

Letting Go and Letting God

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Genesis 11:27-12:9

Sermon Series:
A Journey of Faith –
A Study on the Life
of Abraham

We can learn a lot from Abraham as we see how God moved him from a place of orientation, through a period of disorientation, to a new place of reorientation. And as he progressed along the way, Abraham lived by faith by letting go and letting God.

I love the beginning of a new year. It provides a wonderful opportunity to look at where we have been and renew our commitment to follow Jesus as Lord wherever he leads. I am very excited that today we begin a sermon series on The Journey of Faith: A Study of the Life of Abraham.

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Let's look at the first part of our passage for today so that we can understand the place of orientation for Abram in Genesis 11:27-32: "Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran."

These verses in Genesis 11 help us to understand Abram's place of orientation. Though we know him as Abraham, his name was first Abram. And these few verses make clear that Abram's story is connected to the history of the nations in the earlier chapters of Genesis. We also learn about Abram's family of origin—his father, brothers and nephew Lot. He is married to Sarai, who later was known as Sarah, and the passage emphasizes that she had no children for she was barren.

And we also see in these verses the importance of place. Abram and his family had already begun a journey to Canaan from their home in "Ur of the Chaldeans," but somehow they had gotten stalled, so God intervenes to spur Abram on to continue the journey once begun. In this decisive moment—not only in Abram's

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life but for the community of faithful who have followed him—God intervenes and calls Abram. It is a call to let go: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” Other versions use the word *leave*.

A call from God is an invitation to live by faith by leaving the familiar place of orientation. It is a call to let go. This meant letting go on a number of different levels, including the physical place of his country and home and the emotional ties he had with his kindred or extended family. And, undoubtedly, there was a spiritual sense of letting go as he moved from a familiar place of orientation to the unfamiliar.

But Abram’s call was not only a call to let go, but also to let God do what only God could do. Notice the words of the passage:

I will make you a great nation,
I will bless you,
I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

This is the central moment in this passage and a key passage in all of scripture and in the Big Story of God’s redemption.

What is clear here is that God is in control. God is the one who is choosing, and God is the one who will accomplish what needs to be done. God is the one making this covenant, and it is God who will keep this covenant. It is all about grace. The journey isn’t about Abraham but about what God is doing and will do by His grace. What Abraham must do is let go and let God. I cannot emphasize this enough. There is nothing particularly remarkable about Abram. We do not know why God chose him. We only know that God did choose him, and by grace He chose to bless him and make him a great nation—the nation of Israel through whom others would be blessed. Abram had to let go of the life he had to receive God’s grace and to live into the covenant.

A wonderful picture of faith is open hands, because hands that are open cannot be clinging or clutching things. Hands that are open have let go and let God do what only God can do.

I was once asked at a retreat to identify the Bible character I relate to most, and I said Abraham. One reason is because a significant turning point in my faith journey was when I graduated from high school. I had to leave my family, the home and the small town I had been born and raised in all my life.

It was a terrifying time for me, but as I let go, I became

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more aware of my need for God and a desire to know Him more intimately. My letting go led to my letting God do in and through and for me what only God can do. Though I was seeking God, I have to say that God intervened for me in ways I never could have orchestrated by leading me to myriad people who directed and guided me spiritually through mentoring, small groups and Bible studies. My college years turned out to be a greenhouse experience for me as I grew personally and spiritually in ways I never imagined possible.

I'm sure, as many of you think about your own lives, you can recognize ways God has intervened by grace and led you from a place of orientation, as well. It is amazing to think about how much God changes our lives as we let go and let God do in and through and for us what only God can do.

Now let's look at the next few verses in Genesis 12:4-5: "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife, Sarai, and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan." What strikes me about this passage is that we are never too old for God to do something new.

Hebrews 11:8-9 interprets this passage for us by telling us, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not *knowing where he was going*. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise."

Abram recognizes that God is intervening in his life, and he chooses to cooperate by letting go and letting God do what only God can do, but living by faith leads him from a place of orientation through a period of disorientation. Hebrews makes clear that Abram stepped out in faith to obey God, not knowing where he was going. He lived as a foreigner in temporary housing the rest of his life.

Again, I can relate to Abram. Ten years after graduating from high school, I left my home in Northern California to go on a short-term mission project to Moscow, Russia, which was then still a part of the Soviet Union. I am not by nature a risk taker, so this was totally beyond me. I didn't know anyone I would be with, I didn't know the language, I didn't know that much about where I would be living. It was a disorienting experience. I remember at one point thinking, "I feel like I am stepping out into a black hole—

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alone.” But God spoke to me, “I know the place where you are going, and I will be with you.” This was an opportunity to trust the God I knew in circumstances that I didn't know.

Another way I relate to Abram and Sarai and their experience of disorientation is because I, too, have wrestled with infertility. This emotional disorientation was undoubtedly more difficult than the geographical displacement for Abraham. Children were a sign of blessing in the ancient world, and children were needed for the care and economic well-being of the family. So can you see the irony of God in choosing an old, barren couple to bless? There can be no doubt that what happened was only by God's grace.

