

**Christ Community Covenant Church**  
**“And Abraham Believed God”**  
**Pastor Gloria Merritt - May 8, 2016**

Happy Mother’s Day to all of you – because, after all, we all have a mother, so we should celebrate that! I want to acknowledge that this day can be a mixed bag for many of us, for various reasons, so the message is not about that. So, let’s be focused less on the performance of our moms, good or bad, and thank our LORD that she is part of our story, that God used her to bring each of us into this world. In fact, let’s take just a moment to thank God for and to bless our mothers. Let’s pray... [for moms and for the sermon]

Today I have the privilege to continue in our series on Genesis – which we call “Beginnings – finding your story in God’s story.” Today as we look at the story of Abraham, and our key verse for today is Genesis 15:6 which says, “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” We’re going to look a bit at why that matters to us. And, although it’s not in the bulletin, I’d also like for us to begin today’s study by reading from chapter 12:1-3. Let’s read it together from the screen: The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

<sup>2</sup> “I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.

<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.”  
(Genesis 12:1-3, NIV)

**1) Let’s start with some Background Information:**

The story of Abraham spans 14 chapters in Genesis. There are a lot of great details in those chapters – as I was studying it – it was kind of like being hit with a firehose! It’s been said that besides our Lord Jesus, Abraham is the most important person in the Bible. That should make us sit up a little taller and pay attention. Christians, Jews, and Moslems take their ancestry from him. If we were to ask Moses, Joshua, King David, Solomon, Daniel, Nehemiah, and other biblical heroes – they, too, would look to Abraham as the Father of their faith. In fact, we simply cannot understand the New Testament without a better understanding of Abraham. There are many references to Abraham in the New Testament.

Up to this point, the story in Genesis is focused on the entire world, but in chapter 12 the focus is on one man. Previously the narration covering about 2,000 years in 11 chapters had moved rapidly, but at this point in the story it slows way down. When we read it, there are lots of things mentioned that aren’t all that pretty – lying, fire and brimstone, war, circumcision, more lying, and child sacrifice. If you’ve had much chance to read the Old Testament, do you ever wonder about some of the things that God included in his story?

This story, and most of the stories in Genesis, make much more sense to us if we know more about the cultural context. For example, we know that he was first named Abram and that God called him and his family out of Ur, a country among the Chaldeans, which was basically the Orient. So keep in mind that Abram came out of the Orient, he was brought up in its customs, he was quite likely as pagan as you could get, and God chose this particular man to go to a new land which was to be the physical birthplace of the nation of Israel. It’s probable that with God’s omniscient view of the world, he may have had an inkling that Abram was going to be a great choice.

His name, “Abram” means “Father of many” and was later changed to “Abraham” which meant “Father of many Nations”, which was rather ironic since he had no children, and that’s a theme throughout his story. In those days a person’s name was purposeful and was to live out its meaning. It might be true in any age. In that culture, it was likely that his name produced some laughter and teasing. [NOTE – slide should say, “Abram = Father of many; Abraham = Father of many nations.]

So imagine this scene – God appears to Abram, who is quite wealthy, with many livestock and many servants to manage it all – and tells him to leave the Orient behind, pack up everything and go, at least a 1,000 miles westward where God will establish a new family through him. At this point he is 75 years old, he is about to go from everything familiar to him to the unknown. Now, I know that change is difficult for most of us, but change at an advanced age is even more difficult. But, right here is an example where Abram believed and did exactly as God directed. What compelled Abraham to do such a preposterous thing at his age? I'm wondering if God's appearance to Abram was so spectacular that he couldn't help but go? I wonder because, it seems like we human beings need a lot more than subtle direction.

This call of God should sound familiar to us, too, because there are other places in scripture when we are called to leave family in order to start something new. Remember that passage from Genesis 3? God said that in the case of marriage we are to leave, and weave and cleave and start a new family. In Matthew 19:29 Jesus said, And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. [NIV] Spiritually speaking, leaving ungodly practices so that we might be new in Christ and grow in Christ is exactly the right step to take.

When Gary and I got married nearly 37 years ago in South Dakota, we took this idea very literally. We both came from believing, church-going families, but we also felt that in order to establish our own family, our own faith, our own identity in Christ, that we needed to physically break away in order for a better spiritual outcome. That decision took us to Tennessee. It wasn't easy and we had lots of tests to our faith, but we still believe that it was a good spiritual decision for us. I know that many of you in this room made a similar decision at some point in your journey. [Slide: "Leave behind things that won't benefit you spiritually."]

But, this kind of leaving doesn't always have to mean that you move miles and miles away. It might mean that there is something else God would have you leave behind. Maybe there is some physical object or habit or person that keeps you from maturing in your faith. In Matthew chapter 5:29-30 Jesus uses hyperbole and says, "If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.<sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." Maybe in this particular moment, this is a scripture for you to believe and take seriously, asking what God would have you do about it. Is there something in your life to get rid of or leave behind? One more verse to consider: [Hebrews 12:1 (NLV)] "All these many people who have had faith in God are around us like a cloud. Let us put everything out of our lives that keeps us from doing what we should. Let us keep running in the race that God has planned for us".

Let's look again at our theme verse: Genesis 15:6 "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

## 2) **What did Abram believe?**

Strictly speaking, it doesn't tell us what Abram believed.

As the story of Abraham continues we will see that he occasionally responds with faith, but more often he doubts and responds with fear and self-protection. That sounds just like us, doesn't it? Like Dave spoke of last week, Abram too, seeks significance and security because we see examples laced throughout his story. Here's a list of highlights:

- We read of Abram's propensity to lie and protect himself at Sarai's expense – putting her at risk at the hands of powerful men.
- We read of trouble with his nephew, and of Abram's rising up to protect him, both in physical warfare and in spiritual warfare.
- We read of a ritual – strange to us, but familiar to Abram in which God establishes a covenant, an unbreakable promise that he would indeed become a great nation. During this encounter with God, Abram honestly shows his doubt and questions – how could he become a great nation without land or descendants?
- We read of another covenant, one of circumcision of the flesh that foreshadows the circumcision of the heart.

