

Trusting Angels

The following text is Jonathan Green's speaking notes from the gathering held at The Sanctuary on 15th March 2007

Introduction

Last time we met we started out on Act 3 of the Story we Find ourselves in. We thought about the way in which God focused his plan to save the whole of creation on one man and one family. The family of Abraham. Act 1 we titled creation, Act 2 introduced us to 'crisis'. We could title this Act 3 - Calling - God 'calls' Abraham to be used instrumentally to bless the whole world. Abraham and his descendants are God's 'crisis response team', to bring a blessing into a world that had been infected with evil. So 'calling' means God recruiting you to be part of this movement of people who want to bring God's blessing back to the world. We thought about how this understanding is central to our understanding of the Christian community! The Sanctuary exists to bring blessing, as God's people here in Westminster, to bring goodness to the world in which we find ourselves, wherever we have influence, at work, with our friends, with our families...¹

So don't wait to be called, for God to tell you what to do... if you locate yourselves in this story then you are already called! The word calling really is the same as our word 'vocation,' derived from Latin. To be called, to hear your calling, or to find your vocation are all ways of saying that you have signed up with this higher purpose or mission in life. You're not just here for your own agenda, or for a company agenda. You want to be part of God's ongoing creation of the world - against all the forces that are working against that creative process. You want the world to become the kind of world God dreams for it to be. This is all about seeing heaven invade our communities... This is the kingdom of God, what Matthew always calls, the Kingdom of Heaven breaking in so that we experience it! (What does this look like? Flip chart?)

I think that what we are learning is this... that the church is at its best when it gives itself away. When we looked at Genesis 12 we saw how God tells a man named Abram that he's going to bless him, and through him, he is going to bless the whole world. This is the birth of the Jewish people, whom God wants to use to reach everybody. This blessing is instrumental in nature. God wants to use Abraham, to flow through him, to have him be the conduit through whom God can bless everybody else. God gifts us so that we can pass on the gift for the good of the world. Abraham is a vessel, so are we, vessels of God's glory, people who live according to God's ways. God doesn't choose people just so they'll feel good about themselves or secure in their standing with God or whatever else. God chooses people to be used to bless other people. Elected, predestined, chosen - whatever words people use for this reality, the point is never the person elected or chosen or predestined. The point is that person serving others, making their lives better.

The second significant idea in Genesis 12 is that Abraham's calling is universal. It is for everybody. All kinds of people all over the place are going to be blessed by God through Abraham. God has no boundaries. God blesses everybody. People who don't believe in God. People who are opposed to God. People who do violent, evil things. God's intentions are to bless everybody.

¹ Many of these concepts are taken from Brian McLaren's helpful book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*.

So with that as a backdrop

With universal blessing through Abrahams descendents. Tonight I want us to think about the processes by which this is worked out. Let us look at the way the story continues... but all the time let us keep in mind the promise that God will give Abraham numerous descendants, chosen to bless the whole of creation!

You see, the story of God and Abraham and Sarah is a story of patience and trust and sacrifice and waiting... Through this central narrative, we get a great insight into the way in which God leads and guides. It is not all at once, it is progressive, a step at a time. You are faithful over here and then God shows you the next thing.

And so we see that Abraham leaves Lot and fulfills God's request to leave your family and then God shows Abram the next bit. In chapter 15 1-6, we see something staggering. Read - what faith!!!

Something else to remember

These events happen over many years!

I want us to briefly focus on 2 stories

Firstly let us look at Chapter 18:1-19

What an interesting story... Part of Abrahams response was cultural. Hospitality to the stranger was considered vitally important in that culture. Secondly, the text indicates that these men are no ordinary men. Many scholars say that these were in fact angels. Others say that this is God walking with Abraham. There are certainly hints of that and especially when you read on to the account of Sodom and Gomorra... It seems that the story goes onto reveal that it is actually the angel of the Lord which in the Old Testament is God's representative. An extension of the divine personality... It is as close as the text gets to saying that this is God whom Abraham entertains! And God gives a promise, makes a prediction, that their lives will be changed, as old as they are, by a son!

This promise is so great and world changing that God personally delivers it. This is incredible. Again, it is good to pause and think about what we just said. God physically appears to Abraham and walks and talks with him! And it is not just any old conversation, this thing God will do will affect the whole world.

I love Sarah' response to the revelation that she will give a child - she laughs... I was talking to a good friend of mine earlier who said that when God tells him to do something he usually laughs...

Why does she laugh, cos it is nigh impossible, she was well past child bearing age!!!

I mean, none of this makes much sense! You need a heck of a lot of faith!

So let us pause for a moment. Lets talk with one another about this story... what else strikes you, what do you notice? (Flip charts/group work)

2nd story... God calls Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son. 22:1-18

Now with all of that in mind, thinking of this story that extends over 10 chapters and many years lets focus on this next story... 21.1

In Genesis 22, God tells Abraham to take his 'only son Isaac' and sacrifice him on Mount Moriah. After all those years of waiting for a son, now Abraham is told to take Isaac and kill him. So great is Abraham's faith, he prepares to do just that until, at the very last moment before the boy is killed, Abraham is told by God's messenger to stay his hand. A ram is miraculously provided to die in Isaac's place, and sacrifice is made.

We should not underestimate how hard it must have been at times for Abraham to trust God, but his faith is rewarded richly in God's strong reaffirmation of the covenant between Abraham and himself (Gen. 22.16-18).

I want us to think about a well known verse, probably the best known verse in the Bible! John 3:16

One principle of Biblical interpretation is called the principle of first mention. Whenever you come across a significant word in a passage, find out where this word first appears in the Bible. John does this in his gospel. The first mention of the word love is in 3:16 - for God so loved the world that he have his one and only son." We then discover that love is first mentioned in Genesis 22 when God tells Abraham to take 'your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love' and offer him as a sacrifice. John is doing something intentional in his gospel: He wants his readers to see a connection between Abraham and his son, and God and God's son. John's readers who knew the Torah would have seen the parallels right away.²

The comparison is staggering isn't it.

Right here we see a shadow of things to come. Right here we have an e

And because of Abrahams obedient he promises that his blessing will indeed come about...

We can learn a lot from these stories, about promises, about patience, about trusting the word of God, about guidance, about being faithful and following a path even if it seems ridiculous!

² A great insight from Rob Bell, see *Velvet Elvis*, 156