

God Calls Us

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-9

Sometimes I wonder what people will say about me after I die. Of course, I also sometimes wonder if anyone will talk about me after I die. What stories will they remember? What stories would make them laugh...or inspire them...or cause some pain? Will any stories about me be handed down from generation to generation? I doubt it. Maybe I need to pull some absurd, comical stunts. Then when my relatives get together, they can talk about the ridiculous antics of Aunt Chris.

In the book of Genesis, we find stories of men and women that have been handed down for many generations. The stories of Abraham and Sarah are told by people from three major religions – Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Other major characters are Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Esau, Rachel, Leah, and Joseph.¹

Throughout the Bible, the names of the patriarchs (and matriarchs) are used to teach and to remind the people who God is. God spoke to Moses from a burning bush saying, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”² Jesus referred to “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” when talking about the resurrection of the dead.³ Peter identified the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob as the one who glorified Jesus.⁴ In Hebrews, the writer uses these men and women to define what faith is.⁵ They are lifted up as models of faithfulness, examples for people to follow.

In our overview of the Old Testament this fall, we’re highlighting a couple of stories – Noah last week, Abraham today – and skipping over many others. We have a guest preacher next week who isn’t preaching from the Narrative Lectionary, so this is the second and final story we’ll be hearing from Genesis. You might take some time this week to review the stories we’re missing.

We can summarize the lives of Abraham and Sarah in four statements. (1) They were called by God. (2) They followed God’s instructions. (3) They ran into some complications. (4) Their lives were changed because of their relationship to God.

We heard their call from God in the reading from Genesis 12.

The LORD said to Abram, “Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

*I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;
all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you.”⁶*

In the next five chapters, this call is repeated three more times.

As the call and the promise to make Abraham the ancestor of many nations was repeated, it was accompanied by a list of instructions. Leave your country and family. Settle in this land that I will show you. Believe what I am saying even though it seems impossible. Circumcise every male in your household.

Abraham and Sarah followed God’s instructions – for the most part. They left their country and their extended families. They settled in the land that God showed them. They believed what God said – well, some of the time they did. Abraham was circumcised and he circumcised every male in his household.

¹ Sources consulted for this sermon include [NL 102: Calling of Abram — Pulpit Fiction](#); [#503: Call of Abraham - Sept. 18, 2022 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#); and Eugene F. Ropp, *BCBC Genesis*, Herald Press 1987, pp. 93-100.

² Genesis 3:6, 15

³ Matthew 22:31-32

⁴ Acts 3:13

⁵ Hebrews 11

⁶ Genesis 12:1-3, *Common English Bible*

However, they ran into some complications. Some of these happened through no fault of their own. There was a famine in Canaan that caused them to take a detour into Egypt. They struggled with infertility.

Some of these involved choices made by other people. Quarreling between the herders of their livestock and the herders of their nephew Lot's livestock led to the separation of Abraham and Lot. Lot's decision to settle near the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and some of his decisions while living there were not wise, bringing complications into Abraham's life.

Some of the complications resulted from their poor choices and lapses of faith. More than once, Abraham tried to pass Sarah off as his sister in order to make it less dangerous for himself. Instead of waiting on God's promises, Sarah took matters into her own hands. She suggested to Abraham that he should have a child with her slave Hagar. Abraham went along with her plan. Once Ishmael was born, Sarah's jealousy and Abraham's decision to send Hagar and Ishmael away had long-term ramifications.

Through it all – despite it all – they were changed because of their relationship to God. Their lives took unexpected and unusual new directions once they followed God's instructions to leave their homeland. God changed their names – Abram and Sarai – to reflect this new direction. Abraham and Sarah became the ancestors of many nations. Many people have been blessed through them.

As I considered the call of Abraham and Sarah this week, I thought of three women. One had her life work thrust on her by the fact of her birth. One was confident she heard a call from God for her life as a teenager but ended up choosing a different direction. One questioned a call for many years before accepting it.

The first woman is Queen Elizabeth II. She was born a princess with some choice in what she would do as an adult, but at age 10 with her uncle's abdication of the throne and her father's coronation as king her life was mapped out for her. I don't know her personal beliefs, but she appeared to have a deep sense of religious and civic duty which she may have seen as a call from God. She worshipped with the Churches of England and Scotland. She demonstrated support for inter-faith relations. In her Christmas message in December 2000, she said: "To many of us, our beliefs are of fundamental importance. For me the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life. I, like so many of you, have drawn great comfort in difficult times from Christ's words and example."⁷ While Queen Elizabeth didn't have a choice of vocation, she had many choices about how to live it out. A nation and a world were blessed through her.