- We read of continued infertility and of Abraham's and Sarah's human attempt to have an heir. We read of the human frailties of his wife, who was dealing with the emotional, physical, and cultural consequences of infertility.

So, what did Abraham believe? Was it God's promise to be his "shield" and "very great reward" as seen in chapter 15? Was it God's assurance that he would have an "heir" coming from his own body? Was it the prophecy of descendants as many as the stars in the heavens? Was it about the prospect of a homeland, or a great name, or blessing? Was it all of these? Or was the promise something greater and deeper? We might say that Abraham was justified before God on the basis of a trusting attitude toward him in all things. We would not be wrong in thinking this, but there's more to it than that.

In this story, we read again and again of a Sovereign God's intervention, of his choosing a man who had done nothing to deserve being chosen, but who responded with faith and with belief to Jehovah God who so graciously pointed to something that was yet to come. God lovingly chose Abraham to start the whole process of redemption so that through him the whole world would be blessed. The ultimate descendant of Abraham is, of course, the Lord Jesus.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. <sup>11</sup> And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. <sup>12</sup> And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

Let's look at Hebrews 11:8-12: (NIV)

[Slide: "By FAITH..." ]

The fact that Abraham and Sarah were old and beyond child-bearing years showed that this conception and birth were beyond human ability and could only come about by miraculous intervention. The birth of Isaac foreshadowed another birth far in the future when again the conception of a promised child was completely miraculous – when human effort was not enough to bring about God's purposes.

Friends, our human effort is never enough to bring about God's purposes. In this we see our story in God's story. We need God to call us, to instruct us, to bless us, to cover us with His grace and forgiveness when we mess it all up, and to give us the gumption and the will to live out His promises! Like Abraham, we do not know where our journey will take us, we do live in a foreign land under temporary tent-like circumstances, we do look forward to the eternal life God has promised, and we consider God faithful.

Here is what the apostle Paul wrote about Abraham in Galatians 3:7-9, 29 [NIV]

<sup>7</sup> Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." <sup>9</sup> So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

And farther down in the chapter, verse 29: If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's **seed**, and heirs according to the promise.

Later in Abraham's story we read of an incredible test of faith in which God asks Abraham to do the unthinkable – to take his son, the son of promise, the son conceived through a miraculous conception – and to take him and sacrifice him to God on an altar. We read almost with disbelief, even though we know the outcome. Child sacrifice was probably not foreign to Abraham. He would have been aware of its practice in pagan cultures. However, it was rare.

As the story continues, we see that Abraham continues to believe God. I think he had finally had enough of trying to twist God's commands for his personal convenience because it appears that he had experienced what that kind of disobedience can bring about. I think we can see that his journey of faith

had matured, because he had experienced God's faithfulness and could reflect on it. He took this Isaac up the mountain and obediently set about to join God fully on God's terms, not his. And what a glorious outcome as Abraham AND Isaac, the next generation, watched God provide the Lamb – another foreshadow of what was to come.

### 3) **How does Abraham's faith apply to me?**

Here at 4Cs, we hear stories and see prayer requests that indicate that we all experience trials and testings in all kinds of ways. We struggle with health issues, unemployment, addictions, finances, problems in our relationships, parenting, you name it. And, it is our human tendency to cry out to God for the trial to stop, for the pain to stop, for the struggle to stop. We don't want to believe that our trials and struggles could have purpose, we don't want to believe that our faith is being matured and that we might be the very vessel God could use to point others to Him. Let's watch this story I found on Youtube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZwd2\\_ahMY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZwd2_ahMY)

We need inspiring stories like this to help us. I love that Jake said at the end, "I have a strong personal faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." And, like Abraham, I think that God is using Jake and his story to cheer us on and to point to Christ. Abraham's story points to Christ.

I have appreciated that our pastor has shared with us that he is learning to pray that God would increase his faith, rather than take the trial away. What a great way to pray! Remember what it says in James 1:3-4 (NIV)? It says this: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, <sup>3</sup> because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. <sup>4</sup> Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." Let me say that last sentence again: Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Not lacking anything. Are we willing for that to happen?

Because Abraham believed God, we his descendants can believe, too. As we believe God, we can trust that He will provide through any sacrifice He might call us to. How might your faith, your story your belief impact history? How might it impact your future, your family, your workplace, and your friends?

Let's pray and ask God to increase our FAITH so that we may truly be the seed of Abraham.

BENEDICTION: In your bulletins there is a little chart that Donni found about Abraham's faith.

- Faith HEARS God's commands – it pays attention
- Faith BELIEVES God's promises (and there are many!)
- Faith WAITS for God's blessings (not pre-empting them)
- Faith BLESSES others
- Faith OBEYS
- Faith EXPECTS future instructions
- Faith is THANKFUL
- Faith WORSHIPS
- Faith PERSEVERES

### **Questions for Small Group Discussion:**

- 1) Have you ever sensed God's call for you/family to physically move away or to leave a situation for spiritual benefit?
- 2) Abraham's story spans 14 chapters (12 – 26). What parts of the story have you wondered about?
- 3) When Genesis 15:6 says, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness," what comes to mind for you in considering what he believed?
- 4) Do a concordance search on the word "righteousness." Consider what verses might connect to Abraham's story.
- 5) Discuss how you hope for your story of faith to have an impact on your family or friends. Discuss ways it already has.