

SERMON TITLE- "Abram And God's Peace Plan"

TEXT- Genesis 12-14

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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On Sept 11, 2001 the world changed. I remember going downstairs to do some exercises, turning on the TV and watching the disaster unfold and thinking that exact thought. It turned out to be right in a way that many other similar declarations have not.

There are pivotal moments in history and Genesis lists them off for us-

- the creation of everything
- the first people
- the entry of sin into creation
- the first family feud
- the great flood
- the Tower of Babel

When we understand these stories a foundation is laid within our minds for understanding how life, as people created by God, is supposed to work.

Some of these events are massive- Creation & The Flood- others are small local events but with great consequences [the first disobedience, the feud between Cain and Abel]. But when they are understood we realize the deep implications that run through every part of our lives.

In some ways, the parallel of 9/11 was the story of the Tower of Babel. It was the collapse of grand statement of achievement and the beginning of a very difficult time.

In the case of Babel the implications were many, many times greater than our 9/11- all human communication had been frustrated by God and the current season of human conflict was introduced. The story of human history has been the story of wars and rumors of wars.

As I said last time, however, the Bible is not the story of hopeless disaster- it is the story of redemption and in even as each calamity is described another dimension of God's redemption is also described.

This was certainly the case with the story of Babel. The confusion of language which came next is followed by a genealogy that leads directly to Abram.

After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. Genesis 11:26

Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran . . .

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan . . . Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.

Genesis 11:27-31

And with that brief introduction we meet possibly the most important person in the Bible- besides Jesus. His story begins with a simple command-

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Genesis 12:1-3

Abram becomes the person through whom God puts together a new beginning- a new beginning that carries forward in a direct lineage to every followers of God living today.

The story of Abram has many parts and we will take at least 2 Sundays to look at it- but today, because of our Peace Sunday theme, will focus on a side of the Abram story that is easily overlooked. Abram was in many ways the beginning of God's peace plan.

There are a few parts of the story that we do need to understand why understanding Abram's story is so important to us, especially in the context of the peace question.

#1. He is "called out" of his native land.

#2. He is to be the source of blessings for the whole world.

But today we are focusing on coming Remembrance Day and our own focus on Peace Sunday.

In a world that had collapsed into turmoil and conflict Abram was God's gift of not only the promise of a peace that is to come- but of how to live in peace.

So how is Abram a symbol of peace?

First, it was not a peaceful time. The world descends naturally and easily into conflict. In fact the setting of a part of Genesis we are going to look at follows an account of how Abram has rescued his nephew Lot from marauders. The rule of the day- as it is everywhere and over all time without a strong government- was that unless you and your friend's armies were stronger than those of your neighbours- they would come and help themselves to what you had. And so the neighbours of Abram and Lot had helped themselves to Lot's possessions. Abram had a stronger army and rescued Lot.

What follows next is our text today-

After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him . . . Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand."

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. Genesis 14:17-20

And so Abram meets one of the cryptic characters in the Bible. Who is the Melchizedek? In fact we know very little about him and much of what we know come from a part of the Bible written 1500 years later.

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means "king of righteousness"; then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace." Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever. Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Hebrews 7:1-4

Strange and mysterious pretty well sums up this encounter but for today I want to focus on his title "**king of Salem**" which means "**king of peace.**"

In a world of war- at a time of war Abram is brought to the altar of this particular priest- the "King of Peace."

It turns out that Salem is almost certainly the proto Jerusalem- long before the full city was built up during the reign of David.

Jerusalem may in fact, over the course of time be one of the most fought over cities in the history of humanity. It is both ironic and in some ways fitting that it is the city of Peace. It reflects both the reality of life and the craving of the human soul.

The reality is that the world is full of conflict and the pain associated with it- the reality is also that even in the name the word "peace" is imbedded. That pretty well tells the story- even of Remembrance Day when we wear the poppy- not only to remind ourselves of those who have died- but also why they died. They died so that we can live in peace and freedom.

There is no time, like a context of conflict that the craving for peace is the greatest.

So what did Abram do that reflected the glimmer of peace within his story? What was it in Abram's character and actions that make him a seminal character in the context of peace?

#1. He Understood God's Promise For A Better World

Unlike some of the Biblical characters we don't have much insight into Abram's mind, at the beginning of his story. We are told where he lived, who his relatives were and then what God told him, and his response.

