

The Story of Abraham (Genesis 12-25)

Ch. 12: After Abram's father has journeyed somewhat west from the Chaldean area, Abram hears the call of the Lord to leave his home and go to the land of the Canaanites, where God will bless him and through him all the families on the earth shall be blessed.

Abram journeys into the heart of Canaan, at Shechem, with his nephew Lot, his wife Sarai (who is said to be without child), 75 years old at the time, and when arrives the Lord appears to Abram and says he will give Abram's descendants this land.

A side story (repeated two other times, once about Abram and once about son Isaac) of a famine that takes them into Egypt, Sarai taken into Pharaoh's harem because Abram has her hide the fact that she is also his wife (he is also half-sister). But plagues beset Egypt and the half truth is discovered and Abram sent back to the land of Canaan.

Ch. 13: Lot and Abram separate and take different parts of the land so as not to run into conflict and once again the Lord reminds Abram that his descendants will inherit the land.

Ch.14: A war of city-states erupts and their kings, leading to Lot being captured and Abram defeating an alliance of kings to save his nephew. At which time the mysterious Melchizedek, king of Salem, appears and blesses Abram.

Ch. 15: Abram receives a promise of a son from the Lord in a vision or as the Lord walks with Abram (always a confusion about whether vision, angels, the Lord himself in human form) and for the third time promises many descendants. When Abram asks how can this be, God formally establishes a covenant with Abram as animals are cut in two and a flaming pot of fire goes between the two halves. Once again Abram also promised the land.

Ch. 16: Sarai gives Abram her servant Hagar as his concubine wife and Hagar gets pregnant, gets haughty and so Sarai want to banish her but an angel of the Lord convinces Hagar to return, promising that her son to be, Ishmael, will have many descendants as well. The place of the encounter is "the well of the one who sees and lives". That is, sees the Lord directly and lives.

Ch. 17: God appears to Abram and walks with him when Abram 99 years old and repeats the making of a covenant, this time focusing on circumcision of all males as the outward sign of that covenant. The Lord says the name is now Abraham and Sarah. (Notice that Ab/Av is 'father' in

Hebrew). The promise of Sarai bearing a child is given but Abram laughs because of their ages.

Ch. 18: Three men/angles, one the Lord? visit Abraham and Sarah and after they offer them hospitality, they promise that Sarah will be with child by the next year.

Abraham walks with them toward their next destination—Sodom and Gomorrah—and bargains with the angel/Lord for the lives of the righteous not to be destroyed.

Ch. 19: The two angels reach Sodom and Lot offers them hospitality but the men of Sodom want to use/rape them, even after Lot offers his daughters instead. The angels save Lot and his family and the Lord sends down destruction on Sodom and Gomorrah, but Lot's wife looks back, when told not to and turns into a pillar of salt.

Ch. 20: Abram has dealings with Abimelech and repeats the scene of Sarah as sister rather than wife, Abimelech takes her to bed but before he has relations has a dream of what he has done and reprimands Abraham for not being straightforward with him. Gifts are given and go separate ways, with the curse of sterility lifted from Abimelech's clan.

Ch. 21: Isaac is born and Sarai sends Hagar and Ishmael away. When Hagar at her last, an angel appears and promises her that Ishmael will be made into a great nation. And their lives are spared.

Ch. 22: God tests Abraham at Moriah, asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham goes with Isaac to do the deed but an angel of the Lord stops him and has him offer a ram instead, with the Lord declaring yet again Abraham's blessing and the promise of descendants.

Ch. 23: Sarah dies and Abraham bargains for burial land from Ephron (a wonderful capturing of that bargaining style).

Ch. 24: Abraham sends a servant back to his ancestral lands to find a wife for his son Isaac and Rebekah (Abram's great niece and Isaac's cousin) accepts and comes to be Isaac's wife.

Ch. 25: Abraham is said to take another wife who bears him several sons who become the heads of the various Arabic tribes of the area. Abraham dies and is buried with his wife Sarah, after 175 years of life.

God's Word and goes forth, faces the hardships, works through the difficult events, stays open to God's direction and becomes the source of blessing for all and the model of faith for all.

