

Second Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2017

Text: Genesis 12:1-9

Theme: "God is So Great!"

I think I will try my hand at a little sculpting. It may be a hidden talent of mine. I'll just take this lump of Play-Doh and begin work. I'll work on the eyes, and then the nose. You can't rush these things, you know. Now here are the ears, a mouth, finally a bit of a neck. And—what do you think? Maybe it doesn't look like much from where you are sitting, but up close. Well, it probably looks better from where you are sitting. It looks a little like the Creature from the Black Lagoon. Looks like my talent will remain hidden.

We do try our hands at different things. If we do have a talent for a particular skill we may well find satisfaction in it and that talent maybe affirmed by others. These things don't always go together. We may be affirmed, but really we find no satisfaction in it. Or we may not be very good at it and still find it satisfying.

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we certainly put our hands to serving our Lord. We are never perfect at that, can be pretty discouraging to see how badly we seem to be doing it especially if we see what shape we've gotten things in. The key is not the shaping that comes from our hands, but the shaping that is the work of God. God does not fail in His shaping. God's work is great because God is great, so great. Would you not agree?

Today we see God calling that great man of faith, Abraham. That's the God we just sang about, "The God of Abraham praise." The work of the great God is always great, the problem comes with our reshaping.

Today our text puts before us our father in the faith, Abraham. He is on quite a journey. In our text he is directed to leave Haran and go to the land God will show him. He's done a lot of traveling already, and not alone. At the end of chapter 11 (27-32) we see that Abram's father, Terah, leaves Ur of the Chaldeans and goes to Haran. That's probably a journey of around 600 miles. Terah takes with him his son Abram, Abram's wife, Sarai, and his grandson, Lot. Lot's father, Haran, had died in Ur.

Yes, it was a long journey, could not have been easy. You were leaving the familiar for the unknown, leaving your family, well-known surroundings, your place of livelihood, and maybe your gods? Maybe you had some you could carry with you, fit nicely into your hand. So off you go, probably on a travel route for trading, but you won't be traveling back and forth. Maybe the best you can hope for is some word of your family from a trader. Obviously there is no social media. You'll just have to live the life right in front of you, not throwing it out on the web. There won't be any videos of favorite recipes or startled cats from back in Ur. Yes, a big move. Why did Terah make this move? I don't think we are told. It could have been hard times, or famine, or civil unrest, and just a hope for something better. We are told the plan was to go on to Canaan (11:31).

Life is lived but Terah never makes that move to Canaan. He dies there in Haran at 205. But the trip will be made. Seventy five year old

Abram, 65 year old Sarai, and Lot, whose age we are not told, go on to Canaan. Looks like life in Haran went well with them for they have stuff to take along, probably like herds and flocks, and silver and gold, and servants. Abram doesn't just have a whim to do this, not just trying to complete what his father started, no, God tells him, not gods you can carry in your hand, but the LORD. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you." (vs 1) There is great promise, "And I will make 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 him who dishonors you, I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (vs 2, 3)

Does not Abram exhibit great faith in this great God? There is no looking on the GPS, no doing it the old way, unfolding the map. No, it's "to the land I will show you." 'I'll tell you when you are there.' And God does how him. "To your offspring I will give this land." (vs 7) Abram goes in faith.

Paul speaks of his faith in our lesson from Romans 4, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." (vs 3, quoting Genesis 15:6 after God had directed Abram's gaze up to the stars and said, 'count them if you can, so shall your offspring be.') Yes, Abram is our father in the faith. Here in our text builds an altar to the LORD in praise and thanksgiving (vs7). He moves and builds another altar, "to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD." (vs 8)

The LORD is the great God. He says of Himself, “I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.” (Isaiah 42:8) This is the God of Abraham. He will guide and protect Abram from those peoples already in the land and from those outside the land in his travels. As He tells Abram, “I am your shield.” (15:1) The Canaanites in the land and the Egyptians outside the land would not lay a hand on Abram, or Sarai, or the servants or the animals, yes, Abram’s shield. God will even use Abram to deliver Lot and his family when they are taken captive in war. Abram will lead a force of 318 probably against a much larger force (14:13). It was the a force of four kings. This is the work of Abraham’s God.

God is great, so great. But maybe sometimes He needs a little help, maybe we need to put our minds and our hands to helping things along. This great nation business was a long time coming for Abram. It could be that Hagar, Sarai’s Egyptian servant was the solution. God could need a little help, could be just what He intends. So it happens and Ishmael happens. But he is not the child of the promise, not the one in whom the nations will be blessed. He will be a source of contention. And maybe God needed a little shield assistance when it come to protecting Abram from Pharaoh and later Abimelech, so we’ll tell the half truth about Sarai being the sister instead of the wife. Yes, this putting little reshaping could be just the thing.

And are we not still so tempted? God lays out before us in His Word how He would have us live as new creations in Christ, those reborn in

baptism. But the old nature is always trying to resurface. The father of lies comes with the same old tired, but quite effective, line of ‘did God really say?’ Maybe you should listen more to what others say God is saying instead of relying on the light of His Word. There are those who claim to really be in on God’s wavelength, love experts, if you will, those who say love never denies, always satisfies the desire even if thousands of years of Christian teaching and practice need reshaping.

Helping God along is not helpful. Yes, it’s the work of the father of lies, there’s a hook and a trap to it all, a barb to bring us down. When we put our hand to God’s Word to squeeze it and twist it to make human desire the rule of the day, the shape we find and experience is death, despair, even damnation. We don’t have an aptitude for godhood. We are not great at it all. It will just all be in pieces.

The Great God is the God of Abraham. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Human attempts at reshaping have not derailed God’s plan of blessing. That plan would not be derailed by the weaknesses of God’s people nor the attempts of their enemies. The Seed through whom all the nations would be blessed would come. He’s in the room with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is about to find more than he was seeking. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs, unless God is with him.” (John 3:2) Yes, He has come from God. He says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen.” (John 3:11) He does this as the One who

has come down from heaven (s 13). He is come forth from God, from the glory that was His from all eternity, and more than come from God. He is God.

He is the Son of God who is about to take up the curse. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...” (vs 15) Lifted up He was. This is not some molded form of God lifted up, no God is lifted up in Christ on the cross. This is the Lamb of God is the once for all sacrifice of sin, the lifting up of the One who always walked in perfect righteousness, no attempt at reshaping of the Father’s will at all. He came to destroy the power of the devil. He tramples the accusing serpent down in the dirt with His sacrifice.

He is the shape of God’s love. “This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and gave His Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10). This is the love of our life, that love that gives us life. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him, should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) Look at the certainty, not “could be,” “should be,” or “wait and see,” no, “have eternal life.” The certainty is guaranteed by His resurrection from the dead.

Now He shapes us through His Word, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. He has been lifted up to the right hand of God and He has poured on His Spirit on those to whom it was promised. It empowered them to be at the mission of preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the world beginning in Jerusalem. He still pours out His Spirit on

those to whom it is promised. “Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have that birth, that rebirth, birth from above that puzzled Nicodemus, born of water and the Spirit. Brothers and sisters buried and raised with him, washed, cleansed, perfectly clothed, that perfect righteousness of Christ.

Now, you and I, as we seek those things above, and not below, we are the shape of God’s love in the lives of our neighbors. Our work is for them, not for ourselves, that work that saves us is done and freely given. We serve our neighbor as those shaped for service. It meet their needs. God is using us to get His work done. He gives the opportunity to point to Him, the great God, the God of Abraham, so they too may be Abraham’s children. For Jesus’ sake. Amen