

September 10, 2017
First Christian Church Greensboro, NC
Lee Hull Moses

Genesis 12:1-9
StoryKeepers: Abraham and Sarah
To Be a Blessing

I've always been a little intrigued by lighthouses; I grew up in Indiana, where we have lots of cornfields, but not much need for a lighthouse. Several years ago now, we went with Rob's family up to northern Minnesota, and stopped at Split Rock Lighthouse, on Lake Superior, just north of Duluth, Minnesota.

The waters of Lake Superior are just as treacherous as the Atlantic Ocean, especially if you are a ship traveling at night along the very rocky coast. So Split Rock Lighthouse was built there in 1910, after a year in which several big ships were lost. The lighthouse sits up high on a cliff above the lake, and for a long time, there weren't any roads that went there. All the supplies needed for the lighthouse -- including the building supplies to build it -- were carted there by ship, and then hoisted up the rocky cliff. It's really something.

I was particularly taken by the story of the lighthouse keeper, who stayed there to keep the light burning. And it wasn't just Split Rock, of course. In the days before electricity and automation, there were lighthouse keepers stationed at treacherous spots on the shore, all over the world, keeping those lights burning so that ships could safely find their way.

I keep coming back to those lighthouse keepers as I think about our calling as a church, about the task of the church. And I've said this before, but I think one of the most significant tasks of the church is to be the keepers of stories.

I mean: we do a lot of things as a church -- we serve our community, we worship together, we take care of each other -- all important. But we do all these things, I've come to believe, because we are the keepers of stories -- stories from scripture, stories from the tradition of the church, stories from our own lives... we are the keepers of stories that show us how God is at work in the world.

And I don't mean that we *keep* these stories in the sense that we hold on to them, or lock them away, or keep them safe. I mean that we are keepers -- caretakers -- in the same way that the keepers of a lighthouse keep the light shining...

We brush them off, polish them up, retell them, share them, let them shine -- so that we, and maybe others who are passing by through troubled waters, can see that light and know that they are not alone.

These stories are a navigation tool, of sorts -- they point out the dangerous rocks ahead, and offer us a way to live.

So, this fall, we're going to take a look at some of the stories that we have the privilege of keeping. We'll retell the stories -- most will be well-known - and we'll wonder together about why this story is worth keeping, about what kind of light it shines for us, about how it might help us navigate the way ahead.

We'll we start today with Abraham -- or, Abram, really, as he's known when we first meet him in the 12th chapter of Genesis.

You might remember that this point in Genesis marks a sort of break in the narrative --before chapter 12, we heard the creation story, the garden of Eden, the story of Noah and the flood, the tower of Babel -- all these are ancient stories told about the origins of the world. Chapter 12, though, when we meet Abram, introduces a different sort of story -- a story of a particular individual person who is an ancestor of the nation of Israel -- so these stories, then, are not exactly stories of the origins of the world, but the origins of the people of Israel.

On Tuesday nights, at Table Topics, we're reading this book by Rob Bell, called *What is the Bible?* In it Bell reminds us that there are actually a lot of things going on when we read a Bible story: There's what's happening in the story itself -- in this story, God tells Abram that he and his wife Sarai have been chosen to be the ancestors of a great nation, that God will bless them with many descendants, and that this nation will be a blessing to all the families of the earth, so Abram gets this message from God, and begins his journey.

That's what's happening in the story itself. But also important is what's happening in the time when the story was written down. All these stories were passed down orally from generation to generation, for years, before they were finally written down. And we think that this one, these stories in Genesis about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers.... We think that these stories were written down much later, when the kingdom of Israel had established itself as a nation, and was facing political and military threats from every direction -- as nations do -- so somebody decided that it was about time to write down these

stories that were so important to the people of Israel, as a reminder of the promises God had made to their ancestor Abram so many years before.