3) And the cornerstone of this call and response activity of God in history are the covenants God makes with us. With Noah he makes a covenant not to destroy the earth like that again but expects humanity to no longer kill each other. With Abraham he makes a covenant that makes his descendants his special people and the land of Canaan their land, if they follow him and keep him as their God. A covenant is a relationship of fidelity and trust that obligates us to a way of life but an obligation we freely embrace because we know it leads to life. For the Hebrew Scriptures the covenant with Moses colors the entire reading/interpretation of all the Old Testament. Notice how there are hints of that story already present in the Abraham stories, even though the events of Abraham took place many centuries earlier—going to Egypt, plagues on Pharaoh's house, Pharaoh releasing them, God in the fire of the covenant burning brazier, burning bush, etc.)

Where in your life have these three themes/core understandings of the story of Abraham, indeed all biblical stories, been present in your life?

Take a couple of minutes to share with each other and then as a large group.

Finish with:

To know God's covenant with us, God's invitation to us to respond to his call, the ways of God active in human history, we need to know and embrace the great stories of our biblical faith. In addition to Abraham, we will explore the story of Jacob and Moses this evening. But with more time these could be expanded to all the great stories of the Old Testament and to the story of Jesus in the New Testament.

Split into two groups and send to areas for next focus.

The Jacob Saga

Catechetical goal: to have participants come to a better understanding of the Oral tradition found in the Old Testament by hearing the Jacob story and by viewing it through the common themes.

Name people and events of the story

People: Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Esau, Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, Bilhah, Laban, 12 sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Isaachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin; Dinah, Potiphar, Potiphar's wife

Events: Rebekah being told by the Lord that she has two nations quarreling within her and the oldest shall serve the younger. Jacob being born second and holding Esau's heel, Isaac's favorite was Esau, Rebekah's favorite was Jacob, Jacob manipulating Esau into selling his birthright for some lentil stew, Jacob deceiving Isaac to receive blessing, Esau pleading for some sort of blessing, Esau wanting to murder Jacob, Rebekah and Isaac send Jacob to go find wife through uncle Laban, Jacob encountering God through a dream (stairway), God proclaiming same covenant with Jacob as with Abraham and Isaac and also promising protection, Laban tricking Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel, Laban keeping Jacob in service for marriage of Rachel, Leah becoming fruitful while Rachel barren, Rachel and Leah giving Jacob their maidservants, Rachel has two sons, Jacob has 12 sons from Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah, Jacob deceiving Laban out of sheep and goats and fleeing, Laban receiving message from God not to harm Jacob, Laban looking for stolen gods, Jacob stating that he will kill whoever stole gods, Rachel sitting on the gods, Jacob sends messengers to Esau in hopes of reconciliation, Jacob wrestling with divine being/God, Jacob's hip gets injured—walks with limp, God names him Israel, Jacob reunites with Esau and tries to give him riches, rape of Dinah, God telling Jacob to build altar at Bethel and putting terror on towns so no one pursued Jacob and family, God again names Jacob "Israel" and renews covenant, Joseph sold into slavery in Egypt

Tell the Jacob Story

Facilitate discussion on where people see four themes present in this story

Four themes in Jacob story

Call and response: Gen 28: 10-22 *God appears to Jacob in a dream and renews covenant with Jacob at the beginning of Jacob's journey, Jacob responds later on by building shrine and vowing to have the Lord as God, and also returning a tenth of whatever God gives him to God.*

Covenant: Gen 28:13-15 (*Jacob's dream*) Gen 35:10 *God blessing Jacob and naming him Israel and promising land and descendants*

God active in human history: Gen 25:22-23 *God telling Rebekah about twins, Gen 29:31 God taking pity on Leah and making her fruitful, Gen 30:22 God remembering Rachel and making her fruitful, Gen 31:24 God appearing to Laban to warn him not to harm Jacob, Gen 35: 1-5 God appearing to Jacob to have him build an altar at Bethel, after Jacob did, a terror from God fell on the towns round about so no one pursued sons of Jacob*

