

Sermon: Abraham Believed

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 1, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.” (Genesis 1:4) This is how we are introduced to this man, whose name means ‘the exalted father’, who would later be renamed as Abraham, ‘the father of many nations’, who gave rise to not just one but three major faiths—Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

On this second Sunday of Lent, we come to this passage in Genesis 12, where we find Abram at the city of Haran. The word ‘haran’ means highway or crossroads. In a way, Abram was literally and metaphorically standing on a crossroad, discerning God’s call.

Prior to Genesis 12, we learned that humanity was created in the image of God, yet fell into a state of sinfulness, resulting in being cast out of Eden, the paradise lost. This was not God’s original plan and purpose, and from Genesis chapter 2-3 onwards, one gets the sense that God was purely on plan B mode, of reacting to humanity’s further slide into shame, violence and degradation.

Even God’s attempt to wipe away all creation, except for a pure seed, Noah, with a righteous family of eight. That experiment ended badly too, in a shameful drunken nakedness, prompting God to note that even after a near universal purge, *“the inclination of the human heart is [still] evil from youth”* (Genesis 8:21) In short, curses and punishments have solved nothing, though God swore to never again to use such harsh measure, the evil in the hearts of humanity continued unabated, through the Babel generation, of humanity once again trying to play God.

The call of Abram, was perhaps God’s third attempt to start over, *“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”* (Genesis 12:1) Strictly speaking, this journey to Canaan started with Terah, Abram’s father, back in chapter 11. It was Terah, who uprooted from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans, a good chunk of his family including his wife, his son Abram and Sarai, the daughter-in-law, and Lot, the grandson. Half-way through Terah’s journey though, he decided to

settle in the city of Haran, the city of crossroads, and would eventually die there.

The Hebrew Scripture does not seem to care to offer an explanation. For that, we need to turn to midrashic speculations. In one particular story, Terah was an idolator, actually an idol maker. In a polytheistic world rampant with carved deities, idol-making, for someone good with their hands, was simply good business. Terah, evidently, had set up shop in Haran, and was making a good living.

On one particular day, as he had to travel for business, he left the young Abram in charge of the shop. Upon his return, Terah found all the idols in the shop smashed to pieces, except for the largest one.

He inquired in shock, “What happened?” “Well,” responded Abram, “the smaller gods were trying to gang up on the biggest one. There was a huge fight overnight, the big one picked up a stick and smashed all the little gods into pieces.”

The father was naturally not amused, “Do you take me a fool? These idols aren’t real. They couldn’t have done what you described!” Abram replied calmly, “If they weren’t real, why then do you bow down to them?”

It’s a nice story; not sure how true it was, but it does give us a clue as to the mindset of Abram when God tells him to go—go to a place he has never been before; go from his father’s household, his kin, and the comfort of his home—go, and I will show you where. So Abram went.

We may not fully understand Abram’s mindset, but we do know the way of God through our experience of God’s call here today. In our own calling in both lay and ordained services, as ministers, elders, Sunday School teachers, treasurer, or convener of committees, we see God’s hand at work. We see that God does not always call those with the best pedigrees or the shiniest credentials. We see, again and again, when we do respond faithfully and trust in God’s leading, we are blessed with gifts and talents, learned and acquired, for the tasks we are called to.

Did I happen to mention that I never thought that God would call me to preach his words, someone who is not eloquent in speech, who struggled with stuttering as a teenager, who had to learn new languages from scratch. My first reaction to the call to ordained ministry was thinking: “Is this a joke? Is God playing a cruel joke on me?” It was no joke, when God calls, God blesses as well.

The call of Abram comes also with a promise, *“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”* (v.2)

Though Abram and Sarai were barren, without a child, the author of Hebrews explains that by faith Abram considers God not only the maker of promises, but keeper of said promises, *“By faith, with Sarah’s involvement, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered him faithful who had promised.”* (Hebrews 11:11)

But the promise of blessings is not just for Abraham and Sarah own sake. This promise of blessings comes like a double-edged sword, or perhaps more akin to a double-sided mirror, as God continues, *“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.”* (v.3)

The journey that Abraham would eventually travelled was fraught with danger, with twist and turns beyond expectations. He did not always fare so well; he stumbled from time to time, conducted himself less admirably on occasions, but he persisted, faithfully. By persisting in faith, he got to witness how God blesses and curses over time.

Sometimes, I am asked to explain why bad things happen to good people, and vice versa. I don’t really have an good explanation, but simply to counsel to wait. Wait for God’s time, not ordinary time, but God’s time. The Greeks have a special term for this, they call it *Kairos*, of extraordinary time when God acts in the affairs of humanity. That’s what God promised to Abram, and that’s what God promises to us.

Blessings and curses aside, the final, true purpose of God is revealed by the final sentence, *“and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* God is righting the wrongs of humanity’s descend into sinfulness and fallenness. The final destination of the call of Abram is the blessing of all peoples, all families, and all nations, and Abram was merely a channel of that universal blessings, a first step.

To such a call, the Apostle Paul explains in Romans 4, that *“Abram believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”* Of course, the faith of Abraham was multi-faceted, and the story later on of the near sacrifice of Isaac played also a crucial part. But it was through faith, through belief and trust, that Abraham was reckoned by God to be righteous.

The promise that God gives to Abraham is our also. It is a promise dependent on faith, in order that it may rest on grace—the grace that

eventually took shape in the person of Jesus Christ. It is through Christ, the son of David, of Abraham, and the Son of God that we see God's promise to Abraham came true—that all nations be blessed, a blessing that came to fruition not through power or might or condemnation or domination, but through the sacrificial love of God, through the cross, where all are saved through faith.

I shall leave with you these words from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in the 2015 book *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*:

“Now is the time for Jews, Christians and Muslims to say what they failed to say in the past:
We are all children of Abraham.
And whether we are Isaac or Ishmael, Jacob or Esau, Leah or Rachel, Joseph or his brothers, we are precious in the sight of God.
We are blessed. And to be blessed, no one has to be cursed. God's love does not work that way.
Today God is calling us, Jew, Christian and Muslim, to let go of hate and the preaching of hate, and live at last as brothers and sisters, true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith, honouring God's name by honouring his image, humankind.”

Abraham believed! So shall we.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**