Abram's first action was to obey God's call to move from his comfortable world on the basis of a promise. Except for the larger context we do need to recognize that the world that Abram was moving from was probably a pretty comfortable world. Every indication that I can think of tells me he and his clan were at the top of their social orders. They were the rich and prosperous of their societies. They were the people who have no need to shake things up- because life is pretty good.

And yet, when Abram hears God say to him "**Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you . . .**" [Genesis 12:1] he is ready to go- and he goes.

It is as the story of Abram unfolds that the depth of Abram's understanding of what he was doing comes to light. Abram leaves his native land and heads to the land of promise.

As I said, Abram's personal world was not in chaos. Every year millions of people are displaced and set out on a search for a land of peace. These desperate searches are the reflection of the

world we live in and those desperate searches are its natural consequence.

But Abram was remarkable because he was not driven by desperation. Even though the chaos of life did not affect him- and frankly he and his family were probably prosperous because they were the top dogs in that world- Abram was so convinced that God had something better that he was willing to uproot himself and go in search of that land that God would show him.

This search is at the heart of what it means to be a child of Abram- to be a follower of Jesus. When disaster strikes and we are driven from our safe places, we all are ready to reach out to a “better” way. But unfortunately for most people that is where it ends.

Years ago when we were in seminary I remember acquiring a friend who would come down to our apartment hot tub. Because I was going to be a pastor he decided he should tell me his spiritual journey. It was a journey of disaster after disaster. He had more metal plates in his body than the average robot. Each plate and scar on his body was the result of another accident seemingly always due to his reckless behavior. And it seemed that each one had a near death experience that involved him crying out to God and being rescued from certain death. But in each case- and even as he sat there in the hot tub with me- somehow he was unable to make good on the promises he had made to God. Unfortunately, he was just a little but extreme of something all of us understand only too well. When we need rescuing the beauty of God’s way is perfectly clear to us- but once the storm is past- life in the world, as we know it, is hard to leave.

Not for Abram. He knew that God had a better plan than what he saw around him- even at its best.

It is this knowledge/hope that marks out kingdom people today. In the NT the language that is used to describe God’s people is aliens and strangers.

Why was Abram a man of peace? Because the land that God has for his people is a peaceful land.

This leads to the 2nd feature of Abram-

#2. He Willingly Gave Up His Rights

Now we westerners live with a strange delusion- we think that when we go to strange lands that we still retain the rights we

have in our native land. It is the same arrogance that Roman citizens had in Jesus’ time. They considered themselves to be people of “super-rights”.

Of course when foreigners come to our country we are quick to point out what an illusion this is.

Abram knew his place as a stranger- he knew he did not have the rights of the land.

But Abram went beyond this to the ethic that Jesus would explain 2000 years later- it is the ethic of voluntarily giving up even those rights that we do have.

And how did Abram demonstrate this? He did it in a dispute that he had with his nephew Lot. Both Abram and Lot became wealthy and we are told that the land was not big enough for both. What happened next shows the character of Abram that foreshadows what Jesus would say about Kingdom people as a people of peace.

So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." Genesis 13:8-9

#1. Abram faced the conflict head on. Abram, first took the step of bringing up the issue [something that also marks what peacemakers must be willing to do]. Peacemakers are NOT people who avoid tough situations. This is not our main point today- but it is incredibly important. This does not define a peacemaker- but without this you cannot be a peacemaker. In philosophical language it is the necessary but not sufficient condition to be a peacemaker. Kingdom peacemakers are not willing to back down from dangerous or difficult situations.

#2. Abram gave up his rights. This completes the definition of a Kingdom peacemaker. Jesus nailed this principle in His most challenging command-

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not

**turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.
Matthew 5:38-42**

When it comes down to actually following Jesus' teaching- this is where things bog down on a regular basis- but make no mistake- our response to this command defines the depth of our commitment to actually follow Jesus.

For Abram, this was a very practical challenge. He was facing the kind of daily domestic challenges you and I live with- and that is where the challenge came.

Abram voluntarily gave up rights far beyond the call of duty. He let his nephew Lot choose the prime land and took what was left over for himself. This is where Abram identifies himself specifically as a peacemaker.

It does not take very deep insight to understand why giving up one's rights should lead to peace- after all what is the justification for any "just" war? It is a war fought in defense of our rights.

