



Sermon Transcript January 26, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption God Acts, We Respond Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-23

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 26, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Genesis 12:1-3

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And 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. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Genesis 15:1-21

¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." ⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." ⁵ And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

⁷ And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." ⁸ But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹ He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

Introduction

As we make our way through the story of the Bible, this morning we come to the letter “A” of CASKET EMPTY. CASKET EMPTY is the acronym we are using to put together the story of the entire Bible. The letter “A” stands for a man by the name of Abraham. Anytime you see the name Abraham in the Bible, it ought to cause your mind to go to the beginning of the Bible, the book of Genesis. This is one of the goals of our sermon series. When we open up to a certain section of the Bible, it is always helpful to know a little bit about where you are in the grand story of the Bible. Abraham’s story appears very early in the Bible. His story begins in Genesis 12 and he is first introduced to us at the end of Genesis 11. And yet, even though his story is very early in the Bible, his presence never really passes off of the pages of Scripture. In fact, the significance of the story we are going to consider this morning is highlighted by the fact that Abraham’s name appears 22 times in the New Testament.

I also find it interesting that Abraham lived 2000 years before Christ. And here we are 2000 years after Christ. With these two time periods being equal distance from the time of Jesus, what we discover is that the way God responded to the needs of this broken world through Abraham is the same way he responds to your brokenness in our day. And furthermore, we will learn that the very thing God required of Abraham 2000 years before Christ is the same thing God requires of us today, 2000 years after Christ. It is a testament to the fact that while “the times are a changing” God remains the same. The God of the Old Testament is no different than the God of the New Testament. Don’t forget that it is all one big story and God is the main character throughout the story. God is constant in his character and the way he responds to the need of this world.

So what we will discover with Abraham is that our only hope in this broken world is dependent upon God doing something. You can’t fix what is broken in this world. Ultimately, you can’t fix you. I think of the old nursery rhyme: “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men, couldn’t put Humpty together again.” We saw the great fall of man last week in Genesis

3. We saw how man was removed from the presence of God as a result. We saw how our world is a mess and life is a mess and then we die. And furthermore we are told in Scripture that *“it is appointed unto man once to die and then face the judgment.”* This leaves us with no other option. We need God to do something in order for us to have any hope. That is what we see in the story of Abraham. In the story of Abraham we see God acting in a decisive way to redeem a world that has gone awry. The question the story of Abraham answers for us is this: “What is God going to do about this broken world?” Or, here is another way to put the question. “How can we possibly have a relationship with God?” The answer is the same for us as it is for Abraham. God in his grace needs to act on our behalf and we need to respond with faith.

This is the dance you will see throughout the story of Abraham. The pattern goes like this: God acts. And then, Abraham responds. First, God breaks in and then Abraham follows God. Then God does what only God can do and Abraham in turn worships God. Finally, God sees to it and Abraham believes God. Do you see the “dance”? It is the dance we are invited to as well. God in his grace acts on our behalf through Jesus. God always takes the lead and we respond: we follow, we worship, we believe.. My prayer for you is that you join the dance.

God Breaks In - We Follow

The story begins in Genesis 12:1 with God calling Abraham (at the time of his calling his name was simply Abram, which means *exalted father*). We read in Genesis 12:1, *“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’”* At the end of Genesis 11 we discover where his country was and what people he came from and even who his father was. He came from Ur of the Chaldeans, which was ancient Babylon. His father’s name was Terah. He had settled down in Haran with his extended family, which included his brother’s family and his nephew Lot—the son of a brother who had passed away.

There wasn’t anything extra-ordinary about this family that got God’s attention or drew God to Abraham. In fact, Abraham and his family, like the other families around him, were not worshipers of God when God called him. They were an idolatrous family. Later in the Old Testament, when the descendants of Abraham—the nation of Israel—is finally in the Promised Land, Joshua looks back to recount their story and quite naturally he begins with God’s call to Abraham. In Joshua 24:2, he says of Abraham, *“Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.”* Abraham was a pagan

idol worshiper when God called Abraham. In fact I read this week that some ancient sources suggest that Abraham's family was in the business of manufacturing and selling idols. Whether or not that is true, we do know that when God calls Abraham, it is not because Abraham did something that deserves God's calling of him.

Rather, in a very abrupt way, what we see in Genesis 12:1 is God breaking in. Aren't you grateful that God is a God who "breaks in" and calls us out from the mess—out of our own idolatry—and into the blessing he has to offer us? He doesn't say, "Clean up you act and then come!" He just beckons to us, "Come and see." Remember, you can't fix you. We need God to act. And so he does in the life of Abraham,

Think of what we have seen up to this point. If there is one thing that we discovered last week as we finished looking at the letter "C" - which stands for Creation—is that life is not as it should be. It is not as we wish it would be or long for it to be. As you make your way through the first eleven chapters of Genesis, you can only conclude that we are all swept up with the tide of this broken world. We need God! Ever since Adam rebelled against God and declared his independence from God, this world has been a mess. We all know the struggle that comes with life.

