

“I Did It My Way”

Abraham’s Story: A Dramatic Monologue
Genesis 12-25 {text: Hebrews 11:1, 6, 8-13; 12:1-2a} ¹

“Good morning! My name is Abraham . . . that’s right, Abraham. My name isn’t used much anymore, but it has been a fairly well-known name in times past. I’m sure you know that one of your own greatest Presidents was named Abraham. And actually, Abraham Lincoln was named after *me*, because I am the Abraham, the Abraham from the Bible.

“I lived on the earth as you do some 4,000 years ago, though I still live in the Presence of God. It’s good to be with you. Your pastor thought you might enjoy a visit from me while he’s having health issues. And as I tell my story, I think you’ll find that there are many similarities in our lives.

“When God first spoke to me, I lived in Haran with my father, my brothers, and all of our families. Haran was a city in the hill country of what you now know as south central Turkey. I was at work one day, just minding my own business, when the Lord said, ***‘Leave your country, your people, and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’***”

“So what do you think you would have done if you had received an instruction like that? Sarah wasn’t very excited about it, I’ll tell you

“Sarah, we’re moving.”

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know.”

“How long will we be gone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will we ever come back to our home here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why are we doing this?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Who told you to do this?”

“I’m not altogether certain.”

“That was a hard conversation, and it was a very hard decision . . . to leave everything that was familiar and secure, and to launch out onto the vast sea of the unknown. I really struggled with it. Sarah and I finally decided that if we didn’t go, we’d probably regret it for the rest of our lives . . . and we didn’t know how much of “the rest” there would be. I was already 75 years old!! Some of you are 75 or close to it. Think about that.

“Making that decision was a lot like a poem that one of your own people wrote—the poet, Robert Frost. I’ve really enjoyed him since he joined us over on the Other Side. The poem is called ‘The Road Not Taken.’ You probably know it. I won’t give it nearly as well as Bob does, but here goes:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 7, 2019.

And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveler, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
 And having perhaps the better claim,
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
 Though as for that the passing there
 Had worn them really about the same,
 And both that morning equally lay
 In leaves no step had trodden black.
 Oh, I kept the first for another day!
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
 I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence: [4,000 years!]
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference.

“Maybe you, too, have had experiences like that. I’m here to tell you about the path I took.

“Leaving was hard. We packed up, Sarah and I, together with all of our family and our servants, our flocks . . . my, what a crowd! Our farewells were difficult, and we never were able to really explain to our family why we were doing this, but at last we were off.

“After many adventures, and after a long time—months, it was—we got to the vicinity of “the Land.” I built an altar just as we entered the land. You might call what I built a chapel, today. Anyhow, it was a place to pray, to talk to this God who had called us out.

“Actually, I built altars just about everywhere we camped, because I was aware that this God was everywhere—even in the common, everyday places—not like the gods my people had worshiped in Haran. Another of your poets, Browning this time, expressed what I mean when she wrote that:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
 and ev’ry common bush afire with God.
 Those who see take off their shoes.
 The rest sit ‘round it and pluck blackberries.

“You just have to have eyes to see, I guess.

“My trade was livestock. I was a farmer, like some of you, perhaps. I love the earth . . . the fields . . . the animals. We settled after a while in the hill country, an area that reminded me of Haran. We were like your boll weevil, ‘just lookin’ for a home.’

“We hadn’t been there too long, though, when trouble broke out between me and my nephew, Lot, who had come with us. He was wanting better land, he said, and he moved off, down in the river valley . . . but that’s a story for another day.

“After Lot left, the Lord said to me:

“Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your

offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.'

"Lord, that all sounds good," I said, "but, what can you give me? You have given me no children, so a servant in my household will be my heir."

"I was getting pretty anxious by this time. When we left Haran, we had really burned the bridges behind us. Now we'd been in the land for almost ten years, and the future of this promise looked pretty bleak. Sarah and I had tried and tried to have a child, but we had had no luck at all. I was feeling irritable, I guess.

"And then God said, '**Abraham, look at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be.**'"

"I responded, 'But Lord, how can I know this will really happen? What guarantee can you give?' After that the Lord gave me a sign—one of those experiences that is so special that we seldom share them. You'll forgive me if I don't talk about it in detail, but it was a holy, 'mountaintop experience.'

"You've probably had 'mountaintop experiences' yourself. But have you noticed that such times feel pretty different when you're back down in the 'valley' of ordinary life? And, though this truly was an awesome experience, it had still been ten years already, and Sarah and I were still kind of worried about whether God would—or could—ever make good on that promise. Maybe even God was having trouble working it out for us to have a child. After a while, we hit on a plan.

"Our idea was that I would have a child with Sarah's servant, Hagar. Your customs are different, I know, but in my time this was quite an acceptable thing to do; and any children born in this way would be counted as my own. People did it all the time.

"Our plan seemed to work, and before long Ishmael was born. He was really a cute little fellow . . . but his birth didn't solve anything. God told me that Ishmael was not the son through whom the promise would be fulfilled, so we were back at square one. Only now, the household was filled with bitterness, jealousy, and anger. Sarah and Hagar, who had once gotten along almost like sisters, never did get along after Ishmael came.

"My idea of God was too small, I guess. I thought God couldn't handle our problem. Do you ever feel like that? Our patience was too short to wait on God's timetable, and Sarah and I took things into our own hands.

"I didn't know what you know, that 'with God, nothing is impossible,' as Dr. Luke would later write. I didn't know that God had given instructions to Adam about having only one wife, either. I hope you realize how fortunate, how truly blessed you are to have the complete record of God's Word! It wasn't always around, you know. And I'm afraid, after watching the world for 4,000 years, that not many folks seem to take the time to read it. They just don't study the Manual; and then they wonder why their lives don't work.

