

Anglican Church Noosa
THE PATRIARCHS – Call | Covenant | Cost
Genesis 12:1-9; 15:1-18
Call and Promise
Rev'd Chris Johnson

This week, Lynda and I went to see the movie *The Odyssey*. This is Christopher Nolan's latest movie telling the epic story written by Homer. It is a magnificent story of a man and his wife and son; and his kingdom, and his journey home to reclaim the Kingdom.

It is a story of epic proportions, however if you think that is epic, I'll show you epic! Look at the story of Abraham and his family. Today we start a new series in which we will explore the story of this man and his family over three generations. We will be looking at Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their associated families. We will be reading stories of great faith, and stories of hopeless human failure. Most importantly we will be reading stories about God's promise, God's faithfulness to his promise and how no amount of human sinfulness can thwart the promises of God being fulfilled.

This is a truly epic story, however it is only the minute beginning of an even greater story. In fact, the greatest story ever told, the whole story of the Bible. Abraham is the father of the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. It is the nation which produces the Messiah Jesus, a Messiah not just for Israel but for the whole world.

So quite apart from its spiritual significance, by any standards this is an epic story. So let's see where it begins with the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Today we begin with the Call of Abraham. Abraham is always held up in the rest of the Bible as the great man of faith. We have just been working through the book of Romans, and you might recall Romans 4 where the apostle Paul presents Abraham as the great man of faith. Hebrews 11 also spends considerable time extolling Abraham's acts of faith.

What is the faith of Abraham? One way of expressing it would be to say, FAITH is simply joining God's epic story. For Abraham, it was about being the beginning of the story.

Or the usual way we talk about it is, hearing God's Call and obeying it. Faith is hearing God's call and obeying it. God calls Abraham to leave his present home in Harran and move to a new land. At this stage of the story Abraham is simply known as Abram so that's what I will call him from now on. It is later in Chapter 17 that God will change his name to give him a new identity in this new venture. So for now it is Abram but we are talking about the same person.

The Call of Abram involves a command and promises. It is what we know as a covenant. In chapter 12v1 we find the command, *"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."* Up sticks Abraham. New country, new challenges, new vocation.

The promises are in vv 2 and 3.

- I will make you into a great nation
- I will bless you
- I will make your name great
- You will be a blessing

- I will bless those who bless you
- I will curse those who curse you
- Through you all people on earth will be blessed.

This is a wonderful set of promises. Promises of blessing and protection. He will have a great name and become the head of a great nation. Not only that, all the nations will be blessed through him.

How good is that? How big is that?

The focus of these promises will come down to 2 elements- Land and Children. The tension in the story will be around the questions,

1. Where is this land? And how can he take possession of it when there are so many people already living there?
2. How is he going to have children when he is already so old?
75 years old in fact it tells us in v4.

As far as the land is concerned v6 tells us he arrived at the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. He then moves on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent there. On both occasions we read that he built an altar to the Lord, which indicates an act of worship. He was acknowledging that God had brought him on this journey and he was thankful for arriving safely.

So here is one reason why Abram is known as the great man of faith. He obeyed God's call to leave Haran, and travelled to the land of Canaan. He had some big promises to reassure him, but he couldn't possibly have seen how they would ever be fulfilled. Nevertheless, he trusted God and went on the journey.

I know some of you here this morning were not born in Australia. You have travelled here from other parts of the world. The reason you have stayed, I suspect, is that you believe this is the promised land.

I hope you might resonate a little with Abram and his journey. Leaving the familiar and what you have always known. Coming to a strange land with customs possibly very different to your native land. You will know something of what is involved in trusting God as a migrant in a new country.

Maybe, if you come from the UK or New Zealand, the differences are not that great, however there will still be new things to learn and adjustments to be made. If you've come from a country with completely different roots to Australia then the adjustments may have been enormous. John O'Grady under the pseudonym Nino Culotta wrote the best-selling Australian book, 'They're a Weird Mob'. Maybe that was your experience.

When it comes to Abram, we don't really know if he knew he was heading to Canaan, if he knew anything about Canaan already, or if Sarai was keen about the move or reluctant. All we know is that he knew the call was from God, so he obeyed. He was a man of faith.

Now it would be nice if that was the end of the story. Abram is this great hero of faith and everything works out well for him. But it is not so easy.

As we move to chapter 15 we find Abram has doubts. He firstly doubts having a child and we will get to that in a minute. He also has doubts about taking possession of the land. In v8 he says, "*Sovereign*

Lord, how can I know that I will take possession of the land?" and then God does what looks to us like a very strange thing.