After Genesis 2, in those first eleven chapters it is nothing but negative after negative. Cain kills his brother Abel. After some time transpires, God summarizes what he sees in the world with this statement, *"the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."* Do you hear the superlatives in that assessment? *"Every intention . . . only evil continually."* So what did God do? He wiped out the whole lot with a flood, minus Noah and his family. What was God's conclusion about man after the flood? In Genesis 8:21 God says, *"the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth."* The flood didn't change a thing about man's heart. The nature of man's heart was further illustrated at the Tower of Babel, where man once again claimed independence from God and where God once again visited man with his corrective hand of judgment. From the fall of Adam to the Tower of Babel, from Genesis 3-11, it becomes clear that man cannot fix his own problem. On our own, we cannot work our way back to God for *the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.* At this point, things look rather hopeless.

But then we come to Genesis 12 and there is a major turn that takes place in this story. God breaks in. And here is what we read. *"Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And 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. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Did you catch the abrupt change in the tone of this passage? It is a welcomed change. Finally there seems to be some hope for this world. The change in the tone of the narrative is found in the word "bless." Some form of the word "bless" is used five times in these three verses. Coming out of the grim and hopeless picture of Genesis 3-11, it is welcomed news. It is a picture of hope. In this chapter, God is turning to this fallen world with his blessing. It is a word that means "favor" or "grace." He pours his favor out on Abraham by telling him that his name will be great and a nation will come from him. But there is something more to this "blessing" that God announces to Abraham. God promises that through Abraham *"all the families of the earth will be blessed."* And so there is a pattern of hope here that is not just for Abraham. Rather, it is a hope that trickles down to you and to me. Just like God breaks into Abraham's life, he breaks into our lives with his grace and his blessing and he calls us to follow him.

Did you catch what God called Abraham to do? He said, *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."* Do you know what it says in Genesis 12:4? *"So Abram went, as the LORD had told him."* That is so easy to read over rather quickly, but it is an amazing act of trust on Abraham's part. He is trusting God in the midst of a host of unanswered questions. God said to Abraham, *"I will make you into a great nation."* Abraham was 75 years old when God came to him and he and his wife Sarah were yet to have any children. Really? A great nation will come from us? Furthermore, where the land was that had been promised to him had not yet been disclosed to him. One wonders what Sarah thought as they were setting out to "who knows where?" But, in due time, God said, I'll show you. But in the meantime, follow me. Leave behind what is known. Walk into the unknown. Abraham responds. He puts his trust in God and simply follows.

When God breaks into your life, he asks you to follow him and to trust him. What that means is that you will follow him without having all your questions answered. Some of you are sensing God breaking into your life and calling you, but you are holding back because you don't have all of your questions answered. Well that is not what the journey of faith looks like. If you are waiting for God to answer all of your questions before you leave it all behind to follow him, you'll never leave the past behind and you will never experience the blessing that God offers. At the end of the day, you are not putting your trust in answers to your questions. Instead, you are putting your trust in the person and the character of God who comes to you and says *"I will bless you."* This journey of faith

and trust is hard at times because the journey between the promise of God and the fulfillment of his promise means that you have to trust God even when you don't understand what is happening or why God is allowing certain things in your life. But the one who puts their trust in God will one day see the fulfillment of the promise. Jesus makes a similar costly invitation of us when he says, *"Pick up your cross and follow me."* It makes me ask, "where will that lead me?" To which Jesus says, "trust me." It is in losing your life that you find it. When God breaks into your life, he simply asks you to leave your past way of life behind and to follow the One who wants to bless you.

Only God Can Do It - Worship Him

The lack of having a son remains an ongoing tension in the story of Abraham. How will God possibly fulfill his promise to Abraham to make a nation out of him when in his old age he is yet to have a child? That is the dilemma you find three chapters later in Genesis 15. Here Abraham says, *"O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus . . . And behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."* Abraham is trying to solve the problem of the lack of an heir by suggesting that his servant be the heir of God's promise. It was culturally acceptable at that time. God comes back with a resounding, "No!" He rehearses his promise to Abraham and says, *"Look toward the heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them . . . So shall your offspring be."*

Then in Genesis 16, we find that Abraham is now 86 years of age and still no heir is born to him. Again, he and Sarah take matters into their own hands and Abraham sleeps with Sarah's servant and she conceives a son. Ishmael is born, but God is very clear that this is still not the son of promise. We then come to Genesis 17 and now Abraham is ninety-nine years of age. Still, there is no heir. The biological clock is way beyond ticking. But God comes again and reassures Abraham of his promise that from him and Sarah they would have many descendants. In Genesis 17, Abraham laughs at the idea. In Genesis 18, Sarah laughs at the idea. Is it any wonder that when this promised son is born in Genesis 21 that his name, Isaac, which means *laughter*.