Mystery of God's ways: Gen 32: 23-33 *Jacob's struggle with the angel/ God during the night, Jacob prevails, the angel cannot win, Jacob is named Israel, Jacob is hit at the hip and limps, from this point on Jacob is a changed man.*

Other storytelling devices and recurring themes

- Theophanies—appearance by God changes person and course of events
- Blessings handed down—once blessing or curse is said it has life of its own
- Reversal of fortune—Firstborn serving second-born, then when Jacob wants second-born, Laban gives him first born, Jacob deceiving Isaac, Laban deceiving Jacob, Jacob and Laban—service and wages—first Jacob pays with service to marry Rachel/Leah (Laban's wages) then Jacob outwits Laban by accepting colored/speckled sheep and goats as payment
 - Hero sagas—how Israel bested their enemies (because of their God's interventions)
 - Eponyms—people standing in for whole nations
- Tribal stories—struggles between Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom)
- Barrenness of women—showing that children are gift from God
- Conflict/reconciliation—Jacob/Esau, Jacob/Isaac, Jacob/Laban

Moses: The Man who know God face to face
(Moses, Joshua, Pharaoh, Army, Israelites, God)

Introduction: Biblical account put together from more than one version of story—we cannot be clear about exactly what happened. Beginning of Israelites existence in Egypt came about through Joseph (son of Jacob) bringing family there during famine in Canaan. Israelites prospered and grew in number and leadership and this led Egyptians to fear them because of the possibility of them becoming too powerful (Exodus 1:13-14a). Because of this fear, the Egyptian pharaoh ordered Hebrew babies to be killed. Moses was born to parents from House of Levi, a descendent of Jacob. To protect Moses, his mother placed him in the river in a basket hoping someone of Egyptian heritage would find him and protect him from being killed.

Events that followed:

- Moses rescued from water by daughter of Pharaoh. He was adopted into the household of Pharaoh himself and educated as a royal prince.
- Early on Moses showed compassion for Jewish slaves and how they were often mistreated by the Romans. Observing such an incident, Moses reacted by killing a Roman guard in order to defend a Jewish slave.
- For fear of punishment, Moses ran and escaped into desert. He eventually found a home and married into the family of Jethro, a priest of Midian. His wife Zipporah bore him a son, Gershom.
- One day as he was tending his flock, he was Called by God through a nearby burning bush (Exodus 3:3). God told him, “I am God of your father” (Exodus 3:14). Moses was persuaded by God, with the promised help of his brother Aaron, to go into Egypt and demand release of Israelite slaves. Moses argues that he is not fit and actually he is now comfortable in his new environment and not anxious to be adventuresome at 80. He asked for God’s name to prove he was sent by God (name very important in ancient time...proved ones had a relationship with named person). A covenant was formed between Moses and God.
- The Lord answered “I am who am” which translates to “Yahweh”. This word seen as very sacred word and omitted in early writings and replaced with Lord or Adoni. Moses only person who receives God’s name in communication with him. Moses asked God to send someone else and God got angry but was determined to use Moses so promised that Moses’ brother Aaron would be his spokesperson.
- Moses takes off for Egypt and tells Pharaoh God’s message and so begins the great contest of wills between Yahweh, through his servant Moses, and Pharaoh. Refusal by pharaoh to concede to God’s wishes results in 10 plagues directed to Egypt, the last being the death of all firstborn Egyptian sons. Israelites marked their doors with blood and still today this day is remembered as Passover (Exodus 12). For Christians, this feast frames the Last Supper and the whole paschal mystery, in which we proclaim Jesus himself as our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7) Pharaoh finally released all Jewish slaves but then changed his mind and pursued them.

