

Children's Time

What book of the Bible have we been looking at?

Genesis is divisible into two parts, the primeval history (chapters 1–11) and the ancestral history (chapters 12–50). The primeval history sets out the author's concepts of the nature of the deity and of humankind's relationship with its maker. The ancestral history (chapters 12–50) tells of the prehistory of Israel, God's chosen people.

Abram and Sarah, become Abraham and Sarah

Genesis 12:1-9

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 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. 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."^[a]

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot and all the possessions that they had gathered and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran, and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak^[b] of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east, and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Welcome again to Peace Sunday, following yesterday's International Day of Peace. I'm hoping today that we can make some connections between Abram and Sarai's story in Genesis, and our peace theme.

But I wanted to begin with another story.

I'm curious if anyone recognizes this woman. (SLIDE) Yes, this is Carrie Nation, otherwise known as Hatchet Granny. Carrie was a woman with deep convictions. She was an educated historian who had jobs throughout her life as a school teacher, hotel owner, cotton farmer, and an activist. She created a sewing circle to help clothe those less fortunate than her. She was an advocate for freeing women from corsets and other clothing that was limited and restricting and created a shelter for women and children

fleeing abusive situations. And perhaps most famously, she was a leader of the temperance movement.

After years of protesting the sale of alcohol through street preaching and even serenading patrons with hymns and a hand organ, at the age of 54, she heard God calling her to pick up rocks, enter local saloons, and smash any barrels and bottles she found there. She did just this in the town of Keowa, Kansas, and after clearing the town of some of its alcohol, a tornado touched down. Carrie took this as a message from God, affirming her good works, emboldening her to do more. Her husband jokingly remarked once that she'd be more effective with a hatchet, to which Carrie responded, "That is the most sensible thing you have said since I married you." Despite many arrests and fines, she became incredibly popular, funding her efforts with speaking tours and donations from her supporters.

Needless to say, Carrie was a woman of deep held convictions.

I bring up this slice of American history because it fits nicely with an old story in the Jewish tradition of a young Abram.

As the Israelites wrestled with what it meant to be the people of God, disagreements would occasionally arise around the key figures in their people's story. One of those disagreements was why God chose Abraham as the father of this movement. What was so special about this man? And so legends were created and formed to help build out his character and identity.

One of those myths had to do with Abraham's life as a child. During his youth, so the story goes, Abram's family was in the business of building idols for worship. One day, while left in charge of the family store, Abram picked up a stick and smashed all but the very largest statue. (SLIDE) When he was done destroying the family business, he placed the stick in the hands of the biggest idol. When his family returned and surveyed the damage, Abram told them that the largest statue had picked up the stick, and destroyed all the lesser idols. Abram's father scolded him, saying, "they're just statues, they know nothing," to which young Abram cheekily responded, "then why would we ever worship them?"

It's a story meant to give a sense of Abram's curiosity about the true God. Certainly someone with this kind of gall and conviction was worthy to become the father of the people of the one true God.

The story continues that because of his troubled behavior, he was taken to see a community leader, a man with much wisdom, who told him that he should forget about the idols, that we find the true God when we worship fire. Abraham responds that water puts out fire. So the suggestion is made that perhaps he worships water. Abraham responds that clouds hold water. So the wise man declares that he should worship the clouds. Abraham responds that wind pushes clouds, and since humans can withstand a strong breeze, perhaps it's all nonsense.

The wise man becomes angry with Abraham and declares that he should be cast into an actual fire, and if Abraham is correct, i.e. that there is a real God above all these made up ones, then that God will save him. Abraham is cast into the fire, and in a story foreshadowing Shadrach, Meshak, and Abednego, he is saved because of his faith in God.

Needless to say, Abraham was a man of deep held convictions.

There is something in us as human beings that are drawn to stories like Carrie Nation and Abraham. Something about that certainty that goes beyond logic or legalism - so rooted and convicted that we are willing to push beyond society expectations. These stories of conviction remind us that some of us do in fact have a line in the sand that cannot be crossed, and when push comes to shove, we are capable of head-turning acts of civil disobedience.

Of course we also know that there is a danger in this kind of certainty to go on a righteous rampage. We see it all the time - in folks who push others to make sure they always get their own way. We see it in cult leaders and conspiracy theorists who claim to be the only ones to see the actual truth, calling people to follow only their vision. We see it in politicians who push false narratives or never admit when they are wrong, and even in churches where sermons are given with so much certainty that there is no room left for questions, doubt, or those who disagree.

And so perhaps like me, you're left wondering how we tell the difference between convictions that are to be trusted and celebrated, and convictions that are dangerous and destructive.

Perhaps there is something that we can find in our scripture passage from today. Whether or not there is any weight to the legends about Abraham as a child, the verses of today's scripture passage from Genesis tell us that God chose to provide this ordinary man with a blessing. Emily reminded us of the strange weightiness of this blessing. A willingness to leave the familiar home setting as an older man. And yes

because of this blessing, perhaps because of Abram's certainty, Abraham was told he would be a blessing to many. (SLIDE)

Blessed to be a blessing.

Perhaps the deepest convictions are those that allow us to also be blessed to be a blessing. Here on Peace Sunday, we celebrate our tradition of nonviolence and working for peace. We think of those in our community who volunteer in areas of need. We affirm those who speak up for those without a voice. And we remember those serving in areas of our world with deep conflict and tension, knowing that a peaceful alternative makes a very real difference.

I think about author and professor Ron Sider urging the Mennonites, Quakers, and Brethren churches in the 1980s to remember their roots, and consider a new calling. (SLIDE) At a Mennonite World Conference gathering in France, Sider spoke these words...

Over the past 450 years of martyrdom, immigration and missionary proclamation, the God of shalom has been preparing us Anabaptists for a late twentieth-century rendezvous with history. If we are ready to embrace the cross, God's reconciling people will profoundly impact the course of world history . . . This could be our finest hour. Never has the world needed our message more. Never has it been more open. Now is the time to risk everything for our belief that Jesus is the way to peace. If we still believe it, now is the time to live what we have spoken.

Needless to say, Ron Sider was also a man of deep convictions.

He knew intuitively that this peace idea was hollow unless people were willing to put it all on the line. He understood that those who believed in military force were willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause. He challenged those peace churches to consider something that would offer a life-giving alternative, and in the process, Christian Peacemaker Teams, now known as Community Peacemaker Teams, was born.

Blessed to be a blessing. What might that mean for us here at UMC? How might we have the courage of Carrie Nation, Father Abraham, or Ron Sider, to stand up for what we believe, in life-giving and courageous ways? How might we lean in to God's way of peace, as we navigate the world, and what might we learn along the way? Here in central Pennsylvania many of us live relatively comfortable lives, but we know that there are those in our midst who feel vulnerable due to the color of their skin, their income, their faith tradition, or their legal status. We know that global warming continues to

create uncertainty about the stability of our environment. We know that we are living amid another widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, that mental health and substance abuse continues to be at crisis levels, and that political polarization is creating an anxiety that weighs on some folks so heavily that civil war has been suggested.

So amid all that, how do we speak peace into our world? How do we share the love and peace of Christ in our context, and work for a better world for the next generations?

How might we receive our blessing in order to be a blessing in our context?

Next week we'll continue Abraham's journey, this time with his nephew Lot. It too, is a story of courageous peace, and perhaps we'll find another bit of wisdom there, as we continue our journey together through the book of Genesis.

May we continue to catch glimpses of God's light and love amid the pages of this ancient text, and may we be blessed to be a blessing.

We move now to our sharing time, and we'll begin with our new glimpses of joy video, sharing in each other's lives in pictures and videos.