What do we celebrate on Remembrance Day? We honour those men and women who were willing to die so that we could live in freedom. This week our Care Group went to the meeting of the City of Nanaimo mayoral candidates and during the discussion we were reminded that our veterans died so that we could have rights.

So, if that is the case then those who are willing to give up their rights will certainly be the cause of far less wars than those who are willing to fight for them. The reasoning behind that is not complex.

How does this work in the real world? There are 2 parts to the answer to that question-

1. The Big Picture. This giving up of rights is important because it demonstrates that God's Kingdom of peace is not of this world. It will not be achieved through the means by which change is made in the normal course of human affairs. Jesus made this clear when He told the leaders of His day that if His kingdom were of this world- then His followers would take up arms to defend themselves and presumably eventually enforce the laws of the Kingdom.

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." John 18:36

Defending our rights means we miss the point of what the Kingdom of God means.

How this works out in the political arena is very complicated and Christians have struggled with it from the very beginning. For today I would suggest that if we don't struggle with it- we are probably overlooking either Scripture or the reality of the world we live in.

So today we are only going to say that question is complicated.

But it is far less complicated close to home.

2. The Little Picture. This is actually not a question about the affairs of the world- it is a question of the daily affairs of family life. Abram and Lot were involved in the kind of family dispute that we face every day. Abram could probably have insisted on and achieved his rights to the land of his choice without any major battle. His rights to pick first were self-evident.

You and I face that kind of question many times a week. What are our rights at work and in our families? Are we first of all willing to face the conflicts around those rights?

And secondly, having faced them and having come to a place where there is a clash between your rights and what someone else is demanding of you- as a Kingdom peacemaker- we must be willing in principle and in practice- be willing to lay those rights down.

That is where being a peacemaker actually demonstrates itself- in our homes.

Being a peacemaker has very practical implications in the Kingdom of God- it means being willing to give up our rights.

The mark of God's peacemakers is exactly that- it is the willingness to give up our natural rights and it- more than any other single act brings peace to a potential conflict.

No wonder Jesus says in the Beatitudes

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Matthew 5:9

Abram was a peacemaker and in the most practical possible way- showed us what it means in daily life.

But there is one more thing that Abram did that marked him off as a man who was God's prototype peacemaker-

#3. He Prayed For The Nations Around Him

It took place during a strange incident. As we have said- after the Great Flood and then Babel humanity continued its slide into depravity. Genesis records-

Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." Genesis 18:20-21

It turns out that on the way there the angels sent to discover the state of Sodom and Gomorrah had a conversation with Abraham before making their investigation. Abraham had a very bad feeling about what they would discover and asked this question-

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

And amazingly God responds-

The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." Genesis 18:23-26

And then Abraham begins his famous negotiation with God-

Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?"

"If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." Genesis 18:27-28

And he did not stop there but continued in this vein until God agreed that even if only ten righteous people were to be found in Sodom the city would not be destroyed.

It is an amazing story for a whole lot of reasons but today the main thing that I want us to note is the job Abraham had in his world was to pray for the people around him.

Abraham knew that the world was a mess. He also knew that there was very little in his power to make a big change in the state of

affairs- but Abraham knew that because he had chosen to serve God- he was in a position of privilege. And how did he use that? He prayed for those around him- specifically he prayed that they would be spared the judgment that was due him.

This is a very specific assignment given to God's people. Paul repeats it this way-

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:1-4

I still remember the sermon we had last year on Remembrance Sunday. It was a guest speaker who spoke about our duty as Kingdom people and his conclusion was- "Never say, well at least we can pray- prayer is the great assignment of God's people."

God's peacemakers- in the pattern of Abraham are commissioned to pray for all those around us- and on a day like today that commissioning is focused on governments and nations- again according to the direct command of the NT.

So today I want to end with a quotation from my favorite Ancient Church Father, Tertullian- who has a way of turning a phrase. He writes about prayer both in the context of the OT and of the NT in this way.

In the past prayer was able to bring down punishment, rout armies, withhold the blessing of rain. Now, however, the prayer of the just turns aside the whole anger of God, keeps vigil for its enemies, pleads for persecutors. Is it any wonder that it can call down water from heaven when it could obtain fire from heaven as well? Prayer is the one thing that can conquer God. Tertullian