

<b>Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> March 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 8.30 a.m.</b>		<b>Lent 2 Ember Day - Vestry Sunday</b>
Genesis 12:1-4a	Ps 121	Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
		John 3:1-17
<b>God's call and invitation</b>		

**Lent 2017 Pearls from the Old Testament  
The Grace and Mercy of God**

Lent 1 – Genesis 2 & 3 - Temptation and tragedy

Lent 2 – Genesis 12 - God of the covenant (The call of Abram)

Lent 3 – Exodus 17 - Water from the rock (Christ, the water of life)

Lent 4 – 1 Samuel 16 - Samuel anoints David and the work of the Holy Spirit

Lent 5 – Ezekiel 37 - The valley of dry bones and the promise of new life

Palm Sunday – Isaiah 50 - The Lord's suffering Servant

A special welcome to Peter Page and his wife, and all others here with us and in Grahamstown for the VG and Graeme College Founders' Weekend! Peter is part of the matric class of 1967 – it is their 50 year celebration!

## **Introduction – Genesis**

The book Genesis – the word means “origin” or “beginning” – is part of a series of OT books that tell the story of a people. Genesis 1-11 take us through a series of cosmic and universal events. It is a universal history of beginnings.

We do not read the book Genesis as an historical or scientific description of *how* or *when* the world began – we do not look for arguments for or against evolution in these pages, or the big bang, or how old the world is; but rather to show us *why* and *who*: *why* are we here; *who* is behind it all. A story of origin and meaning.

## Central themes that emerge<sup>1</sup>:

Only one, supreme God – not many gods and goddesses;

The one God, sovereign in power, created the world and all that there is;

“...every human being, male and female” – no matter whether slave or free, rulers or servants, rich or poor – “is created in God’s image to represent him and exercise dominion on his behalf...”<sup>2</sup> So we treat each other with respect and dignity and honour and courtesy.

But human beings are both foolish and prone to sinful rebellion against God; they are arrogant, ambitious; they seek to become like God (desire for power and control); they are capable of great hatred, rage, fury, violence;

Instead of progress and improvement – as we might expect when we see scientific progress, civilisation, development, growth in knowledge – the book of Genesis “is emphatic that man’s natural tendency is toward waywardness and depravity”<sup>3</sup>, selfishness, cruelty, greed. We have this inbuilt fault, this crack, that however much we patch it, it returns...

The early chapters of Genesis are a picture of the growing power of sin; but also the growth of grace. There is judgement, but there is also protection, guidance, blessing. God reaches out.

### OT reading: Genesis 12:1 – 4a

**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.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Wenham 2003. *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*. 37

<sup>2</sup> Wenham 2003. *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*. 37

<sup>3</sup> Wenham 2003. 37

“The world of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and their families is different from the world of chs 1 – 11: here we are dealing with “real” individuals and their life stories.” No longer “the man” and “the woman” (Adam – first man, in Hebrew tradition – from the Hebrew word for man; Eve – first woman, in Hebrew tradition – from the Hebrew word for life, or living) – now it is Abram (“exalted ancestor” Gen 17:5) and later Abraham (“ancestor of a multitude” Gen 17:5); Sarai and Sarah.

“Abraham’s journey is the primordial [original, fundamental, existing from the beginning] faith narrative for all believers.”<sup>4</sup> Cf. our NT reading, Romans 4.

The story of Abram speaks to us of relationship, pilgrimage, covenant, love, belonging, moving on. God speaks to Abram, and calls him to leave the familiar, his country, his family, his father’s home, and to go to a land that God will show him – the Promised Land that was the magnet for the people of Israel through the pages of the Old Testament.

God – YHWH – God’s covenant name. Mankind’s covenant partner. Relationship.

Name – identity, belonging, link with family... our parents’ prayers for us, hopes...

What does your name mean? Why were you given that name?

God knows you and me by name... given at baptism... God has called us by name (Isaiah 43:1b-2)

God’s call required him to leave the known and the familiar. YHWH called Abraham to go from his father’s country and kindred – to leave

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<sup>4</sup> Binz, 44

his ethnic group or tribe, his extended family, the place of his security, his identity, his belonging...

It was a journey that his father had begun – from Ur of the Chaldeans, to Haran, with the intention of going into the land of Canaan (11:28-31) – the picture of a pastoral people, migrants, moving with their flocks and herds.

A journey following the rains, looking for grazing... like someone moving to a new town in search of work, or for a better life...but now it is given another dimension: a call from God, an invitation to follow God to an unknown destination – “the land that I will show you.” (12:1b). We move... and with hindsight we see the hand of God guiding us... or we move with a real sense that this is God’s call to us. Setting out into the unknown.

How have you been aware of God’s call?

But it was also a spiritual pilgrimage. Ur and Haran – where Abram’s father had settled – were both centres of pagan worship – so the call from YHWH to leave and follow was also a call away from pagan worship, to discover and follow the one and only true God.

### **Gen 12:2 – I will make of you a great nation...**

The promises of God to Abram: I will bless you ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (12:2-4) A divine command - to leave and follow - and a dual blessing – upon Abraham, and upon all the families of the earth.

This promise is not a justification for the land claims of the modern state of Israel; rather, this is a blessing on all who follow in the faith of Abraham.

It was the beginning of the covenant relationship between God and Abram. A covenant was an ancient form of agreement between a lord

and his underling. The lord promised protection and life; the underling promised obedience and commitment. This was the initial understanding of the relationship between God and His chosen people. Abram followed the call of God; God promised blessing and protection.

His name changes to Abraham in Gen 17, when circumcision is given as a sign of the covenant. An outward sign of an inward spiritual relationship. Circumcision in the OT; baptism in the NT. A sign that we belong to God. God has reached out to us.

### **12:4 – so Abram went, as the Lord had told him...”**

“Abraham’s act of obedience began a life that would make him the father of faith, an example for all who would follow in his lineage of what it means to believe.”<sup>5</sup>

His unquestioning obedience to God’s command is seen as an outstanding act of faith to be imitated.

“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.” (Heb 11:8)

From the call of one man (Abraham), the invitation is now to everyone, to discover and receive eternal life: reconciliation with God, with one another, with creation, and with ourselves; forgiveness of our sins; the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us for worship, witness and service; becoming part of the kingdom of God; being set free from the power of sin and evil and death; being born again, born anew, born from above. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16). What a gift! What an invitation!

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<sup>5</sup> Binz, 44

It is in this relationship with God that we live and move and have our being; it is the love of God that sustains us and carries us through all that lies ahead.

## **Conclusion**

Abraham left a legacy of faith – it extended further than anyone could imagine because he had the vision to see beyond his own lifetime and the wisdom to understand the importance of making sacrifices for future generations. What kind of legacy would you like to leave for the future? What legacy, what blessing, are we giving to others? In our country – the weak and vulnerable, those receiving state grants... our deep concerns over the apparent debacle over the grants to 17 million people.

Abraham accepted with his mind whatever God had revealed, but he also said yes with his life to whatever God wanted him to do. What about you and me? Yes with our minds? Yes with our lives to whatever God is calling us to do?

“God of our ancestors, you call people in every age to walk in faith and bring blessings to your people. May we hear your call, get up and follow in the way that you desire for us. May we make a difference in the lives of others and be a source of blessing...”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Binz, pg 48 (paraphrased)