

Cindy Voth  
Patriarchs and Matriarchs  
September 14, 2014  
Genesis 12-50

Purpose: To explain the history of the patriarchs and matriarchs as an avenue to challenge the congregation to respond to the call, promise, covenant, and activity of God in their own lives today.

I think if we are able to be honest with ourselves and with each other, we would confess that we all secretly wish that our families had it all together. Perhaps some of us think that ours already do have it all together. Or perhaps others of us are quite certain that our families do not have it all together. At all. Dysfunction knows no boundaries, and yet if you are like me, we assume that people of faith should somehow be exempt. At the very least we think when we open the holy word of God that the stories of those people will present us with hope that there is a possibility of holding it all together, of thriving under the call and covenant of God.

This morning we move to looking at the stories of the biblical ancestors – the stories of the well-known and usually well-loved matriarchs and the patriarchs. In these stories we continue in our salvation timeline of moving from the problem defined to the solution promised. Last week Pastor Neil walked us through the problem defined by discussing the stories of creation as well as the four fall narratives. In his sermon he talked about the role of sin in creating a divide between God and all of God's creation. Today we move to thinking about the solution that is promised and explained throughout the rest of the book of Genesis. The promised solution is woven throughout the lives of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, and Joseph and Asenath.

If you are participating in our Bible reading plan then this week you would have read many of the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs. I found it quite intriguing to sit down and read through the book of Genesis in one setting. For me it helped to see how this is a larger story of one family held together over four generations. I assume that many of us could name the

highlights of these stories as they are stories we have heard and received since we were quite young. However, now as adults as we sit with these stories we might be alarmed and even perplexed to read components of the larger story that we had never read before, never been taught before, or simply didn't remember. In the reading of the larger story of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants we might settle in with the book and assume that we are going to read about people who had great faith and moral values; a larger family system that has it all together. Instead however, we read of a larger family system with its own types of dysfunction and "skeletons" in the closet. Now, before we are too quick to pass judgment on poor Abraham and Sarah, I do think we should challenge ourselves to consider: how would our own family book read? What if your family would write down the key stories of your family for the past four generations? What would you be shocked or embarrassed to know? What stories would highlight your family's perseverance and faith?

Genesis chapters one through eleven share the beginning of the whole human family. And then moving to chapter twelve there is a marked shift as the focus turns to one family. However, we must be reminded that this shift has not narrowed the arena of God's concern.<sup>1</sup> In the rest of the book of Genesis, chapters twelve through fifty, we read the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, and Joseph and Asenath.

Before we dive into some of the overarching themes of these stories, I do want to be honest and at least name that there are some really ugly parts of this story. These are the parts that begin to address the level of dysfunction I alluded to earlier. I am fearful that these are the components of the story that never get verbally named during sermons, in Sunday School lessons, or around our dinner tables. I won't go into detail for all of the stories, but I do list them

here in case you would like to go back and refresh your memory of them. There is Sodom and Gomorrah and the extreme immorality and sexual perversion of that community. There are the repeated cases of conflict within the family community where we as the readers can ask ourselves “Will they make? Will they figure out how to get along?” There is Lot and his daughters, both in Lot offering them to the angry mob instead of the visitors, as well as the occasions of incest that follow. There are multiple accounts of deceitfulness and lying. Abraham and Isaac both lied by telling others with power that their wives were their sisters. Jacob and Rebekah joined cahoots to deceive Isaac and Esau. Then there are several accounts of abuse and mistreatment of maid servants, often associated with barrenness of one of the matriarchs. And we must not fail to name the ugliness of the raping and abuse of Dinah and then the murder of the men in the city, or the very complicated story of Judah and Tamar. **And yet**, in and through it all we read the constant themes of God’s calling and God’s covenant formed with this family. I think that this should provide hope to us all that even in the midst of our own families’ dysfunctions, and trust me your family is not exempt, God can and God will continue to call and invite us to join in the covenantal relationship.

