

The 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33:1-12; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26; Romans 4:13-25.

Genesis 12:1-9 begins the biblical narrative about Abraham, the progenitor of Israel. Thus, the biblical account switches from an emphasis on God making covenant with the entirety of humanity (Adam and Noah were Gentiles) to God's concentration upon a single people for the salvation of the world. It is not that God is being exclusive in choosing only Israel as God's chosen people (as if God has no relationship with anyone else), but is rather concentrating the work of grace through one people so that they might understand, heed and follow it (even though they are often disobedient to it), so that this covenant can then be expanded into the whole world through Jesus Christ. The story of Abraham, therefore, introduces God's covenantal work with the children of Israel as the next stage of salvation history.

Although Abram is initially introduced in Genesis 11:27-32, the actual story of Abraham is found in Genesis 12:1 through 25:11. His name was initially Abram ("father of height" or "father of stature"), but in Genesis 17:5 was changed by God to Abraham ("father of a multitude"). He was born and raised in the famed city of Ur, a wealthy and powerful metropolis near the juncture of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in ancient Mesopotamia (or what is today Kuwait). As a young man, Abram migrated with his patriarchal family to Haran in northern Mesopotamia (what is today northeast Syria). There, the story began.

"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" (12:1-3).

A call comes from God to Abram. That call is to "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you". He is being called to separate himself from his home and from his larger family, leave his beloved Haran, and travel to the land of Canaan. He had to leave the moon gods of Haran and go to Canaan where the "God-who-had-no-name" dwelt. Since the ancients believed that a god had power only within a given territory, Abram could only receive God's promise by leaving Haran (where the moon god reigned) and going to Canaan where the "God-who-had-no-name" dwelt. Since the ancients believed that you only knew the essence of a person by knowing his name, to go in search of a "God-who-had-no-name" was to go in search of a god who was, by his nature, unknowable and an infinite mystery. Thus, Abram is being given a most formidable assignment – to leave everything and everyone (and even every god) whom he knew and loved and trusted to go out into the unknown in search of a god who was, by definition, unknowable!

In God's call to Abram, God makes certain promises to the patriarch. God promised Abram that he would become the father of a great nation which would bless all humankind. This nation would be God's means by which all people would find peace and joy and ultimate purpose in life – "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (vs. 3) because of Abram. It is later in the narrative that we learn the impossibility of this promise – for Abram was 75 years old and his wife, Sarai (later, Sarah) was both barren and past her child-bearing (Gen. 15-16).

This is the first covenant made between God and Abram. A covenant was the vehicle by which the ancient peoples made binding commitments to one another (as opposed to a contract). A covenant was a solemn agreement made between two parties (who might or might not have equal status) in permanent, defined relationships with specific obligations on both sides. To break a covenant was the most grave of actions in the ancient Near East with horrific consequences (for example, in some cultures, it was legal for the wronged partner in a covenant to slay the partner who broke covenant). That was the nature of the relationship to which the “God-who-has-no-name” committed himself when he called forth Abram to the task of traveling to another country.

Thus, God obligated himself to Abram (vv. 2-3) while calling Abram to an obligation toward God (vs. 1). The indication that Abram accepted covenant with God was his action to set forth with his family on the literal journey into which God had called him!

God’s promise was that God would personally “bless” Abram, bless his family, make his name great, and make him and his heirs a blessing to the whole world. But what was God actually promising Abram? The English word “blessing” has a much more limited meaning than did the Hebrew word, *barak*. The English word has either a religious or a secular use. Its religious meaning is to hallow or consecrate by religious rite or word (thus, receiving the “blessing” of a priest or a minister). Its secular meaning is to enjoy happiness, pleasure or contentment.

