

Staking Our Life

Since our time with Noah, the ark, and the olive leaf last week, the story of God and humanity has continued, culminating in the building of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, when humanity determines to build a name for themselves by erecting a tower that will touch the heavens. God is not pleased with their ambition and arrogance, so God topples the tower, scatters the people, and confuses their language. At the end of chapter 11 we are given a lengthy genealogy which ends with the family of Terah, the father of Abram. In the midst of the list of names, we are told that Abram is married to Sarai, who is barren. [Read Genesis 12:1-9]

I am not an experienced camper. Glamping, with all of the luxuries of a fancy hotel I could maybe do, but regular real-tent camping is not my natural habitat. We asked for and received a tent as a wedding present. Dave and his friends have used it. I have never slept in it. In fact, I have slept in a tent just a handful of times, one of which was a week-long Outdoor Education trip in seventh grade. I'm still amazed that the tent we slept in managed to stay up for one night, let alone three. I also slept in a tent outside Boston the night before a 3-Day, 60 mile breast cancer walk. It rained so much and so hard that I and all of my things were floating when they woke us up early to get us walking. No one was really sleeping anyway. In both cases, I give thanks that my tent was well-staked, that despite my ineptitude and inexperience somehow the tent held firm, giving me cover from the darkness and from the elements, at least from above. In my few experiences with tents, I have learned that it is important that the stakes are driven deep and well into firm soil so that the tent can withstand wind and rain and whatever might come in the night, but even the most well-driven stake is not meant to be permanent. Eventually stakes must be pulled up, so that the tent can be moved. Tents are made to be moved, intended to be temporary, not fixed for any length of time.

This morning we meet Abram and Sarai, who will soon be named Abraham and Sarah. As I mentioned before they are only identified as relatives of Terah, descendants of Noah through his son, Shem. They are quite unremarkable Mesopotamians by all accounts. Sarai's one distinctive trait is that she is barren, the first woman named—and shamed—in this way in the Old Testament. Then out of the blue, God tells Abram to pack up his

family and go. God provides no Triptik from AAA, no GPS app on a smart phone, no cartoon-like treasure map where X marks the spot. God simply tells Abram to go to a land to be named later. And Abram goes. The Hebrew word translated here as “journey” literally means pulling up tent stakes.¹ This is not a new thing for Abram and Sarai. Their life, their experience is a nomadic one; they know how to pound in and pull up tent stakes, but this time it is different. God calls them to pull up stakes and walk away from all that has given them a sense of belonging, a sense of security, a sense of home. And they go. With only God’s promise that God will make of them a great nation and that others will find a blessing in them.

Along the way, Abram builds altars, small tangible reminders of the God on whom he is staking his life and that of his family, small acts of worship of this God who promises great things through old Abe and Sarah. Abram carves out sacred spaces along the long journey to pause and give thanks. Long before I heard a call to ministry and even when I felt like God and I were on the outs, I loved walking into sacred spaces like churches and pausing there. I still do. I love the startling quiet in the midst of a busy city, the silent but stubborn flames of candles, and the ways the backs of the pews are worn from year after year of hands pressed on them where people have leaned to stand or kneel. I notice the scratches on the floor from feet that have walked in to celebrate weddings and baptisms and others that have shuffled in to say goodbye to a loved one or to cry out to God in prayer for a sick friend or a broken relationship. These, too, are altars along the way, sacred spaces carved out for worship and prayer, tangible reminders erected by others who have staked their claim on this God.

Abraham’s story is the first chapter in Ancient Israel’s family story. In Abraham, Israel understands its beginnings as a small nation, an underdog, an outlier. This people will stake their lives on this one God, the very god who now ties himself to them through this one Mesopotamian, this one guy and his family. We find our beginnings here, too, of course. Abraham and Sarah are our ancestors, as well. That said, their example is not always one we should strive to follow. Abraham will pass his wife off as his sister. Sarah will insist on Abraham’s having a child with her maidservant, Hagar and then demand that he send Hagar and her child away. Not exactly patterns we should strive to follow. That said, they still have something to teach us.

