

## *Can You Hear Me Now?*

### *“Abraham’s Call”*

#### Genesis 12:1-9

Today, we are starting a new sermon series called, “*Can You Hear Me Now?*” You may recognize that the title is borrowed from a popular commercial which first aired on TV in 2002 and lasted for 9 years. In the long-running set of commercials, Verizon Wireless boasts that it is the nation’s largest, most reliable wireless network. The spokesman, played by actor Paul Marcarelli, says the catchphrase, “*Can you hear me now?*,” “*Good!*,” while testing the network quality of his phone call in different places, from country roads to city streets, both indoors and outdoors.

Like the test man in the Verizon Wireless commercial, God calls God’s people in different places and at various times. We are asked the simple question, “*Can you hear me now?*” In the Bible, there are many accounts of God’s calling on the lives of individuals, and through this sermon series, we will read and reflect together on four such stories from the Old Testament. We will see how God’s call came to them at different stages in their lives, and we will discover the different ways they responded to it.

The first story is God’s call to Abraham. Abraham is one of the most important figures in three of the most influential religions of the world: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. If you grew up in the church, you know who he is. He is not called just Abraham, but Father Abraham because he is considered to be the progenitor of our faith. Most of you probably remember this song from Sunday school:

Verse 1:

*Father Abraham had many sons.  
Many sons had Father Abraham  
I am one of them, and so are you  
So let’s all praise the Lord.  
Right arm!*

Verse 2:

*Father Abraham had many sons.  
Many sons had Father Abraham.  
I am one of them, and so are you.  
So, let’s all praise the Lord.  
Right arm! Left arm*

I wish we had more time to keep going with the song, clapping our hands, thumping our feet, nodding our heads, turning around, jumping up and down, and saying “Amen!”

How did Abraham become father of us all? The answer to this question is found in today’s scripture reading from the 12th chapter of the book of Genesis. The story of God’s call to Abraham and Abraham’s response to God’s call serves as the bridge between the primeval history, which covers the first 11 chapters of Genesis, and the stories of Israel’s earliest ancestors, which takes up the rest of the book.

This transitional story begins with God speaking. Let’s hear the words spoken to Abraham once again from the NIV translation:

*Go from your country, your people, and your father’s household 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.*

This is a fascinating story of God's call, especially when we do some digging into Abraham's background. In the Bible, there is almost nothing that is revealed about Abraham other than his genealogy, which we find in the previous chapter. There is no mention of what he looked like, how smart he was or what his beliefs were.

However, immediately following God's call to Abraham, there is a story that reveals to us something about his morality. Abraham and Sarah find themselves having to move to Egypt, forced to relocate there to escape a severe famine. As a foreigner, Abraham was afraid that the Egyptians might kill him and take his wife Sarah because she was so beautiful. So, he comes up with a plan. He says to Sarah, "Do me a favor: tell them you're my sister. Because of you, they'll welcome *me* and let *me* live." (Genesis 12:13, The Message)

Abraham's scheme works! Sarah's beauty is noticed by the officials of Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler, and she is taken into his palace. Instead of being put to death, Abraham is lavished with all sorts of gifts. The deception continues until God intervenes, and the truth about Abraham and Sarah's relation is uncovered.

Apparently, Abraham was not the most ethical person of his time. His behavior does not serve as a good model of morality for others to follow. Actually, it is Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler, who demonstrates higher moral character than Abraham in this story. When he discovers that Abraham and Sarah were a married couple, he simply lets them go without any punishment. In fact, he even allows Abraham to take all the gifts he had given to him.

It's interesting, isn't it? As the episode in Egypt clearly reveals, God's call and favor on Abraham's life was not because he was some morally upright human being. He did not come from a great, noble family. He was not a born leader. From outward appearances, there was nothing special or different about Abraham. He was just an ordinary person, living an ordinary life, doing ordinary work. He was not more spiritual than others. He was not even searching for God. Actually, we read in Joshua 24:2 that Abraham's father was a pagan and worshipped idols. So, it is likely that he did not even know to search for the God whose name was Yahweh.

Yet, this is the type of person whom God called: an ordinary, self-serving individual. Making it abundantly clear to us that it is God who makes Abraham special and extraordinary. There is no way to rationally explain God's choice to make Abraham's name great. He is not the person you or I might have envisioned to carry out God's great mission. Truly, as it is written in the book of Isaiah, God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and neither are our ways God's ways. God's ways are higher than our ways and God's thoughts higher than our thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

If we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, we discover something very important about God's action of choosing and calling Abraham. And it is that Abraham's past had nothing to do with his future. God did not weigh Abraham's family background and measure his list of personal accomplishments or failures to make a decision about his future.