But the Hebrew word was far richer than consecration or contentment. It really meant well-being in all of life’s dimensions – corporate as well as individual, economic, political and social as well as spiritual. The word captured the meanings of the word *shalom*, and its emphasis upon the creation of God’s ideal world of justice, the equitable sharing of wealth by all, the elimination of poverty and people being at-one with God and each other that eventually became the shalom community of Israel (the “kingdom of God” in the New Testament). In what is the first covenant made between God and the patriarch of Israel, God has introduced the ideal of a nation seeking to live into and to bring to all humanity the shalom community – the world as God intends it to be!¹

The story concludes, “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. Abram passed through the land

¹ An intriguing nuance on this first covenant made between God and Abram is the unique Hebrew form that is translated “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (vs. 3b). The form of the Hebrew verb used here can be equally understood and translated as either passive or reflexive. Both are equally acceptable translations, and only the inclination of the translator decides which way it should be translated. The phrase can be translated “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (the passive sense). Or it can be translated, “all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (the reflexive sense). There is no indication in the text which reading of that text was the intention of its author. Both are equally correct. Therefore, it is intriguing that Christian biblical scholars almost universally use the passive sense in translating this phrase and Jewish scholars normally use the reflexive sense. If one uses the passive sense, one is implying that God’s blessings (and salvation) are given to the world through Abraham (cf. Gal. 3:8). If one uses the reflexive sense, one is stating that Abram’s blessing and obedient action becomes a model to the rest of the world about how all of us should act (i.e., “May we be as blessed as was Abram by being as equally obedient to God’s command”). This tendency of Christians translating the passage differently than Jewish scholars is a clear example of how one’s theological beliefs can unconsciously influence one’s academic decisions!

to the place at Shechem, to the oak 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" (12:4-9).

What deep faith Abram displayed! He had to give up his home and most of his family. He had to give up his city. He even had to give up his gods and journey to a strange country where lived a new God, a God whom he had never known nor worshipped. And he did this simply in order to "be a blessing . . . (so that) all the families of the earth will be blessed." In Abram's faith, therefore, the Hebrew people could see the kind of faith all Israel was meant to have.

The call of Abram reflected the Israelite understanding of how God works with people for the redemption of the world. God redeems and blesses humanity through the faithful obedience of a people (e.g., the Israelites). These people respond to a call given by God, a call which always comes with conditions and "strings attached". God expects these conditions to be fulfilled before the promises and blessings of the call can become reality.

So, according to this Old Testament lesson for the 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Abram was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Instead, he obediently left his homeland, his gods, and his people and journeyed to Canaan. He took with him his cousin Lot, his wife Sarai, both families and their retinue. But, although God promised Abram that he would be the father of a great nation, Abram was still childless. That was to require God's action in a different way and in a different story!

Psalm 33:1-12 is a hymn of praise to the God of both creation and of history. It begins with the command for God's people to exalt God. They are instructed to "sing to him a new song" (vs. 3) or hymn in praise to God, "for the word of the Lord is upright and all his work is done in faithfulness" (vs. 4).

In this psalm, God is praised for his work both in creation and in history. It first centers on God's work of creation. "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses" (vss. 6-7). Because of his mighty work in creating both the universe and the world, all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him" (vs. 8)! And why? "For he spoke and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (vs. 9).

But God is also praised for shaping history. "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations" (vss. 10-11). The author describes two sets of plans. First, there are the plans of the nations, of the politically, religiously and economically powerful. And, second, there are God's plans for history. God's plans have stood fixed from eternity; his designs for humanity will be worked out, no matter what the systems of societies will do. They may have plans of their own, but it is God's plans that will eventually be realized.

Therefore, this portion of the psalm concludes, “Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage” (vs. 12). Happy that nation will be that “gets with the program” and discerns and follows God’s will for it; they are not “kicking against the goads”. Unhappy will be that nation that insists upon pressing its will down upon all peoples, for it will ultimately be defeated. So, the Psalm suggests, choose happiness by discerning and following God’s will for your nation.

