

Maastricht 17 March 2019

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

'Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,
your very great reward.'

But Abram said, 'Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.'

Then the word of the Lord came to him: 'This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.' He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

He also said to him, 'I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.'

But Abram said, 'Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?'

So the Lord said to him, 'Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.'

Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. 11 Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates

Sermon- Being an International Church

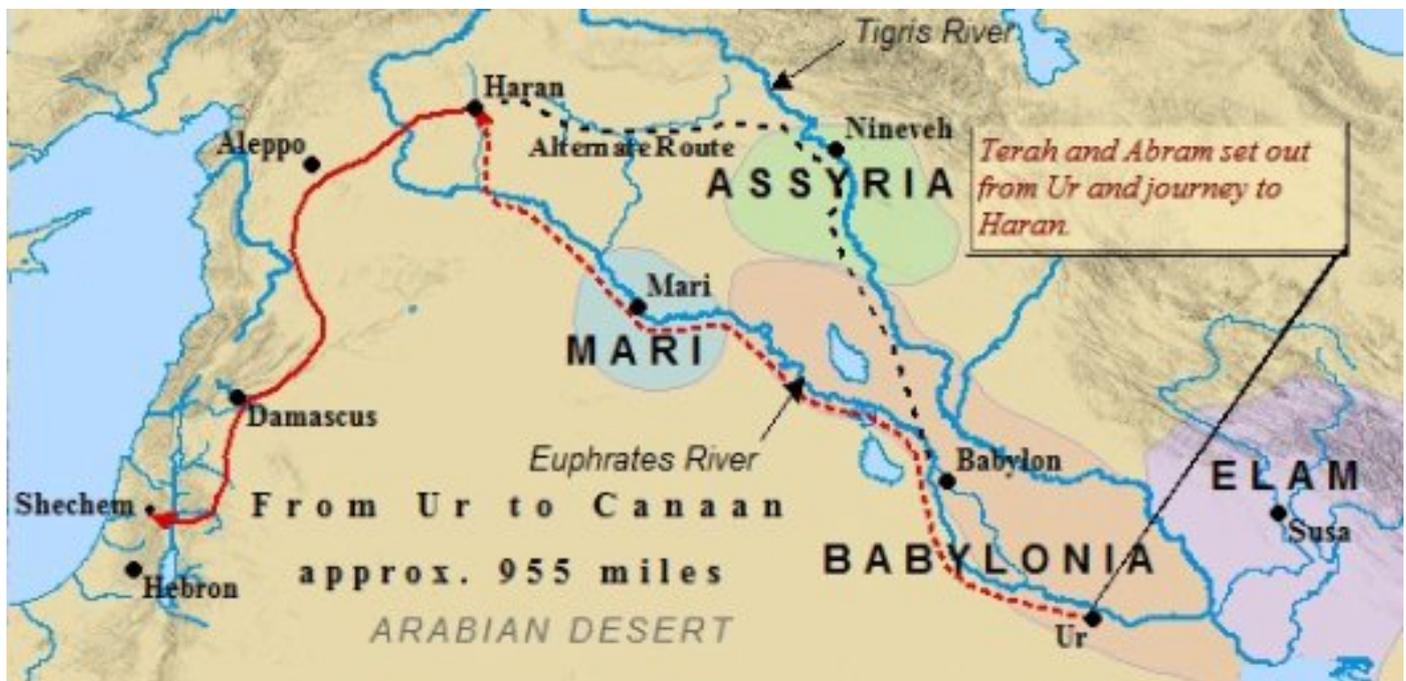
Today after the service we'll be gathering for our Annual General Meeting – a chance for everyone who worships together here to consider the overall life of All Saints Maastricht International Church. The reading today about Abram (or Abraham as he later becomes) I think has something to say to us about being an International church so I'm going to focus on Abram and his life today.

The story of Abram starts back in Genesis chapter 11. Abram was a migrant. He was someone who had left the life he knew to enter another life in another place. As members of an English speaking church in the Netherlands I expect all of us have at some stage been migrants too. Either you or your spouse have come here from somewhere else or you have lived somewhere else and perhaps grown accustomed to worship in English there before returning to the Netherlands.

I would like to walk through the account of Abram's call as we find it in Genesis and look at how God worked there because it has much to teach us. The way God dealt with Abraham may be similar to the way he deals with us as relocated people and as an international church.