God promised Abram that he would be the father of a great nation, but he and his wife waited and waited and waited for decades to have one child. Abram never received the fullness of the promise God had given him. The acquisition of the land and the promise to be a great nation would be fulfilled in future generations.

The seasons of disorientation in the significant parts of our faith journeys happen because we have to wrestle with our understanding about who God is and what He will do. We have to learn to accept what it means to live in a broken and sinful world where

things go wrong. And we have to let go of what we thought our lives would look like and accept the place where we are, and to learn to trust God there. We have to let God do what only God can do.

The truth is that all of us will go through disorienting circumstances of one kind or another that rock our worlds and cause us to doubt the goodness and sovereignty of God. There is always a temptation at this place of disorientation on the journey when things aren't going as we expected to give up or even turn away from God or to keep pushing to get what we want by our own human efforts, or to become bitter that God did not do for us what we thought He would do.

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Some of you are in a period of disorientation right now. And it may be for good reasons, like the birth of a child, a new job, an empty nest. But many times it is due to trying circumstances, like unemploy-

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ment, health concerns, a broken relationship, or the grief over the death of a loved one. Disorientation comes in many forms, but let us be sure that it comes to us all. It is always an opportunity to let go and let God do, in and through and for us, what only God can do.

The place of disorientation is not the end of the journey. It is a transitional point that leads us to a place of reorientation. Let's look at Genesis 12:6-9: "When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb."

In this passage, Abram is actually in the land, and God makes it clear that his offspring will receive this land. But Abram begins to live in light of a new place of orientation. He lives by faith, responding with gratitude for the fact that God has chosen him and intervened in his life. He expresses this gratitude through worship as he builds altars to the true God

who had revealed Himself and given His promises. Abram lives by faith by arranging to live in light of the promises God has given—even though they are yet to be fulfilled.

What Abraham's journey helps us to see is that the journey of faith comes in stages and always involves leaving the familiar place of orientation through a period of disorientation to a new place of reorientation and a deeper awareness of God's love, presence, and power. Hebrews 11:10 puts it this way: "For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Abraham is remembered because he lived by faith. Abraham kept letting go and letting God. He trusted that the God who promised would be faithful to do what He said.

What a joy to start this new sermon series on Abraham on this first day of the new year. It's the perfect day to think about what it means to let go and let God do in, and through, and for us what only God can do. I don't know about you, but I want 2012 to be a year to remember—a year that I become more like Jesus. I want my life to reflect more and more the fruit of God's Spirit—love, joy, peace, kindness. I want my life to make a difference for his kingdom. But I can't do that by my own will or human striving. Neither

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can you. New Year’s resolutions are not going to get us very far on the spiritual journey. In order for real growth and transformation and powerful service to take place, we have to let go and let God.

Letting go is not easy. Americans have a difficult time letting go, because our culture conditions us to hang on to everything with all our might—our money, our power, our resources, our very lives. Even New Year’s resolutions can be an expression of our desire to be in control. It is in our body to hang on, but God calls us to let go and let God do in, and through, and for us what only God can do. So it will take some time to learn to let go, and it will take some practice, too. What does that look like for you? What is God calling you to let go of in this New Year so that you can trust Him in new and wonderful ways right here, right now?

I don’t know exactly what that is for you, but here are some ideas. Perhaps you need to let go of trying harder to change yourself and let God do what only God can do. You will need to cooperate by offering yourself to Him through various spiritual disciplines, but this is not trying harder as much as it is trusting more.

- Let go of your compulsive doing and busyness and let God bless you as His beloved child by observing Sabbath rest

each week in the coming year. Make Sunday a day to live the true values of life—faith, family, friends as we spend time with God in worship and time with those we love.

- Let go of what you don’t know and let God’s Word teach you and shape your life. You will find many opportunities for growth in the bulletin including
 - daily devotions
 - group learning experiences (small groups, Bible studies, Sunday morning classes, CenterPoint classes, Faith and Finance class)
- Let go of your fears or sense of inadequacy or any excuse you may be holding on to and let God’s Spirit equip and empower you for service in ways you can’t even imagine, to do what we know we are incapable of doing on our own. Again, there are so many opportunities to serve coming up. The Count Me In Festival and Stop Hunger and the Great Steak Out are just the first of many opportunities to serve the Lord and serve the people in 2012.
- Some of you are in circumstances that are truly overwhelming. And

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your calling is simply to let go of what you don't understand, given your circumstances, and let God do, in and through and for you, what you cannot do for yourself. Know that you are not alone. Let others in our care ministries come alongside you.

- Our church has been through a significant season of disorientation as we have been dealing with the aftermath of the sexual abuse that happened here six year ago. In the coming months, our leadership will be discerning what it means to let go and let God as we go through a process of discernment, allowing God to lead us to a new place of reorientation. I invite you to let go and let God by praying for the leadership of our church in the coming months. Pray that we will be a people— individually and corporately— who let go and let God by obeying God and going where He leads us.

Again, there are so many opportunities to grow in the knowledge and love of the Lord, so many opportunities to serve the Lord and serve the people, so many opportunities to find help on the spiritual

journey, whatever your circumstances may be. So I invite you to read the bulletin carefully and prayerfully to find the invitation from God to you.

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