But the psalmist takes it one step further. “(Happy is) the people whom he has chosen as his heritage” (vs. 12b). This places a slightly different nuance on this verse. Of course, the first interpretation of this reading is that he is referring to Israel as God’s chosen people. And this is true. But it has a broader interpretation than that. The Hebrew suggests that the author is referring to more than simply Israel. He is referring to any nation which intentionally centers its life in the god Yahweh. Thus, the English translation of the Hebrew could be legitimately made, “How blest the nation whom its God is Yahweh, the people (whom its God Yahweh) has chosen for his own patrimony”.²

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 consists of two stories – the call of Matthew to be a disciple (including the celebratory party in conjunction with that call) (9:9-13) and the healing of an unclean woman and a dead girl (9:18-26). The second story is really two of four stories meant to be considered together (9:18-34), so we will consider all four of those stories in order to fully appreciate the point Matthew is seeking to make.

In the story of his own call to join Jesus’ disciple band, Matthew tells us, “As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me”. And he got up and followed him. And as (Jesus) sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when Jesus heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners”” (9:9-13).

This story presents Matthew’s telling of the story of his own call to discipleship, followed by a party of “tax collectors and sinners” attended by Jesus to celebrate Matthew’s call. The story is not understandable unless one clearly understands the unique and reprehensible role tax-collectors played in Israelite society.

There was probably no person more despised by Jewish peasants than the tax-collector. This was because they were the “front-line” representatives of the political and economic elite of both Israel and of Rome, and yet were, at the same time, “ordinary Jews”. The tax collectors lived among the people in each village and, in fact, grew up as part of the people, but had chosen to betray the people by being the ones who collected the money that supported the Roman occupation, the land-owners and the clergy aristocracy under which the people were kept in servile conditions. As a reward for their unsavory work, the tax-collectors were permitted to

² Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible: Psalms I (1-50)* (NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 202.

keep a significant percentage of the taxes for themselves; this, in turn, made tax-collectors among the wealthiest people in any village – but also the most despised. Consequently, all the animosity and anger the people felt toward the “Powers that Be” was directed toward these immediately-accessible representatives of those Powers. The people recognized that the “untouchables” or expendables of Israelite society (the widows, orphans, beggars, lepers, destitute) had all fallen into the expendable class by circumstance, whereas the tax-collector chose his ostracism out of his lust for money and power (no one made him be a tax-collector).

It would make an intriguing study to consider the impact the above community dynamics had upon the person of the tax-collector. It was likely that the tax-collector internalized much self-loathing, for he would recognize that it was his love of money and position that caused him to choose such a reprehensible profession. He would know how greatly he was hated and scorned by the people as a “Benedict Arnold”. It was intriguing that, when Jesus called Matthew to leave his tax tables and to follow him, the other tax collectors wanted to get together to celebrate Matthew’s call. Obviously, they saw Matthew as being liberated from their leprous vocation. They, indeed, were the “sick” who needed a physician if one were to be truly obedient to the Law and thus love mercy more than sacrifice!

Thus, Jesus calls Matthew to “Follow me”! And immediately, without any hesitation or reflection (the sense of the Greek), Matthew “got up (from his tax table) and followed him”.

But Israel’s religious elite take offense at Jesus’ association both with Matthew and with the “low life” of his fellow tax-collectors. It is intriguing that this elite depends upon the tax-collectors for most of their income, and yet they both shun them (because they were politically “unclean”) and want Jesus to shun them, as well. But Jesus replies, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (9:12-13).

Quoting from Hosea 6:6, Jesus calls the Pharisees and the Israelite clergy aristocracy to accountability through his call to Matthew and his embrace of his tax-collector friends. The clergy elite reject Jesus’ call, but Matthew accepts it. Jesus has called Matthew and his friends to new life and – in Matthew’s case – a new vocation. Thus, by his words and actions of love and acceptance, and in his call of the elite to accountability according to their own law, Jesus is being a transforming presence to those who are otherwise rejected by life. And the elite don’t like it! But Jesus doesn’t allow the elite to get away with their condemnation, for in receiving the taxes, the elite makes itself as unclean as the tax-collectors whom they condemn for gathering the wealth for them!