In v9 the Lord says, *"Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."* Abram brings these animals and birds and v10 says he cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other.

Then in v17 we read, *"When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces."* What on earth is that all about? This is actually a ritual for the making of a covenant in the ancient world. To express the seriousness of the arrangement being made between two parties animals would be sacrificed, cut into pieces and the parties to the covenant would walk between the slaughtered animals and say to one another - if either of us break this covenant, be it to us like these animals.

On this occasion in v17 it is a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch that passes between the animal halves. The fire and blazing torch represent God and it is God alone walking between the two halves of the animals. God is basically saying,

-if I break the covenant, I will die.

-If you break the covenant, I will die.

God is taking both his responsibility and Abram's responsibility on his shoulders.

And this is a foreshadowing of the cross. We have here a picture of God saying to all humanity, 'I will take the consequences of your breaking of the covenant.' So this is God taking responsibility for Abram's inability to keep the covenant and responsibility for you and me, and our inability to keep the covenant. This is God saying I will die for your sin.

There is a lot going on here in Chapter 15 but you have to understand the background of covenant keeping in the ancient world to appreciate the depths of God's love to Abram and all who belong to Abram.

The slain animals are a sign of Christ's broken body on the cross, given because we have broken the covenant with God. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

The other big question in the text is the matter of becoming a great nation, which means having descendants, which means a child. Sarai needs to get pregnant and have a child.

And for Abram and Sarai, this will be the biggest test of faith.

This is where Chapter 15 comes in. Some time has passed (probably about 10 years) and there is no child. Abram and Sarai begin to doubt. But note what they do with their doubt, they express it to God. In 15:2,3 Abram says, *"Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless? The one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus. You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."*

It is okay to have doubts and tell God about them. Doubts are only a problem when we use them as an excuse to reject God. They are not a problem when we use them to move towards God. God loves his servants pouring their hearts out reminding God of his promises; the yet to be fulfilled, promises of God.

God gives Abram reassurance about his promise of descendants. The first one is an evening object lesson. He takes him outside at night and asks him to look up at the sky. *"Count the stars he says, if*

indeed you can count them,” That’s a bit of a dig isn’t it? But then he delivers the punchline, “So shall your offspring be.” v5

And then look at the next verse. V6 *“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”* Does that verse sound familiar? We’ve just spent a lot of time in Romans looking at this very idea.

Remember in our Romans series I said that the word righteousness and justification have the same Greek root. Justification is about being credited with the righteousness of God. When Abram believed the Lord’s promise he was justified. He was credited with righteousness.

So Abram believed the Lord’s promise that he would take possession of the land, that he would have a child. Those two promises are specific to Abram.

What about us? What does it mean for us to have faith and especially the faith that justifies, the faith by which we are credited with righteousness?

I hope that is not a hard question. At one level it is the most simple question to answer and at another level the most complex and mysterious of questions to answer.

Firstly, what’s the simple answer, so simple even a Sunday school child could answer it. There’s a hint. What does it mean for us to have faith? Believe in Jesus.

Paul writing to the Corinthians says, *“All the promises of God find their yes in him”*.

The complex answer to the question is Jesus’ death and resurrection. This is how righteousness is credited to our account. God has walked between the slaughtered animals to say, “I will die if you break the covenant.” So the Son of God goes to the cross, because we’ve broken the covenant.

It’s the most amazing act of love. This is the greatest love story ever told. The most epic love story ever told.

So our faith is in Jesus. Especially what he did at the cross and in rising again. We are justified by faith in this great loving saving act of God.

Do you remember what we talked about in Romans chapter 4 just recently? This is where Paul reflects on the faith of Abraham and relates it to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Let me read this passage to you again. Romans 4:18-25

“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be’. Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead. – since he was about 100 years old – and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness’. These words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

I just think, wow, wow, wow. The story of Abram way back there in Genesis is a story for us. We are included in this epic story.

Abram believed the promises God gave him and it was credited to him as righteousness. We believe the promises God has given us in the new covenant and it is credited to us as righteousness.

It is all one story, God's story, and you are invited into it.
Faith is about joining God's story.
God's epic story of love.

Let me pray,

Father, we are grateful that you called Abram with the promises of land and children. Thank you that he obeyed.

Thank you for the promises we have in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Lord, please help us to obey.

Father, we stand in awe of your amazing grace in Jesus. We are in awe that you have called us to be part of your epic story of love. Thank you, thank you, Father. Amen.