The second woman is Lona Deter. As a teenager, she felt a strong call from God to be a missionary nurse. As she began her studies at Goshen College, she met a young farmer from Illinois. Their relationship continued as she began nurses training in La Junta, Colorado. When her beau proposed marriage, she turned him down. He was offering life tied to a farm; she was called to live somewhere outside the US. The next time he proposed, however, she accepted. She lived out her call with two years of nursing in Puerto Rico, supporting her husband and nurturing their family on the farm, providing leadership in a small church, and working as a nurse when her other obligations allowed her to do so. Her church, her husband, her family, and her patients were blessed through her. In case you haven't figured it out, her married name was Lona Litwiller. She was my mother.

The third woman's faith journey began the day she was born when her parents prayed for guidance in raising her to become a follower of Christ. She was baptized at age twelve and renewed her commitment to Jesus as a teenager, but as she entered college, she had difficulty discerning what God was calling her to do. Eventually, she settled on education. She taught school for awhile and then worked in a Christian bookstore. No matter where she lived, she became active in a local church and served in a variety of roles. And then some people began encouraging her to attend seminary. As a child she would have said that women could not be pastors. As an adult, she decided that other women could be pastors, but she could not. At the age of 48, she finally gave in and headed off to seminary. What she first perceived as a call to study and perhaps to teach, soon became a call to church ministry. In 2009 she moved to Kansas and began pastoring a small, Mennonite congregation. She hopes that some people have been blessed through her. Of course, I'm telling you my story, one you've heard many times over the course of 13 years.

⁷ [Elizabeth II - Wikipedia](#)

I wonder what your stories of God's call include. I encourage you to share briefly in our time of response. Or, perhaps, you'd like to share more in-depth in a sermon like several people did in August. Just let me know and I'll put you on the schedule.

I believe each of us has a lot in common with Abraham and Sarah. We are called by God. We are following God's instructions. We run into complications – some through no fault of our own; some involving choices made by other people; some because of our poor choices and lapses of faith. Our lives are changed because of our relationship to God. And, inevitably, other people's lives are affected by ours.

Some of you may be protesting, wondering how you've been called by God, struggling to see how you are answering that call. A danger is thrusting unrealistic expectations on ourselves and on each other – that we need to have the "right" kind of amazing encounters with God and live out our faith in the "right" kind of way in the "right" kind of job with the "right" kind of volunteer work and the "right" kind of family life. That's a lot to live up to.

It can be simpler than that. I think we're all called to partnership with God. Being a Christian means accepting the call to follow Jesus. But the call is heard and lived out in many different ways. For some it's a call to a particular vocation, for others it's a call to something that is not a source of income, for many it's a combination of the two. For some it's sudden clarity about life's direction, for many it's a series of small decisions along the way. For all of us, call involves a combination of using our natural abilities and spiritual gifts, responding to internal yearnings, receiving encouragement from others, taking time to process and discern, growing in knowledge and practical experience, and being willing to make adjustments along the way.

I don't know how often my mother might have wondered if she missed God's call on her life by being a farm wife instead of a missionary nurse. Some would view one as a much higher calling than the other. Did I finally get it right when I became a pastor? Were my two previous occupations and involvements in other churches and communities deviations from what God wanted for me? I don't think so. Both my mother and I were as faithful as we could be most of the time. Both of us made mistakes. Both of us could have different choices that would have led to different, but equally as faithful, lives.

Answering God's call can take a variety of shapes throughout a person's life. All of us, whether or not we see our vocation as a call from God, wherever we are along life's journey, can ask if our faith and our lives are leading us to be a blessing to others.

Blessing is another word that's hard to define or measure and often misused. My thoughts about call and blessing are expressed in the vision of healing and hope adopted by Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada.⁸

*God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and,
by the power of the Holy Spirit,
to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace,
so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.*

We follow Jesus through prayer and worship. We offer who we are and what we have to God. We practice love, forgiveness, and hospitality. We affirm our diversity. We seek God's peace within ourselves and in our homes, work, communities, and the world. Anytime we grow in grace, joy, and peace; anytime God's healing and hope flow through us we are answering God's call and allowing God to bless others because of us.

Maybe not many people will talk about me after I die. Maybe there won't be any stories handed down from generation to generation. But if I have helped and not hindered in growing communities of grace, joy, and peace; if God's healing and hope have flowed through me; if love lives on after I'm gone; if someone identifies me as an example of faithfulness; then I believe I have answered God's call.

May it be so for me. May it be so for you.

⁸ [Who Are The Mennonites | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](http://www.mennoniteusa.org)