"Well, when Ishmael was 13—that's *13 more years of waiting*, you realize—God repeated his promise to me, and said that a son was on the way. By this time, I was 99 years old, and Sarah was 90. Not the usual turn of events! I laughed so hard that I couldn't stand up!

"Not long after that, we had some visitors at our place—three men who were strangers to the area. I could tell by how they talked. When the tallest one told us that we were soon to have a baby, a son, I suddenly realized that this was really the Lord, in the appearance of a man. The

other two were angels! I was really careful to be nice to folks after that. You never can tell when one of them will be the Lord! Maybe that's a good word for you, too.

"The Lord told me something else, as well. He told me he was on the way to destroy Sodom because the city was so evil. That's the town where Lot lived. I begged the Lord not to do it, and He agreed to spare the city if there were even 10 good people in it. I thought that would be a safe number; surely Lot had influenced some of his neighbors . . . but such was not the case. The next morning I saw the smoke—an awful sight it was, too. God's patience doesn't last forever. Sometimes we really try to push our luck . . . but that, too, is a story of its own.

"Sure enough, at the proper time, Isaac was born! His name means 'laughter.' Can you believe it?! I was 100; Sarah was 91; Ishmael was 14!! It had been **25 years** from God's call until the time when the son of promise was born. Waiting is hard. Some of you know, don't you?

"Sadly, our happiness was short-lived, once more. It was ruined again by jealousy. That happens in your time, too, I've noticed. Ishmael made fun of his little brother. I guess that's not too hard to understand. After all, Ishmael had grown up knowing that he was my first son, yet also knowing that he would not receive the inheritance. That must really have been tough—tougher than I realized, for sure.

"Things finally came to the place where Sarah insisted that I send Ishmael and his mother away. I didn't want to do it. The very thought broke my heart, because Ishmael was my son. God promised to raise up a nation from Ishmael also, but God said that he would live in hostility toward all his brothers. In your day, the whole world knows how the Jews and the Arabs hate one another . . . and they are both descended from my two sons.

"All of this was—and is—because I did things my way. All of this suffering came because I couldn't wait for God's timing; because I didn't follow God's law with regard to morality in marriage—that 'one wife' thing, even though my culture said it was okay Your culture says some things are all right, too. But they're not. And the results last a long, long time.

"Sending Ishmael away was hard, but I hadn't seen anything yet. Years later, when Isaac was a teenager, God spoke to me again: ***Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.***

"I knew the place—you know it as the hill on which Jerusalem now sits—but what I was to do there stunned and crushed me. Did God really mean for me to kill my own son as a sacrifice? How could that be?! Already I had lost Ishmael. Was I now to lose Isaac as well? To give him up would be to give up all hope of God's promise to me.

"Put yourself in my place . . . if you can. The decision to leave Haran had been so simple compared to this. Human sacrifice was common in those days, so I knew about it. What I didn't know was that God never intended for me to hurt Isaac. God was testing my obedience.

"Looking back, I'm not surprised that God had questions about my obedience. After all, I had a history of doing things my way: I had lied twice about Sarah's being my sister instead of my wife, and I had disobeyed with regard to Ishmael. This time, I resolved to obey the Lord's command, and it was the hardest thing I've ever done. The very next morning, before my resolve weakened, Isaac and I set out.

"It was a three-day journey to Moriah—that was the mountain where we were going—so I had plenty of time to think about what was going to happen. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. My

head and my heart were reeling. But I was going to obey God even if that obedience cost me the dearest thing on earth . . . my son.

“The two of us finally arrived at the mountain. We built the altar and gathered the wood—I delayed as long as I could. Finally, there was no more delaying. I told Isaac what was about to happen. There were the tears . . . the embraces . . . the deep looks into each other’s eyes. There was the rope . . . the altar . . . the knife . . . and then, the Voice. God told me not to hurt Isaac, and provided a ram for the sacrifice. The test was over, but I was never the same again. My love had been purified.

“Perhaps I can understand, as few humans can, just a little of what it cost God to give up his Son for me . . . and for you . . . *on that same hill*. God spared me what He would not spare Himself. That’s what you’ll be remembering in just a few days, during Holy Week.

It was not until God cleansed my love for Isaac that I was able to see the idolatrous quality of my love for my son. It was only through that ordeal that I understood that real freedom only comes through radical obedience. It was only on the mountain of sacrifice that I finally understood that not even Isaac was ever truly safe until I trusted him to God.

“I could tell you many more things about my pilgrimage with the Lord . . . about Sarah’s death at 127 (I was 136) . . . about the miraculous way God helped me get a wife for Isaac from my father’s family back in my homeland . . . about what it was like to die myself, at 175 . . . I don’t know why we lived so long back then. Life was slower and more simple, I suppose.

“Yet, even when I died, decades later, I had received but little of God’s promise. I was blessed with many things, but we were a long, long way from becoming a nation. The only land I ever owned was the field where I buried Sarah. Four hundred years in Egypt lay between my people and THE LAND. And there is a sense in which that ancient promise was not fulfilled until your own time . . . when Israel became a nation again in 1948. Still, I was satisfied.

“My friends, our lives with God are really a lot like a relay race. Even though only one of the runners crosses the finish line, *ALL who run have a share in the victory* if they help to speed the one who runs the final lap. And so my word to you today is, **Hold on to God’s promises. Practice obedience. Don’t run ahead of God. And don’t drop the baton!**”

Invitation Hymn: “I Surrender All”