Today's reading from Genesis told about God's promises to Abram of a new land and of descendants. But let's start with the context first. The first 11 chapters of Genesis describe how God created a good universe, how humankind sinned and fell from their privileged place before God and then how they went downhill from there. The call of Abram begins the story of God's redeeming, saving work as one man learns to walk the way of faith with and for God.

Abram started out from Ur of the Chaldeans with his Father and other family to move to Haran on the way to Canaan for economic reasons. We are talking about a time around 2000 BC. Some of the Egyptian Pyramids were already 600 years old and Abram lived at the southern end of an area that spawned several civilizations known as the Fertile Crescent. The reason for both the fertility and the rise of so many civilizations in this region is easy to see on the map here. Where there is water there is life and the mighty rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates brought water and sediment into the desert. Agriculture and cities could flourish. Near where these rivers flowed into the sea we know as the Persian Gulf was the city of Ur.



The best information we have about Ur of the Chaldees came to light through archeological discoveries from 1854 onwards. It was prosperous trade city with two ports and numerous canals. It was devoted to the cult of the moon. Today that spot falls inside the nation of Iraq about 160 km north-west of the Kuwait border. The Ur site is further inland than it was four thousand years ago because of the rivers pushing out the coastline into the gulf.

Terah, Abram's father, decided to relocate most of his family across the fertile crescent with intentions to re-settle in Canaan. Instead of traveling due west across the desert Terah took the route of following the fertile crescent. For some unknown reason, after traveling 800km Terah and those with him stopped at a place named Haran. Terah settled his family here and stayed the rest of his life.

If I put this in contemporary terms. Terah was likely an economic migrant. He had relocated some of his family business from Ur and taken some of his family with him. He had taken his eldest son, Abram and his fatherless grandson, Lot and his daughter-in-law Sarai. In Haran Abram heard God speak to him. Abram heard a clear instruction and a number of promises. The instruction was really simple. Genesis 12 v 1. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

Firstly Abram is being told to leave. Leave the land he considered his home. Leave his wider family network and leave his Father's house. (His father Terah is still alive in Haran). Secondly Abram is told to go to a place God will show him. And then in today's reading we hear that having reached that place he is told that it will belong to him and his descendants – even though he and Sarai don't even have their longed-for son yet and seem too old now for that to happen.

What is God doing with Abram?

God is taking Abram on a journey so that he can work with him.

There is a very clear principle that applies to spiritual growth, that is, the growth of one's character and growth as a human being in the image of God. The principle is that this sort of growth involves pain. St Paul set it out this way in his letter to the Romans

Romans. 5:3b ... we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us.

One simple way to get a person growing spiritually is to take them out of their comfort zone and make them depend on God as their only option. Put a man or woman of faith into a difficult situation and they will grow in prayer, they will seek God with a hunger, they will press into the things of God as if their life depends on it. Pain, or at least discomfort, helps that to happen.

When God called Abram he needed a mature man of faith for his purposes. He needed someone who could be faithful beyond what was reasonable for a purpose beyond comprehension. So the first part of God's call was for Abram to leave what and who he knew to go to places and among people he did not know. As we too know:

- Not knowing things you need to know is uncomfortable.
- Being a small person among strangers is not always comfortable.
- Being a foreigner somewhere is not always comfortable.
- Not being able to speak a local language well can be uncomfortable
- Being without wider family can at times be uncomfortable
- To be constantly unknown and anonymous can be a loss!

This is what the city-boy from Ur and latterly Haran was called to, both he and his wife. The one time economic migrant was called to become a wanderer, not knowing where he was going or what he was really all about. He was no longer a man with a plan but he became a sojourner living around others in faith and hope that God would deliver on his promise to establish him as a Father. Even though he was 75 when he was called! Never place yourself beyond God's purposes.

And then God makes a covenant - unconditional promises - to Abraham that he will not only possess the land he has come to but that his descendants will number beyond count. God's only ask of Abram is that he believes and trusts in God and his promises. And God himself guarantees the promises spectacularly with his fire on Abram's obedient sacrifice.

Each one of us has moved in some way, with all that familiar discomfort. And we may have even thought that it was our idea to live or study or work somewhere else or perhaps the idea of an employer or spouse first of all. I have seen and heard the trials in people's lives as they struggle to come to terms with the loss of what they left behind. And we each experience the pain of what happens in our home countries, or where we have in the past been at home, as well as the difficulties of settling into a new place.