Can you hear the Good News? Our future is not determined by our past! God is making things new all the time - both in history and in the lives of individuals. In Isaiah 43:19, God says in the Message translation, "Be alert, be present. I am about to do something brand-new. It's bursting out! Don't you see it?" And, right before these words, God says in verse 18: "Forget about what's happened; Don't keep going over old history."

Brothers and Sisters, God is doing something new in our lives. God is doing something new and great in the life of our church. Can you see it? In order to see the newness of creation unfolding before us, we must leave the past behind. Stop going over old history! Whether good or bad, our past becomes a stumbling block if it prevents us from

living in the present and beholding the work of God ongoing in the here and now. If this is the case with you, if the past is keeping you in captivity, make a commitment to stop talking about it. In fact, commit to stopping to even think about it. May it be our prayer to God: Lord, please loosen the bondage of our past so that we may see the new thing you are already doing in our midst!

There is one more important thing I would like to draw your attention to in Abraham's call story. Notice that God did not ask Abraham to change his occupation. Like many other people in his hometown, Abraham was a herdsman. He raised cattle, sheep and goats for all his life, even after he relocated to Canaan in obedience to God's call. Actually, in biblical times, children inherited their parents' occupations. The children of farmers became farmers. The children of fishermen became fishermen. The sons of priests became priests. People called Jesus the carpenter (Mark 6:3) because his father Joseph was a carpenter.

When we start to talk about God's calling on our lives, we tend to think about what vocation God might be calling us to. It is true that for some people, they are led towards a change in their careers as they respond to God's call. Some may even be called to go to the seminary and become ordained ministers, as I was. But, as we see with Abraham, and with other call stories in the Bible, God's calling on our lives concerns more than just our line of work.

Now, let's examine how Abraham responded to God's call. Verse 4 of Genesis Chapter 12 says, "So Abraham went as the Lord had told him." He and his wife Sarah were asked to pack up everything they had and leave their hometown. In order to enter into the new future God was preparing for him and his family, Abraham had to leave the comforts of his familiar past behind.

Some of us who have experienced moving far away from our hometowns and even our home countries can understand how Abraham must have felt. Moving is not easy, even when it guarantees you a better home, a better job and a better life. It involves the strenuous work of packing and unpacking, cleaning, and the chores of updating your personal information and changing service providers. It means adjusting yourself to new customs and cultures and environments, building relationships with new people, and learning new things. While going through all these changes, you miss the people and things you left behind.

So, imagine Abraham's situation. His was not a typical move. He was settled down with his wife and extended family in a new land already. Relocating to another country at this stage of his life was not in his plans before God came calling. And even after he heard God's command to leave his old life behind, he did not know where he was going. God said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." So, he had to make a blind leap of faith, trusting that God would guide his way and eventually lead him to his final destination. This would be foolish life decision for a young man let alone a man of Abraham's age. Yet, he moved as God instructed him to move.

Ultimately, the place God showed him turned out to be the land of Canaan. This was the place Abraham's father had originally intended to move his family to when they left their homeland of Ur. There, in a new and foreign place, surrounded by strangers, Abraham built an altar for the Lord. As he continued his journey farther south, he built an altar wherever he pitched a tent, openly displaying his faith in God. And, he listened for God's voice to lead him.

It was whenever he and his wife, Sarah stopped listening to God and tried to take charge of their lives that things spiraled out of control. Abraham almost lost his wife trying to save his own life. Sarah created division and conflict

within her family when trying to take God's promise of offspring into her own hands. And Abraham almost lost his much prized and awaited son, Isaac, trying to please God in his own way.

Listening to God is the most important thing for us to do in discerning God's call and the first step that we must take if we are to follow God's lead in our lives. Perhaps Abraham was not the first person God called to go to Canaan. Could it be that the first call went to his father, who stopped in Haran instead of continuing onto the land God called him to. Maybe, he got too busy to listen to God. Perhaps God's call came to Abraham earlier when he was young, but he was too busy to hear God's voice.

God speaks to God's people even today. As he did with Abraham, God calls us to leave our past and move into an unknown future. We are called, like Abraham, to begin a journey towards a place we do not know, living by faith and not by sight. It is a scary and daunting task. But, hear the good news: God is with us, and it is God who leads our way into the unknown. May we be found listening as God asks, "Can you hear me now?"