I invite you to turn with me to Genesis chapter twelve where we first read of God’s calling and covenant with Abraham and Sarah. As we turn there, it is imperative that we remind ourselves of the significance and the meaning of these two components: calling and covenant. First being “Called, chosen or elected means “chosen for a mission,” (it does) not (mean) God’s favorite people. God chose Abraham, not because of any merit, but out of grace. Abraham, to his credit, who lived in the pagan environment .... responded to God’s call or choosing.”<sup>iii</sup> Furthermore, Abraham and Sarah’s “calling was not to exclude all the rest of the world’s people, but as a way to include them! (Their) mission was to begin the chosen covenant shalom

missional people of God through whom the entire world would become the people of God. It was not a genealogical waiting game. God chose and blessed them so that through them, God would bless every family on earth.”<sup>iii</sup> It is so important that we remember that being chosen means “chosen for a mission” and not that they are God’s favorite people. In addition, the calling put forth to this extended family is continually reiterated to remind them that they are to be a blessing and a way for blessing to come to all the people the earth.

Within this understanding of calling, we should also be reminded of the biblical understanding of nation. Retired Bible professor Marion Bontrager explains: “Besides chosen, a second critical misunderstood word in Genesis 12:1-3, is the word ‘nation.’ The word nation here means a “people” like in “Navaho Nation” not in a ‘nation state’”<sup>iv</sup> which is a different word in Hebrew. “The people of God were to be an open missional community of people, a theocracy with God as their king.”<sup>v</sup> Therefore, Marion highlights that if we were to “Misunderstand the words chosen to mean favorite and nation to be nation-state it (would then) skew how one reads the entire Bible, its story and church history.”<sup>vi</sup>

The final theme to understand is that of covenant and covenantal relationships. “The word covenant comes from the Hebrew word “carat” meaning to cut. Covenant means a solemn promise between two parties made binding by an oath, which may be either a verbal formula or symbolic action.”<sup>vii</sup> In addition, “A covenant established a relationship between two persons involving both privileges and responsibilities along with consequences of blessings and curses...In summary, **God initiated covenant** to which humans responded. Covenant is grounded in God’s mercy, love or choosing. God’s love and offer of covenant demands a response. That response involves privileges and responsibilities. Chosen, call, and covenant are integrally related.”<sup>viii</sup>

Okay, now let's look at the passage in Genesis chapter 12 where it all begins. Actually let's begin with looking at the end of chapter eleven. Chapter eleven ends with the genealogy of Abram's family. Specifically it ends with painting a pretty hopeless picture. The family is one without a future, without hope, without a solution. The genealogy leaves us with a barren wife, an incomplete journey, and the death of the father.<sup>ix</sup> "It is simply reported that this family (and with it the whole family of Gen. 1-11) has played out its future and has nowhere else to go. "Barrenness is the way of human history. It is an effective metaphor for hopelessness. There is no foreseeable future. There is no human power to invent a future."<sup>x</sup> If this family, the entire family of humanity, is to have a future then God must intervene and thus we receive the promised solution.

Reading now in chapter 12: "The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." I don't think that this type of invitation would have been readily accepted by most of us! We usually like to receive a few more details before we head out on a trip of a lifetime. At the very least I think that most of us would have demanded to at least know the destination! The Lord continues to express the promised solution, God's end of the covenantal relationship. Pay attention to who will be carrying out the work, the promised solution: "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." And we are told, "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him."

Here is Abram and Sarah living without a future, Abram married to a wife who is currently barren, and he is promised that God will make them into a great nation of people. I don't know about you, but I think I would want to invite God in for some tea and ask some

additional questions of God, and to take the opportunity to politely explain the situation to God. Perhaps God did not realize that he and his beloved wife are experiencing the beast of infertility, a heartache that is deep and pervasive. So perhaps God thought that becoming a nation of people might be relatively easy. I would have been happy to sit down with God and say “thank you God for this wonderful invitation, and this promise of hope and solution. However, have you thought about the realities before us? Do you actually understand the situation?” But as Walter Brueggemann points out, “The marvel of biblical faith is that barrenness is the arena of God’s life-giving action. Barrenness is no stranger to this new family of promise.”<sup>xi</sup> After Sarah the other matriarchs Rebekah (25:21) and Rachel (29:31) were also barren.

I would also highlight again that we read that this blessing is not just exhausted on Abraham, Sarah and their family. “Instead, this family will be the occasion of blessing for all the peoples of the earth... Be that as it may, God initiates a new future not only for Abraham and Sarah, who were homeless and barren, but for all peoples who are in whatever way living without blessing, if not under a curse.”<sup>xii</sup> **This promised solution is for all people.** There will be times when the people of Israel will forget that they are not God’s favorite ones, or the ones with whom only God’s blessing resides. Sadly the church of today also has moments when we fail to act like we too remember that we have been blessed to be a blessing to all the peoples of the world! This week I came across a song by Bryan Moyer Suderman entitled “I will bless you” which helps to articulate to us the spirit of this calling and covenant. I invite you to listen to a portion of it with me now.