Francis and I went through a two year learning curve of discomfort before we worked out how to live here. We know the standard experiences like going to a supermarket and simply not being able to find what you need. Do that several times and you come home demoralized.

And each of us has come to a church that may have some things familiar to us and probably some things quite unfamiliar. The Anglican church accommodates a wide span of worship practice and core doctrine. But not all of it will be what we grew up with even if we were Anglican and many of us have come from other denominations. As an International church we do not aim to be 'one size fits all' with everything the same from Sunday to Sunday.

I believe that tension between familiar and the unfamiliar stimulates growth.

It takes people deeper in ways that staying where you started would not.

I liken this to what God did with Abraham and Sarah. He called them to leave their country, their people and their family to enter a promised land. This was a stretch. Jesus did it with his first disciples who left their boats, employees and their Father to follow Jesus. Why does God do that? Because it's in the travelling and being off balance that we learn life's big lessons. That's where God can shape us. Having it the way we want it all the time is no recipe for stimulus and spiritual growth. It's not the Jesus way.

So the way we do church is diverse and there is benefit to that.

I have had the privilege of seeing many people come to International churches in some way out of their comfort zone and in that need turn to God in a way that they may never have done while sitting comfortably at home. God uses or allows discomfort for the purpose of speaking to us what we might otherwise never hear. Leaving what you know for what you do not know is a great way

to step into the sort of discomfort God uses. That is an Abrahamic dynamic I see at work in this community of so many displaced people who know what it is to be out of one's comfort zone.

In this context where our cultural and church backgrounds are so diverse we not only seek to reflect that somewhat in our range of music and service styles as much as we are capable but also try to centre our life on what is common to us all, the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to be a church that is consciously based and referenced to Jesus as we meet him in the Gospels and by His Spirit.

Another Abrahamic dynamic that applies to us is that the spiritual growth God sets up for us is so much bigger than ourselves. God called Abram and Sarai away from their existing business plan to become vulnerable wanderers not to simply develop them for their own sakes but because he was launching the salvation of the world through them. The redemption of humanity as the family of God that would culminate in Jesus Christ with consequences for all humanity would begin with them, their marriage and their family.

If God has taken you out of your comfort zone and begun to grow your spirit and character it is not just for your benefit or about you. God's purposes are worked through us but they are not limited to us. Abraham was told that at the very beginning. You are to leave what you know so that all humanity may be blessed through you. It's not a plan I could ever understand but that is how God is pleased to work.

What that means for us here is that to be like Abram our father in faith we need to be open to God's bigger purpose being worked out through us. That has both individual and corporate requirements.

God has you and I here for a purpose beyond what you and I may be working through now. Whatever challenges you are experiencing now through the discomfort of dislocation, God would use that to grow you for his purposes and our future assignments. That is something to hold dear as discomfort leads you to extra prayer and devotion. "God has me here for a purpose."

There is also a corporate implication. This church and what we do as All Saints Maastricht International Church is not simply for us. Let me put it this way, I do not believe that All Saints is meant to be a sort of industrial chaplaincy only serving the needs of English speakers wanting a church in Maastricht. That is simply too small and too immediate. I believe God has us here for purposes beyond what we can currently imagine. God is about redeeming the world and sharing eternity with us. That is why he sent his son.

The numbers of people who come and go in an International setting like ours provide some opportunity for us here. We need to gladly receive and welcome all who come to us and develop a willingness to reach out and give people space in our lives as well as then letting them go without us as they move on. It can be an experience of repeated loss and grief. But we also need to reach out and invite those we come across in our daily lives into the life we share here and into life with Jesus. Some of us have just heard a speaker at an event the Anglican church in our wider area organized recently on how to do that inviting. I hope that will be something we can talk about at our AGM and make a council project over the next year.

Conclusion:

I want to encourage us all to take on the attitude of Abraham. Recognise that every inconvenience and discomfort caused by dislocation is an opportunity to seek more of God so that God's bigger purposes can be worked out through us. The dislocation and the discomfort that may bring are not something to avoid or complain about. They are opportunities to pray Lord, grow me for your purposes. Open my eyes to see how you are at work now and what you are drawing me to.