I really appreciate watching Abraham struggle and grow in his understanding of what it means to trust God and to rest in God's promise. I also appreciate the gracious way in which God deals with Abraham, the one on whom God has set his affection. It is comforting to me because the journey of faith is at times a difficult journey. But do you ever wonder why God waited so long to fulfill his promise to Abraham and Sarah? Why did God wait until Sarah was beyond the years of bearing children to open her

womb? When Paul looks back on this scene in Romans 4:19 he said that Abraham considered his own body and Sarah's barrenness *as good as dead*. And I think that is the point. The delay in keeping the promise was to demonstrate to Abraham and to us that only God can do it. Only God can bring life from the dead.

Think about it. The three patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all had wives who for a time period the text says were barren. This is an interesting thing to ponder especially when one of the promises to Abraham was that they would have many children. Carol Kaminski says of this, "the barrenness of these women establishes unmistakably that the promise made by God can only be accomplished by God. He alone can bring life out of the barrenness of Sarah's womb for the LORD who calls Abraham is none other than the Creator."¹ In fact, when Sarah laughs at the notion that she would have a child when she is well beyond the years of bearing children the angel responds with "*Is anything too hard for the LORD?*" This is not some incidental detail to the story of Abraham, rather this is central to God's plan of redemption. When God is ready to finally act in sending the Redeemer, Jesus, a barren woman gives birth to a son named John. He announces the birth of the Messiah who is born of a virgin. He will be called the Son of the Most High. There can be no mistake that it is God who acts and it is God—and only God—who brings life from the dead.

But sometimes the journey through life causes us to question whether or not God has the power to raise your life from the dead. Can he really change your life? Sometimes the obstacles in life cause us to lose sight of the promises of God and the confidence that God will see you through it. We can easily be critical of Abraham for the times he slipped in his trust—don't forget, he lied two times about his wife, claiming she was his sister." But at the same time, I think Abraham's story is one of incredible faith. His faith is lauded in Hebrews 11:8, "*By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place . . . And he went out, not knowing where he was going.*" In Romans 4 Paul talks about Abraham's growing faith. He says of Abraham in Romans 4:20, "*he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.*" Paul goes on to say that his faith grew as he became *convinced that God is able to do what he had promised.*

What was it that kept Abraham walking in faith as he waited all these years for God to fulfill his promises? One of the things you observe about Abraham from the beginning is that as he makes his way to the land where God is taking him, wherever he is, he builds an altar and worships God. You first see this in Genesis 12:7 where God says to him, "*to your offspring I will give this land.*" Then it says, "*So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.*" He repeats that wherever he goes. David Palmer

says, “There are obstacles externally—Canaanites in the land. There is deep fear that lies within us, doubt whether God has the power to accomplish all that he has promised, and yet we see Abraham journeying through the land and building these outposts of worship to the true and living God.” Palmer tells us that the lesson we should learn is this: “no matter what obstacle you may be facing right now, externally or internally, one of the most subversive acts you can do is to set up signposts of worship as you claim the promises of God.”² It is what you are doing right now! Worship reminds us that indeed God *redeems my life from the pit*. Only he can do it. Through constant worship, this weary sinner is reminded that no matter how cloudy my life gets, the sun keeps shining on me. God brings life from death through Jesus. “*The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*” How do I know? The one who brings life out of death brought Jesus back from the grave and rescued my life from the pit. And so we worship the only One who can do it—the One who brings life from the dead.

God Sees To It - Believe Him

There is a strange scene that unfolds in Genesis 15. Abraham asks God how he can know for sure that God will keep his promises. And then, God tells Abraham to get a heifer, a goat and a ram and cut them in half and lay each half over against the other. When you read these instructions, immediately you realize that there is something happening here that we are not familiar with in our context. But in Abraham’s context, he knew the significance of what he was being asked to do. This was a common custom in the ancient near East when a covenant was being made between two parties. It was a ceremony that sealed an agreement.