- Reed sea crossing by Israelites and thwarted attempt of the Pharaoh and his men to catch them is recognized for all time as God saving his people. The Egyptians were destroyed and the Israelites were free. It was a Passover from bandage to freedom. (Exodus 14)
- Entrance into desert not along Mediterranean because of Egyptian forts there but through the desert wilderness. Thus begins the 40 year Exodus journey with the Israelites wandering, following a cloud (symbols of fire and clouds are uncontrollable///live giving) because the people were to be obedient and follow God's directions.
- Upon arriving at Mt. Sinai, Moses was called again by God. God wanted to make a new covenant with his people. While Moses was with God, the people grumbled at his absence, and got so mad they made a golden calf to worship instead of God.
- God was angry and wanted to forget his people but Moses interceded and convinced God to forgive his people and to give them another chance. (Psalm 106:23) Covenant between God and people took place. (Exodus 24:7) "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do, and we will be obedient".
- God reminds people how he delivered them from Egypt...fed them in desert...wanted to be in relationship with them
 - first he showed love for them
 - then invited them to freely to enter into covenant with him
 - if they follow his instruction on how to live well (his commandments) then they could live in constant relationship with God. (commandments like words of a parent teaching a kid to live well).
- Education in desert: Manna to eat...only collect at morn and only enough to eat that day...didn't listen so it rotted...were only to take double on Friday for Sabbath was to be a day of rest. ...put jar of manna in holy of holies so you remember generosity of God while in desert...also must pass on stories so we remember as people how God takes care of his people. People complained about only manna...Moses grew weary of complaining and went to lord and asked why me...I didn't ask for this job...I need help...I can't do this alone...they aren't mine they are yours...so God told him to gather 70 men to meet with him and gave them same spirit that was in Moses. But people continued to grumble and criticize Moses and God so they ended up wandering in the desert for 40 years until the next generation of Israelites were born. Moses died before they entered promised land.
- Story proclaimed every Easter Vigil not because it happened over 3000 years ago the details of what we can never be certain—rather because it expresses our deep faith that despite all appearances to contrary—God is in control of our world and will overcome forces of evil and that His being active in our world demands a constant response from us to live in covenant with Him. The relationship with us He desires affects how we see his living presence in the world and our willingness to try to understand his ways and to live in love with Him and our neighbor.

How does this Exodus experience relate to the Jesus experience of death to new life?

Themes of the Old Testament present in the story of Moses:

God is Active in Human History / the Mystery of God's Ways:

- God hearing the cries of his people and so sent Moses to free them. The Israelites “groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.” Exodus 2:24
- God's saving power at the parting of the sea. The familiar image that “the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left: (Exodus 14:22)
- “God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness.” (Exodus 13:18) This tells how God forms his people by the journey itself. He shows us our weakness, impatience, and selfishness. He gives us his law along with his freedom. This journey continues today.
- Moses was not allowed to enter into the Promised Land, perhaps he was too old and tired and Joshua was more capable of leading them into land with obvious hurdles...Moses had done his job bringing God's people to the promised land.

The People respond to God's Activity:

- Moses' response to God at the burning bush. (Exodus 3:3)
- When told it was time to leave Egypt, they hurriedly prepared, marking their doors with the blood of a lamb as they were instructed, and leaving the land.
- Moses interceded for his people when God wanted to forget them and create a new people because of all their grumbling and sins. He interceded also Aaron when he allowed the people to make the golden calf, and for Miriam, when she spoke out against Moses' leadership.
- Faithfulness to God results in God's faithfulness to us.

God Seeks Covenant”

- The people agreeing to the covenant to be faithful in all areas of their lives. “All that the Lord has spoken, we will do, and we will be obedient” they had unanimously cheered. (Exodus 24:7)
- Moses reminds people of God and his covenant...“As your reward for heeding these decrees and observing them, the LORD, your God, will keep with you the merciful covenant which he promised on oath to your fathers. He will love and bless and multiply you; ...in the land which he swore to your fathers he would give you. You will be blessed above all peoples; ...” (Deuteronomy 5-11)

Other important points predominant in story of Moses:

- Belief in one God
- God's continued presence despite sinfulness
- God's immense capacity to forgive is unfathomable to us.
- Selection of ordinary, humble people to do God's work
- Chosen people's ultimate role as tools to teach others the ways of God
- The Exodus experience as it relates to today
- The importance of story in preserving traditions of our faith
- Our responsibility to live up to our end of the covenant assured that God is living up to his.