

In Genesis 12, our narrative zooms in on one Abram in the land of Ur, whose progeny will be the protagonists for the whole rest of the Bible. The covenant that God had made with Noah was a covenant with the whole world, animals, plants, and every human family. The covenant that God makes with Abram and Sarai, we come to understand, is the covenant with a particular people, those whom God chose just because. (Deuteronomy says that it was because God loved them, but I'm partial to the universally useful explanation one of my students gave once, which was "because of reasons".) God speaks to Abram and tells him to leave home for the land that God will show him. God promises descendants, land, and blessing, and also says that Abram's descendants will *be* a blessing for all the families of the earth.

The story is told, of course, by people many centuries removed from whatever kernel of historical fact there is about Abram and Sarai. The story is told after the monarchy has been established, when there are known boundaries to states, and when Israel/Judah, however small in relation to neighboring empires, has a certain stability and weight. The rabbis who polished up this story and brought it out again for a new time were looking back with some amazement at how far they'd all come by the grace of God. The people of Israel by the 7th century BCE (we'll say) are countless; they have built palaces for their monarchs and temples for their God; they have vineyards and cities and a whole priesthood. They look back and marvel at what God has done, starting with this old man and his wife who didn't even have children when God first called them, and who didn't know where God would lead them.

It's an origin story, and it tells us that but for the grace of God none of us

would be here today, the events are all so unlikely. But for the grace of God and the willingness of Abram and Sarai to give it a try. Indeed, they stake their lives on God's promise.

This passage doesn't refer to Sarai's barrenness, but we know about it, and the passage does talk about how old they are—Abram is 75. Yet with an astonishing lack of tact, in verse 7 God says to Abram, "To your offspring I will give this land." The unspoken question is, "What offspring would that be?" Abram and Sarai build an altar right there to the Lord and keep moving, as the narrative says, "by stages" (because they were extremely old).

So what we have here is a pair of utterly necessary ancestors who lost everything they had at home and kept moving forward despite not being able to see how the promise could possibly be fulfilled. What the rabbis who pulled the story out again in (we'll say) the 7th century BCE know is that God did deliver on the promise, richly. What the rabbis do not know is how God is going to keep delivering, because now they have new challenges, and there isn't really a viable way forward as the kingdom crumble and the Assyrians and Babylonians advance. But they think the Abram/Sarai story might be important.

A couple of years ago when black men, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, were shot by police, the president of Auburn Seminary wrote,

I remember when I was engaged in Anti-Apartheid organizing in the mid-80s and there was a general sense that the South African government was standing firm in the face of mounting international pressure and would find ways to weather the storm. I thought that Nelson Mandela would die in jail. God makes a way when there seems to be no way.

Dearest leaders of faith and moral courage, this moment and these movements need us. We must proclaim and embody revolutionary

love. In a moment when I want to blame a deeply flawed and wounded criminal justice system and community members who have embraced violence as an outlet for their anger, I refuse to demonize.

I bring this up because John Vaughn reached back into his memory for a time when he thought there was no way forward . . . and then the way forward opened up, and Nelson Mandela was not only freed but elected president of South Africa. Now in the time of awareness of police shootings of unarmed black men, Vaughn does not see how this pattern will come to an end, but he is convinced that it must, and he says we must enter the fray without demonizing the others. “We must embody revolutionary love.”

Well, two years after his essay we don’t seem to be any closer to a resolution of the problem of police shootings, and in fact coalitions have hardened against each other. And police shootings are just one example of the conflicts that have escalated—at least rhetorically—and the coalitions that have hardened against each other. I often remember the lines from Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming:” “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity.” But here’s something:

Recently I’ve been hearing a new kind of political discussion. In recognition of the fact that political arguments are often made in bad faith—as a way to win an argument or win adherents rather than to work out a problem—a few political partisans are starting to experiment with good faith argumentation. It’s just a few, and it’s only in the elite intellectual class that I’m aware of anyway, but it’s something I don’t think I saw much of in the past. Arthur Brooks, the president of the conservative American Enterprise Institute, introduced his podcast on how to

disagree with each other, by appearing on two liberal podcasts in July and August. More recently, David French, who's a conservative Catholic writer for *National Review*, conducted an hour-and-a-half-long conversation with the progressive journalist Ezra Klein on exactly how we can talk with each other in good faith about political issues on which we disagree deeply. And let me tell you, they touched on *all* the third rails! These are just two of several recent examples I've noticed of public intellectuals trying to figure out how we can disagree constructively about high-stakes issues—how we might be able to even imagine policies that one half or the other of us don't hate. And it's a small thing in one way—and on the same day I was inspired by the French-Klein conversation I also read an article in *National Review* that made me want to tear my hair and sit on an ash heap—but it's something I wasn't seeing just a couple of years ago.

So this is all to say, you know, God is the one who promises, and who makes a way where there is no way. God told Abram, “to your offspring I will give this land,” way before Abram had any notion that there might actually be offspring. The rabbis dusted off that story around the time of the Exile, when the Temple was destroyed and it was the end of Judean autonomy. And it is relevant and not nerdy to point out that although Israel/Judea never again regained its autonomy, and the exiles really did go into exile and many of them remained in Babylon or scattered throughout the world—even though that land ceased to be what they had envisioned, it was actually the Jews who stayed in Babylon who ensured the robustness of the Jewish tradition. It was the Babylonian Jewish scholars who wrote the more influential Talmud. It was the Jews not in Jerusalem who survived Rome's sacking of the city in

the year 70 and developed rabbinic Judaism. When there was no way for the people of that land to continue to be the people of that land, God made a way. And that, the scholars could not have known when they first hauled out the story of their wandering Aramean ancestor who had stepped out into the unknown in response to God's call.

As a democracy and a world power, I think we're in great peril. And actually as a congregation, we're grappling with financial problems that don't have an obvious solution. But God is known to make a way where there is no way, usually not what we projected or expected. One final note of hope: this time I read the story, I noticed how Abram and Sarai took the journey in stages. These were old people; they weren't driving through the night or anything. Abram gets to the oak of Moreh, and builds an altar to the Lord. Then he goes on to the hill country east of Bethel, invokes the name of the Lord (which means he initiated a conversation), and built another altar. "And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb." So they took it a little at a time, punctuating their travel with worship, laying every day's trials and joys on the altar. And that's a good model for God's people any time, and for us right now and into the future.

God of covenant, you promised Abraham land, descendants, and blessing so that he might be a blessing for all. Show us how to honor the covenant, so that we might be a blessing to others. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.