Here is how it worked. The pieces of the animals were set side by side with enough room for the two parties making covenant to walk between them. By walking between these pieces they were basically saying, “let it be done to me what was done to these animals if I fail to keep covenant.” Usually, this was an agreement that was made between a stronger and a lesser power and basically the stronger power was promising protection and the lesser power was promising loyalty. So Abraham was getting things set up to walk between the pieces so that he would declare his loyalty to God as God declared his protection. But then something very surprising happens. Abraham falls into a deep sleep and God assures Abraham that he will bring his offspring into the land he promised. But Abraham is not asked to walk between the pieces. Instead, he looks down and he sees “*a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch* pass between these pieces—it is God. In essence God is saying, “I will make covenant with you, and I will bind myself with you, and you need only to stand and see the salvation that God will work for you.”

God makes covenant. God will see to it. And so, all there is for us to do is believe. It is in this passage we find one of the most important verses in all the Bible. In Genesis 15:6 it says, “*And Abraham believed the LORD and it was counted to him as righteousness.*” God is the one who sees to it! Our response is to believe. It is not through anything we do that makes us right with God. It is belief in what God does for us that makes us right before God. This is the verse Paul uses in Romans 4 to illustrate how a person is made right with God. It is through faith in what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. This is what makes a true descendant of Abraham. This is how the promise to Abraham is a promise to bless all nations. Like Abraham, we turn in faith—we believe—and through the cross of Jesus, God credits the righteousness of Jesus to our account.

And so the covenants, God says, “I’ll see to it!” God brings his salvation through Jesus and we in turn are called to believe. In doing so, we are made right with God. Do you believe?

Conclusion

What is important about Genesis 12 and the story of Abraham is that it sets the tone and the pattern for the rest of the story of the Bible. God is the prime mover who acts on our behalf. In the story of Abraham we see God acting in a decisive way to redeem a world that has gone awry. What God does in Genesis 12 and in the story of Abraham is what God continues to do throughout the story of the Bible that culminates with Jesus, the Son of God.

In our passage this morning, we first see how God breaks into this broken world. This is a pattern the we will see throughout the Bible until one day, in human form, God himself “breaks in” and comes in the person of Jesus. Throughout the story of the Bible we see over and over again, God doing what only God can do. He brings life from death. That is the essence of the story of Jesus. He was crucified, buried and three days later he rose from the dead. But so are we, born again by the Spirit of God. We who were once dead in our sins, God has brought alive through the quickening work of the Holy Spirit. Only God can do that. And with the covenant made to Abraham, the first of a series of covenants we will see throughout the Bible, God binds himself to this broken world and he will see to it that he brings every promise to fruition. He is coming back. He is restoring this broken world and forming a new heaven and a new earth. He is making old things new.

Coming out of the brokenness of Genesis 1-11 we were left asking the question: “What

will God do about this broken world?” Here is what we have learned. God will break in. God will do what only God can do—bring life from the dead. God will see to it that nothing will keep him from accomplishing his saving purpose.

This leads us to the second question we began with coming out of Genesis 1-11. How can I have a relationship with this God? Follow the pattern set out from Abraham. When God breaks into your broken world, follow him. Don't worry about having all of your questions answered. Many of them get answered as you follow. Some of them will not be answered until we are with him. But you can trust him. Secondly, worship him. The key to living between the promise given and the promise fully realized is to establish a lifestyle of worship. It is what reminds you that God is indeed good and faithful. Then finally, believe in him. That is the only way you can be made right with God. Put your trust in Jesus who died on the cross and rose from the dead so that your sins can be forgiven. You can't make yourself right by what you do. God can make you right by what Jesus did. Believe!

¹Carol Kaminski *CASKET EMPTY Old Testament* (Casket Empty Media,2012) 30

²David Palmer “A is for Abraham” Sermon preached at Kenwood Baptist Church, Sept. 24, 2017
<https://kenwoodbaptist.org/pdfs/sermons/09-24-2017---a-is-for-abraham.pdf>

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Looking back on your life, what do you think was the biggest step of faith you have ever taken? What was hard about it? What blessing came as a result?

Diving Into The Word

Read Genesis 12:1-3 and Genesis 15:1-21 together as a group

2. How is the LORD revealed in this portion of Scripture. Who is He and What is He like?
3. What does this passage teach you about the people of God?
4. From observing the life of Abraham
What does it mean to follow God when God breaks in? (Genesis 12:4)
How does the worship of God help you walk in faith? (Genesis 12:7; 13:18)
Why is belief the way a person is made right with God? (Genesis 15:6;
Romans 3:21-26; 4:1-3)
5. Read Genesis 17:4-5 and Romans 4:11-18. God promises Abraham that he will be the father of many nations. Explain how this promise is being fulfilled in the New Testament. What implications does this have for the church? In what ways have you embraced the multi-ethnic family of God?

Taking It Home

6. What is one thing you are taking from your study?
7. Who can you tell?