¹ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996) 51.

One scholar points out that “where Abram belongs is not where he is.”² In order to be the blessing God is calling Abram to be, he has to let go of what he knows. He has to relinquish the things he has clung to for his security. He has to leave behind the status and the safety net of his father’s house and his father’s household. And once he begins the journey, he still cannot cling to one camp site or one altar. Yes, he is given opportunities to pause along the way, but God’s call to him is forward, always forward, not idolizing what he has left behind, but trusting the future that lies ahead. God calls him to trust the promise, to trust the future God is building through him, to trust that he will indeed be blessed, that he will be a blessing, that others will find a blessing in him, one unassuming, unspectacular Mesopotamian with a wife who has yet to bear a single child.

We are not nomads, and yet, we too are hoping to be faithful to the same God who calls Abram and Sarai. Fifty years ago this weekend, the doors of this sanctuary opened for the first time. Here in this place a faithful group of men and women and children carved out a sacred space for worship of the same God who made promises to Abram and Sarai. For over half a century this holy place has pointed to God’s faithfulness as people have traveled the journey God has called them to take. For several generations, people from all over have found a place to rest here as they have stopped in to hear the good news of Jesus Christ and pray and sing and cry and laugh. From here women and men have gone on to serve in mission fields pounding nails and putting up drywall in eastern North Carolina, New Orleans, New Jersey, West Virginia, and beyond. From here people have gone on to share the gospel with college students and brothers and sisters in Honduras and South Sudan. It is here where countless ministries have taken flight serving prisoners, caring for homeless families, supporting students in need, and helping refugees find a forever home. I do not believe God is calling us to pull up our tent stakes in a literal sense, but I do think God is calling us beyond the place where we find ourselves now. We are always being called forward in faith, beyond the bounds of our tent, outside the lines of family, tribe, or clan. God calls us—and has always called us—to stake our future not on how well or how deeply we plant or tend to our own tent stakes. The God of Abram and Sarai is always calling us to step out, to understand that our greatness, our blessedness is not found in anything we create or build but in the God who continues to choose to build and bring blessing not in spite of us but through us and with us. One scholar refers to God’s

² Craig Koester, http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1053

calling of Abram and Sarai as a “daring plan to spread blessing throughout the world beginning at one, tiny specific human starting point.”³ Perhaps God’s most daring act of all is in continuing to work blessing through specific human beings like you and me, through human communities like this one tucked in the corner of Allendale, hugging I-83. It’s not about the tent or the tent stakes, but about those who gather and are sent out to be a blessing. It’s not because we are great, but because God is.

A few chapters down the road, the excitement wears off and Abram begins to wonder aloud if God’s promise can be true. When all seems lost, when lovingly built altars have disappeared in the rearview mirror, when Abram’s hands are raw from pounding and plucking up tent stakes more times than he is able to count, and when Sarai is still not a mother, God calls him out of the tent: “Look up at the sky and count the stars if you think you can count them...This is how many children you will have.”⁴ Inside that tent, Abram loses sight of who God is and what God has promised and still promises to do. He has to step outside the tent to be reminded. I’m guessing the same can be true for us. When we are fearful about the future or grieving what is no more, it is tempting to hole up in the tent, but it might just be time to step outside the tent and look up and try to count the stars instead. Because God is calling even now, and God’s promise is still as true today as it was all those years ago. This God, the creator of the stars, is still the daring one who claims us and names us. This God still longs to build a people who stake our life not on our name or our hometown or our tent-staking or altar-building talents, but on God. This God still wants to build a people to bless every nation in the world.

Will we go?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ Towner, Sibley. *Genesis: Westminster Bible Companion*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 134.

⁴ Genesis 15: 5, Common English Bible