

Amazing Faith

The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.”

How would you feel if you were asked by God to do a similar thing?

People do leave countries, of course – but usually it’s because they have a plan for a better life – better security, better opportunities, better health. Or it’s because the move will take them nearer family. Or it’s because their employer needs them somewhere else. And for many people in the world today, it’s because their homeland has become dangerous – and any other situation seems like the better option.

But when God called Abram, he didn’t give a reason – or even a destination.

That’s a pretty big ask, isn’t it? Leave everything behind: your country, your people and your family, and go to... well, when God called Abram, he kept the destination as a surprise.

Abram was presumably pretty comfortable and settled where he was. Originally, his family was from the city of Ur, but along with his father, Terah, his wife Sarai, and his grandson Lot, he’d moved to Harran.

He was not a young man, either – he was 75 years old. Not an age at which people typically move to another country.

But God called him. God called him to leave his family and his home and travel to a strange country. He had no idea where he would end up, what it would look like or how it would turn out. Even with such uncertainty, though, we know that Abram trusted God.

And so, as we heard in the reading from Genesis, “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.”

Trusting in God, he set out for something – somewhere – new.

Along with the call, though, God gave Abram a series of promises:

“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.”

Abram may not have known exactly what God had planned for him; but clearly, it was something special.

“So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.... He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran” (Genesis 12:1-5). So he trusted God and followed God’s instruction... except that he didn’t quite do that - God told him to leave his family, but Abram didn’t – he took Lot with him. He didn’t want he and Sarai to go alone – and Lot was a younger man, so presumably helpful to them in the difficulties they might face.

While that might have seemed like a good idea, the presence of Lot with Abram would cause problems – there was conflict between the families and eventually Lot moved away from Abram and settled in Sodom. And we know what happened with Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abram left Harran with Lot. But Abram’s ‘not quite’ faith in God didn’t end there: Despite God’s promises to him, he didn’t entirely rely on God’s protection. Twice, when he entered new places, he told Sarai to tell the people there that she was his sister, not his wife. It was a reasonable fear to have, because it was the prerogative of kings to take other men’s wives for themselves.

A few chapters later, God said to Abram: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward” (Genesis 15:1) but he did waver in his faith in God- he selfishly placed his wife in danger trying to save himself.

But it wasn’t just Abram’s faith that was not quite there yet. Sarai became frustrated with God’s slowness to act: Abram had told her of how God had him go out into the night, telling him that his offspring would be more numerous than the stars in the sky. But nothing was happening and it had been many years had passed since that promise was made.

Finally, Sarai decided to take matters into her own hands (Genesis 16:2). She offered her maid to Abram so that she could bear children for him. I understand such arrangements may have been culturally acceptable to the ancient peoples, but there was only one problem: it was not God’s plan. They thought they were trying to do God’s will, but they were doing it in their way, not God’s way. The resulting birth of Ishmael, the child of Sarah’s maid, again caused enormous problems for Abram – and indeed continues to cause conflict to the present day.

Neither Abram nor Sarai would always get things right. Their faith in God fell short so many times. Does that remind you of anyone? They were weak on occasion, they made mistakes, their faith wasn’t as strong as it might have been. Just like us. Well, I shouldn’t speak for all of us, so ‘just like me’ – I’ll let you all make your own judgements. I know my that my faith is a bit like Abram’s – I trust God... but I also try and look after myself, too. I am encouraged by the story of Abraham, because even though he was weak, even though his faith was often ‘not quite’ there, we remember him for his faith: As we heard in our second reading, Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Throughout the story of Abraham’s life, God would honour and renew God’s promises to him.

In Genesis 15, God makes a Covenant with Abram, and we read, “[...] the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

² But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

⁶ Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

⁷ He also said to him, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

And then again in chapter 17:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. (Genesis 17:1-7)

And so, with the addition of a single letter in Hebrew, his name was changed from Abram, which means exalted or noble father, to Abraham, which means father of many.

And at the same time, Sarai’s name was changed by God, by adding the same Hebrew letter – from Sarai which means princess, to Sarah which can mean princess too, but also mother of many.

Name changes are significant even today – whether they’re surname changes when people are married, or title changes, or the addition of postnominal letters. The name changes for Abraham and Sarah may seem trivial, but in telling people about those changes they were also making a claim on the promises of God.

I think we can all look to Abraham as an example to us, because even though he wasn't perfect, even though his faith wasn't always strong, God's faithfulness to him was perfect and was strong.

Abraham was like us - he struggled with trusting God and waiting on him in faith. He messed up at times. But he was still a man of God.

Abraham was not perfect in his faith. He didn't perfectly trust God with everything, but he did leave his homeland and go to the place where God was sending him. He did believe God was going to give him a son, but his patience was limited and he wavered. He did believe that God was his shield and that he would protect him, but there were a few times when he decided he should take some action to protect himself.

Abraham's failures didn't ruin his life – though they did have lasting consequences – and neither did they end God's promises to him.

God's promises to Abraham were part of God's plan, his plan to redeem the world through a selected group of people - the descendants of Abraham. God would give that group of people his laws and guide them through his prophets. They, in turn, would show the world what it meant to live as God's people. Ultimately, of course, God would send his Messiah through the line of Abraham, and he would save the world. Through Jesus, that son of Abraham, who was also the Son of God, the whole world would be blessed.

It is not always easy to follow God – as the life of Abraham shows – but we know that God saw Abraham as a man of faith – that phrase that Paul quotes, “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” is from Genesis 15:6, and Paul repeats it again in his letter to the Galatians (3:6), and James quotes it in his own letter (James 2:23).

Abraham did struggle with his faith in God, but ultimately his faith was in God. People today have faith in many things – but not always things that we think of as religious: faith in science, faith in wealth, faith in the goodness of other people. People increasingly describe themselves as ‘spiritual’ but not religious. They may hold that they do have faith... but faith in what?

It's not the fact of faith, though, or the amount of faith, or the strength of faith that's important. It is the object of our faith, and our faith needs to be in God, in Jesus – who lived and died and rose again for our sakes.

The story of Abraham tells us that God will help us as we struggle in our faith, but that that faith must be faith in God. It is not good enough to be “spiritual” in a general sense. It must be faith in the God created all that there is, and who has a plan for all that there is. The one who sent his only begotten Son into the world, not to judge the world, but to save it.

I think it is unlikely that God will say to any of us, “Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.”

But God does ask us to do things that will test our faith. Things that, if we do them, will take us outside our comfort zones. When we are asked such things, let's look to the example of Abraham and Sarah, and step out in faith, confident in God's promises to us, and God's faithfulness to us.

Amen.