The next portion of Matthew 9 presents four healings: the raising of a dead girl (the daughter of “a leader of the synagogue”) (9:18-19, 23-26), the healing of a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years (9:20-22), the restoring of sight to two blind men (vv. 27-31), and the healing of a man who was demon-possessed and mute (vss. 32-34). These healings demonstrate once again that Jesus is indeed who the Church claims him to be – the Messiah (or Christ), but also the marginalized Messiah.

It is intriguing to note the marginalization implied by these four healings. Being in a house of death was to make oneself unclean, and to touch the dead child compounded the uncleanness. A woman having her period was perceived to be unclean, and since that woman had not stopped her period for twelve years, she was constantly unclean. A person who was possessed by a demon was particularly seen as unclean (manifested in his demon possession). The only people who might not be considered unclean – but would most certainly have been ostracized because of their condition – were the two blind men. So all were marginalized, and all were warmly received by Jesus.

It is also intriguing to note that Jesus touched the dead girl and the two blind men, and he accepted being touched by the woman with the issue of blood. Only the healing of the demoniac didn't record a touch. A touch in each instance, whether by Jesus or to Jesus, rendered him contaminated according to the Law. But there is no indication that this bothered Jesus at all!

It is further worthwhile noting that by the time of the fourth miracle, the response of the crowd has become so positive and strong, that the Pharisees felt the necessity to slander Jesus. “But the Pharisees said, ‘By the ruler of the demons he casts out demons’” (9:34).

Finally, it is worth noting the participatory exercise of the people in these healings. In each of the situations, action or expression of faith is required. In the case of the little girl, it had to be the father who had to exercise faith on his daughter's behalf, for he had to overcome his pride and the prejudice of his peers to come to Jesus to ask for help. The woman with the hemorrhage was proactive about getting healed, and Jesus took note of it. “Take heart, daughter,” he said. “Your faith has made you well”.

The two blind men asked for healing, and Jesus, in turn, asked them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” Upon their positive response, Jesus then said, “According to your faith, let it be done to you” (9:29). In other words, the extent of their healing was determined by the extent of their trust and belief in Jesus and it must have been great, because they were fully healed (9:30).

The healing of the mute demoniac was, as in the first healing, dependent not on his faith but upon the faith of those who brought him (9:32). Matthew is very careful to point out that, unlike the woman and the two blind men who assaulted Jesus, both the healings of the dead girl and the mute demoniac were accomplished through the faith and commitment of those who stood in their stead and acted on their behalf, for they were unable to take such initiative themselves.

In this collection of four healings, therefore, Matthew communicates much about Jesus and the nature of his gospel. It is the marginalized to whom he ministers; it is the elite who distance themselves from Jesus and who criticize. Jesus is not concerned about the “religious” actions or values of his day, but instead in ministering to people in their extremities. And faith is a two-way street; it requires commitment from us on an ongoing basis as well as Jesus' continuing commitment to us!

Romans 4:13-25 is the Epistle lesson for the 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time. It is a direct commentary on our Old Testament lesson for today and its emphasis that it is through

Abraham's acted-out faith that "all the families of the earth will be blessed". Paul bases his argument that God's grace-filled gift to us of transformation is appropriated by us through faith rather than through good works or obedience to the Law. Paul builds that argument on the example of Abraham. Paul depends upon the biblical example of Abraham to make his case that salvation is based upon faith. In fact, Paul cites more biblical texts about Abraham than any other historical figure except Jesus. He does so for two reasons. First, by Paul's time, Abraham had achieved a more "saintly" role in Jewish theology than any other biblical figure, including Moses and David. There was no greater biblical figure for Paul to use than Abraham. Second, of all the biblical characters, there was no one who could make the argument for salvation through faith more powerfully than could Abraham. Faith was Abraham's most dominant characteristic to which all biblical and most rabbinic sources gave witness. So the very person and life of Abraham strengthened Paul's argument immensely.

