

Here's an impossible question for you to ponder. It is the type of question that has no single correct answer, the type of question that people can debate for years and never come to a consensus. The question is, "What is the most important passage in the Bible?"

Possible contenders for this distinction include

- the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus – after all, there would be no Christian church, no gospel good news without the cross and resurrection
- the Ten Commandments, which form the basis for society's legal system
- when Jesus is asked "what is the greatest commandment?" and he replies that there are two that are two sides of the same coin – love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself

Those are all good responses, and you can add many other passages to the list, but I would like to nominate as "most important Bible passage" one that might surprise you. I nominate the first three verses of Genesis 12, the covenant with Abraham. Listen to it again...

*Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of 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 the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

The reason I assert that this is the most important passage in the Bible is that I see these promises as the theme that ties the entire Bible together. One cannot understand the stories of Moses & the Exodus, King David, the Babylonian Exile, Jesus' ministry, and the spread of the Christian church without understanding how they are rooted in this three-fold promise to Abraham of land, descendants, and blessing. You might say that the covenant with Abraham is the lens through which we look to interpret all the Biblical story that follows, right through Revelation, the last book of the Bible.

The editors who compiled ancient stories into the opening chapters of Genesis – the stories of creation, Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, Noah & the Flood, and the Tower of Babel – portray humankind as straying farther and farther from God's original purpose for humans, which is to live in harmony with God, creation, and each other. It is perhaps not accidental that when Abram and his wife Sarai are introduced at the end of chapter 11 (and from here on I'm just going to refer to them as Abraham and Sarah, name changes that come a little later in the story), the only information given about either of them is that Sarah is barren. Because she is unable to have children, she and Abraham have no future. They have no hope. They bring nothing to the table. So we can interpret the story of Abraham and Sarah as God hitting the reset button on creation. Once again, God is going to go about bringing life out of chaos where there is no life. The story that follows is going to be a story that originates with God and is totally dependent on God's activity.

But why Abraham and Sarah? Why does God choose to work through them rather than someone else? Are they smarter, more virtuous, wealthier, or more faithful than other options God had available? The story doesn't say. Actually, as we read the rest of the book of Genesis, which contains the stories of Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons of Jacob, these first couple of generations of Abraham's descendants are about the most dysfunctional family you can imagine. It is obvious that Abraham's family is not chosen because they are stellar characters.

That helps us understand that the concept of being "chosen by God" is never about being "chosen because..." – because the person is smarter, more faithful, more virtuous, etc. Being "chosen by God" is always about being "chosen for..." – being chosen for a special purpose, a special responsibility.

Consequently, being "chosen by God" does not convey a special status for an individual or group. To say that God chose Abraham and Sarah and their descendants does not mean that God loves them more than others. It simply means that God has decided to work out his purposes for all humankind using this one family as a starting point. We as Christians see God's blessing of all nations through Abraham being fulfilled in Jesus, a descendant of Abraham. It is Jesus, a son of Abraham, who invites all people to experience the kingdom of God in their daily lives, a life characterized by love, forgiveness, and compassion for all people.

The promises made to Abraham and his descendants were very important to the apostle Paul. In his letter to the Romans, (Romans 4) Paul asserts that the true descendants of Abraham are not those who are related to Abraham by birth, but those who follow Abraham's example of placing his trust in God – hearing the promise, trusting the promise, and stepping out in faith. For that reason, Paul understands that the promise made to Abraham, that God will bless all nations through his descendants, continues to be carried out by the church.

This is why we sometimes refer to the church as being God's elect, God's chosen people. When we say that the church is "God's chosen people", we must be careful not to delude ourselves into thinking this means Christians have a special status or that God loves the chosen ones more than others. Again, being "God's chosen" is first and foremost a responsibility we bear. Jesus lays this responsibility out for us in our Gospel reading. We often call this the Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations..." As disciples of Jesus, we are chosen, we have the responsibility, to share Christ with others.

It is important to note that Abraham personally never saw the fulfillment of any of these promises. He did move to the land of Canaan, but the people who were already living there (the Canaanites) did not vacate the premises and he never got title to the land, except for the cave he purchased at Hebron as a burial plot for his wife, Sarah. He did end up having a family – we best know of Isaac, the son Sarah bore to him, but he also was father to Ishmael by Sarah's servant, Hagar, and after Sarah's death he took another wife, Keturah, and had six more sons. Eight sons altogether – a good-sized family, but Abraham never saw the realization of the promise that his descendants would become a great nation. Nor did he see how the whole world would be blessed through his family.

Abraham never saw the fulfillment of these promises, but when the Lord God said, "Go", Abraham went. He stepped out in faith on a journey to a new land, not knowing what might lie ahead, taking with him nothing but God's promise.

That is a good description of the Christian lifestyle as well, both in our individual lives and in our life together as a congregation. We step out in faith on a journey to a new future, not knowing what might lie ahead, taking with us nothing but God's promise.

One way this congregation has stepped out in trust is by expanding this building. Ten years ago when we were discerning whether or not to go \$3 million in debt to triple the size of the building, we did so by recognizing the building is nothing but a means to an end – and the end, the goal, is to respond to Jesus' great commission – "Go and make disciples". The people for whom we expanded this building are not just you and me, but folks you and I have never met and some we never will meet. Like Abraham, we stepped out in faith knowing full well that we will never see the fulfillment of our actions.

This isn't such a profound insight, but it is something that really struck me when I traveled in Europe this summer. I visited Gothic cathedrals in Prague and Edinburgh that have not only been the home of a worshipping community for hundreds of years, but the buildings actually took hundreds of years to build. I marveled at communities who had such vision for future generations that they undertook building programs so ambitious that the architect that drew the plans and the workers who began the project knew that they would not live to see the project completed. Those Christian communities did not erect those worship spaces for themselves. They gave of time and resources so that their children and grandchildren and thousands of people in future generations they would never meet would have a facility where they could come to faith in Jesus Christ and have that faith nurtured by a worshipping community.

This reminds me that when we give our offerings and they are used to make the mortgage payment on our versatile and lovely building, we do so not only to provide a building for ourselves, but to provide space for people we have not yet met. One way we do this was highlighted in an article in the *Plymouth Sun Sailor* this past week (<http://sailor.mnsun.com/2014/09/14/a-growing-resource/>) The article describes the counseling services available to the community through the Family Resource Center here at St. Barnabas that we started last year. Because of your gifts to our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Offering, we were able to finish the lower level, making a room available on the main level that could serve as a counseling office. Cindy Lindberg, Nancy Carpenter, and Ray Davey are able to provide excellent counseling services at sliding scale rates for people with no insurance because we do not charge them for the use of the office. In the first year, over 100 people have come for counseling (the vast majority not members of the congregation), and Cindy is now averaging about 14 clients per week. This is a tangible way in which our offerings are a way we pass on the blessings we have received from God to others.

So like Abraham, we respond to the call we have received, our call given to us in baptism -- to bear the name of Christ -- and we step out in faith, not knowing where the journey will take us nor what we will experience along the way, but knowing that God will be present with us, just as God was present with Abraham. God blessed Abraham to be a blessing to others. That promise continues to be worked out through you and me, for God has blessed us to be a blessing to others. Amen