(SLIDE while playing song)

So what about the other matriarchs and patriarchs? “After devoting a dozen chapters to Abraham, Genesis passes briefly over the career of Isaac, a relatively passive figure who is more notable for what is done to him – his youthful brush with sacrificial death and the deceptions

perpetrated on him in his old age – than for anything he initiates himself. A much stronger and more vivid character is that of Isaac’s wife Rebekah, who behaves with telling decisiveness... Rebekah at once manifests the hospitality that marks an admirable person. Then, recognizing a divinely presented opportunity, she courageously volunteers to accept an unknown bridegroom and cast her lot in a strange land. She later demonstrates a similar initiative in manipulating Isaac, child of the promise, to bless his (potentially) more worthy son, her favorite, Jacob.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Then the story moves to Jacob and Esau, and then to Jacob and Leah and then eventually Jacob and Rachel. Again the story is plagued with conflict and turmoil leaving us the readers wondering if the family line is going to survive. It appears that at times the family has forgotten the reality they are chosen by God for this mission to a blessing to the world. We find Jacob in Genesis chapter 28, running from his life for fear that Esau will try to kill him. He is in the middle of nowhere, in a place whose name is not known until the encounter. Here he is sleeping with only a stone for a pillow when he encounters God. In the encounter God rehearses with Jacob that he is part of a chosen people, and that God has made a covenant with them. In verse fifteen God expands the covenantal language to Jacob “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Suddenly this place without a name is named Bethel, meaning house of God as Jacob declares (verses 16-17) “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” Yes, even the esteemed patriarchs and matriarchs needed to be reminded that God was still calling them and inviting them into this covenantal relationship.

And finally the book of Genesis ends with the story of Joseph. His wife, Asenath is not as visible as the other matriarchs, and in fact if you were like me I had to do a little hunting to try

to recall what his wife's name even was! In the story of Joseph we are reminded time and time again of our role within the covenantal relationship to be faithful to God and to strive to be a blessing to others. Dear Joseph had a rough time of it with his problems. One would have thought that Jacob, his father, would have learned that there are pitfalls related to being the favorite of one of the parents. However, that appears to not be a lesson that Jacob had learned. In the stories of Joseph we continue see the providential hand and activity of God, offering protection, hope, and sustaining his life and his integrity even in the face of extreme dangers. Genesis ends with the death of Joseph, the fourth patriarch.

This morning I think it is right to pause and offer thanks and praise to God that so many, many years ago God intervened in God's creation and promised a solution. Not only that, but God did so by calling out a group of people and entering a covenantal relationship with them. Furthermore, the story does not end there as today in 2014 God too invites us to join in this covenantal relationship, to continue the story, and to continue to live out the commission to be a blessing to all people. I think that it is quite clear that the patriarchs and matriarchs, although generally well-loved by us, were in no way perfect. They had their own types of dysfunction and shortcomings. We too are not perfect, nor are our families. And yet, thanks be to God, we are invited to join the story and to continue to write chapters in the book of faith of the people of God living into and out of this pivotal covenantal relationship. We each must decide though how we have answered, and how we will continue to answer when we hear our names being called and as we receive the instructions to go and follow God to the land God will eventually show us. With God' grace and God's strength may we too fully enter the story of God's plan of redemption and hope for all people.

Amen.

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- <sup>i</sup> Eugene F. Roop, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press), 100.
- <sup>ii</sup> Marion Bontrager, *Heilsgeschichte Notebook*, 79.
- <sup>iii</sup> Marion Bontrager, *Heilsgeschichte Notebook*, 79.
- <sup>iv</sup> Marion Bontrager, *Heilsgeschichte Notebook*, 79.
- <sup>v</sup> Marion Bontrager, *Heilsgeschichte Notebook*, 79.
- <sup>vi</sup> Marion Bontrager, *Heilsgeschichte Notebook*, 79.
- <sup>vii</sup> Marion Bontrager, *Heilsgeschichte Notebook*, 80.
- <sup>viii</sup> Marion Bontrager, *Heilsgeschichte Notebook*, 80.
- <sup>ix</sup> Roop, *Genesis*, 98.
- <sup>x</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press), 116.
- <sup>xi</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 116.
- <sup>xii</sup> Roop, *Genesis*, 98-99.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Stephen Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company), 112.