Today's Epistle lesson is essentially about the witness of Abraham to a faith-centered life. It begins with an awkwardly-worded opening sentence (awkward in both Greek and in its English translation), and its commentary: "What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith" (4:1, 13).

The awkwardness of these pivotal sentences is probably caused by Paul's desire to intentionally weave into the fabric of these introductory sentences (and thus, into his argument) the wording of both biblical and extra-biblical texts that knowledgeable Jews would recognize and with which they would immediately resonate. That would include passages from today's Old Testament lesson ("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" [12:2]; "To your offspring I will give this land" [12:7]), as well as from Genesis 15:6 ("Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness"). But in its wording, these two initiating verses also echo I Maccabees 2:52 ("Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?") and Sirach 44:19-20 ("Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory (for) when he was tested he proved faithful"), apocryphal readings that were highly respected and would instantly be recognized by Jewish listeners.

Having established Abraham as Israel's founding saint who was blessed by God because of his faith rather than his works, Paul makes his argument for faith occurring outside the Law rather than through the Law (a necessary assertion if Gentiles were truly to be saved). Paul writes, "For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all Abraham's descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"). He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness" (4:16-17a, 19-22).

Paul reminds his readers that Abraham was, in one sense, the world's first Jew. But in another sense, he was also the world's idealized Gentile. Out of his loins (through Sarah) came those who made up the Jewish nation. But also out of his loins (through Hagar) came those who became the Arabian people and progenitors of much of the Gentile world (particularly of Paul's day, including the peoples of the Parthian Empire, the eastern portion of the Roman Empire, late Egyptian or Ptolemaic culture, and even portions of the Greek world). Likewise, he was the founder of the Hebrew religion, but he was also foundational to the then-emerging Christian religion (which was by this time emerging as its own religion rather than as a Jewish sect) – and, of course, Paul would not have known that Abraham would one day be looked upon by the Islamic faith as the progenitor of the Muslim religion. Thus, in both a literal and in a metaphorical sense, Abraham was “the father of all of us – the father of many nations” (vs. 17a).

Thus, Paul contends that one cannot argue that the embrace of one God can come only to those who keep the Law of Moses (whose introduction of the Law to Israel occurred 800 years after Abraham lived), for that embrace became an option for all who came from the loins of Abraham. Thus, both an individual and a people embrace relationship with God by receiving the grace given by God, and receiving that grace by returning that embrace. Grace is not gained either by obeying a Law that came 800 years after Abraham “believed God” nor by good works, for works cannot earn a grace that is already freely given! All that either a person or a people need to do to truly become “children of God” is to accept that they have already been accepted by God!

Thus, Paul concludes this Epistle lesson by making its application. “Now the words, “faith was reckoned to him” were not written for Abraham's sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (4:23-25). Receiving God's love, mercy and justice was not peculiar to Abraham alone, Paul contends. It is meant as well for “us who believe in God” (that is, take God at God's word). Abraham, Paul suggests, is not only a forerunner but a prototype of Jesus, for there was another who believed God “all the way”, who courageously faced “death for our trespasses” but who was “raised from the dead” by the God who is more powerful than death itself. The first Abraham left his homeland, abandoned his extended family, required his immediate family to go with him on what appeared to be a “wild goose chase”, faced into the specter of his lineage dying out with him – but who believed the promises of a god whom he had never met, a “God-with-no-name” that he would be given a homeland and offspring that would become the progenitor of much of the human race – and he chose to believe God in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. So the second Abraham left his heavenly homeland, abandoned his angelic family, called a family of believers into another “wild goose chase” of building “God's kingdom and his righteousness”, and paid for his convictions by being crucified – and he chose to believe God in spite of all the evidence that this was no way to succeed at life! Both Abrahams, through their faith against all evidence, brought new life and salvation to a people not yet born. And because of these two “believers”, the world was never the same again!

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