You might have noticed in the story - in these 9 short verses - Abram covers a lot of geographic ground. He goes from his home in Haran to the land of Canaan, to Shechem and Bethel, and on to the Negev... This doesn't mean much to you and me, but the people of Israel, when they heard this story, they would have recognized those places as being all over their land. All over their kingdom. They would have heard this story as a reminder that God's promise, through Abraham, touched a particular place that was home to them -- these places tie the story of Abram to the whole story of Israel. And it would have been comforting to them, I think, in a time of political unrest and uncertainty -- to remember that God had promised to make of them a great nation that would be a blessing to all families of the earth.

So there's what's happening in the story itself, and what's happening when the story is told, and then we also have to think about what's happening when we read this story -- all our fears and uncertainties, all our life experiences, all the ways we are called to be part of this story, all the ways we need to be reminded of God's promises....

And all that's wrapped up together, all those layers of reading this story -- this'll be true of all the stories we keep -- and we can't separate any of it out.

It's an origin story about promises, about the faithfulness of God -- so it's a great big story about Israel, but it's also an individual story about Abram and Sarai - who leave their homes and their families to follow God, who set up little altars wherever they go so they're never far from God, whose names get changed to Abraham and Sarah, who, later in the story, laugh out loud at the possibility that they will have a child... It's a story about these two individual people who are listening to God, and maybe it's a story about you and me, too...

Because sometimes when God calls us to a new thing, we have to leave everything behind. Sometimes we are so transformed that even our very identity is changed. Sometimes, we laugh at the audacity of what God is asking us to do. Sometimes, following God is like that. That's our story, too.

Now, here's the really remarkable thing about this story that I had never thought about before reading it through this time -- that's the thing about these stories, too, there's something new every time we come to them.... Rob Bell, again, in this book we're reading on Tuesdays, points out that God is actually doing a very new thing -- or, asking Abraham to do a new thing. Not just

in leaving his home and his family, but in the promise that Abraham will establish a nation, a new tribe, who will be a blessing to all the families on earth, who will be a blessing to everybody else.

That's new. Before this, people lived in these little family tribes, primarily for self- protection. The purpose of the tribe was to look out for the tribe. To protect from outside threats. To turn inward in defense.

But God is asking Abraham to begin a new kind of tribe - one that looks outward instead of inward. *Through you all the nations will be blessed.* Not: in this tribe you take care of each other. No: In this tribe, we look for ways to bless other people.

That's fascinating, I think.

That from the very beginning, this call of God, to be part of God's people, is a call to look outward to the needs of others.

That's our story.

One of the things I learned about lighthouses is that the kind of light and the kind of lens you have in the top of a lighthouse matters. Which makes sense -- if you just put a little candle or a 50-watt lightbulb up there, you're not going to see it very far out into the water.

So most lighthouses began using what's called a Fresnel lens -- it was invented by a guy named Mr. Fresnel, back in the 1800's, (and I confess I don't totally understand how this works; maybe one of you can explain it to me later) but basically instead of one big lens to reflect the light, the lens is divided into many smaller sections, all of which capture the light and send it out.... The effect of which is that a small light can be amplified and reflected for miles from the lighthouse out to sea.

And it seems to me that that's what God does through the story of Abram: God takes the light of one person, one person's story, one person's journey -- and amplifies it, reflects it outward -- for generations -- more than the stars in the sky, God promises.... Until that light becomes a blessing for all the nations on the earth.

That's something, isn't it?

So why do we keep this story?

Because it gives us light to see by --

It reminds us of God's promises.

It reminds us who we are: called by God to shine a light that goes beyond ourselves and out to the world.

We keep this story because it shows us how to live:

To listen when God invites us to be part of the new thing God is doing.

To live in a way that our lives are a blessing to others.

To set up altars to God, wherever we're led, so that we keep the worship of God and the promises of God, close to us, at the center of our lives.

God is doing a new thing, all the time, calling us into the journey--

And for us, this journey always begins at and returns to the communion table -- where the feast that has been set for us, a feast of grace that offers light for the way ahead.

So come, beloved people of God: let us rejoice in the new thing God is doing; let us sing together as we come to the table of our Lord.