hardly find a worse candidate to do this. I love the way one pastor puts this: God tells his plan to the angels and they say, "Great, how about starting with that young couple over there... the fit ones who are playing tennis." And God says, "No, I was thinking about that couple over there." The angels say, "You mean the ones with the walkers?" There were all kinds of reasons God's plan didn't make sense. Abram was 75 years old. He and his wife Sarai were childless... infertile! Plus, they were idol worshippers. So God's great plan is to uproot an old, childless, pagan couple, send them on a road trip, not tell them where they are going, and use them to form a nation that would be as numerous as the stars in the night sky... so that he could bless the rest of the world. That's the plan! (Keith Idelman)

Why would God do such a silly thing? Because He could... because only He could. And when God does what is impossible for humans He gets the glory. This theme—God doing impossible things through unlikely people for His glory—will repeat itself again and again throughout the Story. You might as well start watching for it. Abraham was old, Isaac was insecure, Jacob was a con man, Leah was ugly, Joseph was a braggart, Moses stuttered, Gideon was afraid, Samson was arrogant, Rahab was a whore, David was a shepherd boy (and an adulterer and a murderer), Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was disobedient, Naomi was a widow, Mary was a teenager, John the Baptist was... well, he was just weird, Peter was a big mouth, Martha was a worry-wart, Thomas was a doubter, Paul was sick, Timothy was young... [Kyle Idelman sermon, *God Builds a Nation*]

One of the most amazing things about the arc of the Story is this: God uses unworthy, incapable, under-resourced, utterly inadequate people to accomplish his purposes. Why? Because He can, and because it brings Him glory. Do you see some good news here? This means that you, and you, and you who are sitting there thinking to yourself, "I don't know enough, I'm not smart enough, I'm not good enough, I'm not young enough, I'm not old enough, I'm not fit enough, I'm not clever enough, I'm not cute enough to do anything great for God... to make disciples for Jesus"—to you, God is saying, "Good news. This isn't about you. It's about me, and when I call you to do something, I will give you everything you need to do it... everything. I promise."

So what was Abram's response to God's incredible invitation? Faith! He believed God! In Genesis 15:6, ⁶Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as

righteousness." In other words, Abram was made right with God, not because of who he was or what he knew or what he did. He was right with God because he believed God. It was all God's plan, all God's initiative, all God's doing, all God's salvation... and Abram just received and believed. That's real faith.

We use the word faith a lot in Christian circles. But would you like to see the simplest definition of faith in the Bible? 12: 4: "So Abram left, as the Lord had told him..." See those three words... "So Abram left." Last week, we talked about the three saddest words in the Bible. "Where are you?" Here are three wonderful, faith-filled words. "So Abram left..." He was comfortable in Ur—lots of money, a big family, a religion that worked fine for him. Then comes Yahweh who says, "I want you to leave behind everything you know—everyone you know—and I want you to go to a new place. And to make it more fun, I'm not even going to tell you where it is. Just start walking."

And we read this breathtaking response: "So Abram left..." He acted on God's promise... against all odds, against all hope he acted on God's promise. He obeyed God. That is faith. Obeying God because you trust his promise... that is faith!

We Christians have turned faith into a head thing: something we know not something we do. That's why those who claim to believe in Jesus can still cling to bitterness, because they don't really believe what God says about forgiveness. It's why those who claim to believe in Jesus can hoard their money rather than give generously, because they don't really believe God will take care of them. That's why those who claim to believe in Jesus can throw in the towel on their marriage instead of fighting for it, because they don't really believe that God is bigger than their marriage problems. Real faith isn't what you know or believe, it's what you do with what you believe.

Now faith isn't believing that God will give you everything you want; some preachers preach that. It's heresy! No, faith is believing that God will give you everything he promises, and then stepping out in obedience as if it were true. "So... Abram...left." You claim to be a believer, and yet there is something God is asking you to do—or to stop doing—something that seems frightening or impossible or you just don't want to do it, and so you refuse. You say "no" to God. What kind of faith is that? Real faith is acting on what we say we believe, otherwise it's hypocrisy. God called; "So... Abram...left." That is real faith.

But it was nothing compared to what God would ask of Abraham later. I want to look briefly at what may be the greatest act of faith in the Bible. As you read this week, you discover that God did keep his promise. When Abraham was 100 and Sarah, 90, God gave them a son—Isaac. Do you know what Isaac means? Laughter! Finally, after decades of barrenness and decades of promises that seemed ludicrous and hopeless, God kept his promise. And they laughed! Laughed with delight at the goodness of God... laughed with wonder at the miracle of birth. Perhaps laughed with astonishment at the idea that they, at 90 and 100, had just



become first time parents—but there he was: Isaac, laughter, the joy of their lives and the hope of generations.

So imagine Abraham's shock when 15 years later, God appeared and said this to Abraham: I want you to go and sacrifice your son, the one you love, on Mt. Moriah!

The religious world of the time was filled with gods who demanded the blood of children. But not the God of Abraham. He hated the sacrifice of babies. (He still does, by the way.) We know that because we've read the rest of the Story. But Abraham didn't know. God was commanding him to do with his son what other gods of other cultures demanded: lay him on an altar and cut his throat. It must have been devastating. This long-awaited gift from God—the most precious thing in the world—now God is asking Abraham to take his life? And what was to come of this great nation God had promised?

But once again, Abraham demonstrates his faith through his obedience. Later, the writer of Hebrews explains what was going through Abraham's mind: ¹⁷By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.... ¹⁹Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead...

It is one of the most dramatic moments in the Bible, captured in this famous painting by Caravaggio—a father about to slay his beloved son on an altar because he trusts God to raise him back to life. Of course, we are told from the beginning, it was just a test. At the last moment, the angel cries, "Stop!" and the boy is spared. Then we hear powerful words affirming Abraham's obedient faith: "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

You know what we are seeing here, right? The Scarlet Thread! You will not find a more poignant example than here. The sacrifice of Isaac was only a test, but thousands of years later, the story would be repeated. A father leads his Son to a hill near Mt. Moriah; an innocent son, the hope of the world. And he would be silent as executioners lifted their hands to drive stakes into his flesh. The angels watch in wonder... waiting for one word from the Father to stop the hand of the executioner; to rush in as they had done with Abraham so that the beloved son might be spared. But to the angel's eternal amazement, the order never comes. And the hammer falls. And the beloved son is sacrificed.

Right here, only 22 chapters into the Story, we catch a glimpse of the sacrificial death of Jesus. Ironically, what looked like the darkest moment in human history—the death of the beloved Son of God—was in fact the fulfillment of a promise God made to Abram many thousands of years earlier. By the death of this descendant of Abraham, and by his resurrection, the whole world would be blessed.

This was no test. It was the real thing. Our heavenly Father was not willing to withhold his precious son so that he might rescue his precious, lost children... you and me. Did you realize that? Did you know that God's plan from the beginning was to offer up his own son in sacrifice for you? If we know that—if we understand that, if we really believe that—how can we do anything but live lives of obedient faith in the God who always, always, always keeps his promises.