

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Abraham's Altars
Sermon: Altar of Prayer

Genesis 12:8-20

8 From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.

9 Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.
Abram in Egypt

10 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. 11 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. 12 When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. 13 Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

14 When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. 15 And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. 16 He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.

17 But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. 18 So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? 19 Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" 20 Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

Sermon

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was out rabbit hunting with the boys. The rabbits were safe, don't worry, we were making too much noise in the snow and trees to be a real threat. And we came to the bank of a creek next to grandpa and grandma's house, and we started to target shoot into the stream and its banks. It made me recall an event 30 years ago in that same spot. I was target shooting there as a young youth by that creek. We had two dogs that loved to run around it's banks and scare up game. From this vantage point, I could see around 250 yards down the creek before it meandered another direction, and I would try and see how far down I could still hit the water. I took a shot down that stream, missed the water and hit the underbrush close by. At the same time, I heard one of our dogs yelp and bark from that same underbrush, he was hidden away and I didn't know he was down there. And I did two things, back to back. First I freaked out. Oh My God What Did I Just Do. And second, I learned about prayer real quick. Oh, dear God, please don't tell me what just happened happened. And I started bargaining right away, Oh dear sweet 8 pound 6 ounce baby Jesus, if that dog is OK, I will go to church this Sunday, I will learn the songs they all sing - even the ones I don't like, I will (and it continued). So I went from freak out to prayer and probably back to freak out. God, I'll come back to you, I promise. In case you're curious, I did not shoot the dog. He was close by, it turns out his bark echoed off of the bank in the distance fooling my freaked out ears. He was really close by me. But for a few moments, I was scared. And fear gets you thinking about God real fast.

We're in a sermon series on Abraham's altars. Scripture records that Abraham built four altars in his lifetime.

First, after his journey to the promised land and he heard God's voice come to him again, "This is your land I will give to your descendants" And he built an altar of praise. From there, the family moved 10-20 miles south and pitched their tent between Bethel and Ai, up in the mountains, and they stayed there for a while - it doesn't say how long, but for a time, that was home. The Bible says that Abram built another altar to the Lord, and "Called Upon the Name of the Lord". It doesn't say that the Lord answered him, but that is where Abram made his prayers and petitions. And then for some reason, they left that home and altar and moved down to the Negev, which is sort of a desert place, but he kept moving south - trying out new land. From there, he wasn't too far from Egypt. Which we get a different kind of story.

We find that Abram, the man of faith, was also, at times, a man of failure. In these verses, we will learn that anyone, regardless of his or her spirituality, is capable of faltering in the faith. Nevertheless, we will also find hope that God loves to restore people to Himself. When our faith fails, God does not. Look with me at three principles that will help you live a life of extraordinary faith.

First lesson: Expect your faith to be tested. The Bible teaches that the life of faith is full of obstacles. This is confirmed in the life of Abram. Already, in his spiritual pilgrimage, Abram has experienced several tests: He was called to leave his hometown; his wife was barren; and the land that God promised to him already occupied. Now there comes another challenge. Verse 10 reads, "Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. ." As soon as Abram arrives in Canaan he experiences his most severe test to date—famine. Imagine what must have gone through Abram's mind: "I came all the way out here for this! I thought Canaan was to be a land of blessings!" Where is this land of milk and honey I kept hearing about? Imagine the complaining of those closest to him: "Abram, I told you that you were crazy to come here! So you obeyed your God! For what reason? So He could bring us all out here in the wilderness to destroy us!"⁵ Does this sound familiar? How many times have you said, "God, I deserve better than this. I've tried to serve you and live for you and this is the thanks I get for my efforts? Thanks a lot!"

Let's stop and think about this for a moment. Almost as quickly as Abram enters into Canaan, he leaves. Isn't this strange? Abram trusted God for over 1,000 miles from Ur to Canaan. He followed. He left behind his culture, his friends, and his possessions. He traveled to a country where he had never been. Why? Because he believed that God was going to make him into a great nation. But when Abram arrived in Canaan and a famine hit the land he does not think he will be alive for more than a few weeks. What does he do? He goes to Egypt and tries to solve his problems. The man who trusted God for all of a sudden doesn't trust in God. It doesn't make sense! Abram trusted God for the big things of life, but messed up when it came to smaller things. Yet faith means trusting God for the big things as well as for the little things. This is where we often fail. We trust God with our eternal salvation, and then we worry about the struggles we're going through and the decisions we have to make. Can you relate to this? Do you trust the Lord for your eternity and panic over the trivial issues of your today? Abram lost faith in God's protection and took matters into his own hands. I can see the Lord saying "Abram, to your descendants I will give you this land . . . what a minute. Where are you going?" When circumstances become difficult and you are in the furnace of testing, remain where God has put you until He tells you to move. Faith moves in the direction of peace and hope, but unbelief moves in the direction of restlessness and fear. In times of testing, the important question is not, "How can I get out of this?" but "What can I get out of this?" God is at work to build your faith and He alone is in control of circumstances. You are safer in a famine, in His will, than in a palace, out of His will. It has well been said, "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you."

So here's my second point: Face your fears with faith. When you and I fail to pass faith tests, God takes us to school once again and gives us additional pop quizzes. Abram was faced with another test - what happened down in Egypt. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

Amazing! Even at age 65, Sarai is such a beautiful woman that just being seen with her was a life-threatening experience. Beautiful women who found themselves in a foreign land were sought out by the natives. Further, the marriage bond was respected enough so that if a woman was desired as a wife, it was thought necessary to dispose of her husband before taking her. Thus, to save his own skin, Abram devised this little ploy, which he offers as they approach Egypt. Interestingly, Abram's request is really a half-truth, for Sarai was Abram's half-sister. However, Abram's intent here was clearly to deceive, and he was trusting in his deception to protect him instead of trusting in the Lord. Abram failed to fear God. He was more afraid of the Egyptians than he was of God. Fear of man is incompatible with faith in God.

Why does Abram succumb to such sinful behavior? Verse 13 reveals Abram's two motivations: Abram is seeking to protect himself ("that I may live on account of you") and to benefit himself ("that it may go well with me"). There are a few choice titles that come to mind to describe a man like this: self-serving jerk, insensitive brute, chauvinistic pig. In addition to being a jerk, he was also an opportunistic bum. He profited from his wife's moral and spiritual endangerment. He put others around him at risk. He put his wife at risk. He put Pharaoh and his household at risk. Such a plan was bad for several reasons. First of all, it tended to ignore the presence and power of God in Abram's life. God had promised a land, descendants, and a blessing. Now it seemed as though Abram was left to his own devices to procure them. Second, Abram's plan was wrong because it jeopardized his marriage and by extension, the promise of God. God had promised to make of Abram a great nation. From Abram a great blessing to all nations, the Messiah, would come. Now Abram was willing to run the risk of another man taking Sarai as his wife. And Abram's worst nightmare occurred: "Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh. Sarai became a part of Pharaoh's harem. What was going on in those chambers? Was she now in Pharaoh's arms? Abram began to write his own rendition of Pharaoh, Pharaoh: "Pharaoh, Pharaoh...oh baby, let my Sarai go! Yeah, yeah!" And from then on, life would have taken its natural course. She well could have lived and died in Egypt, and had her place in a royal tomb. And Abram was treated well! All sorts of gifts and privileges. So you would think Abram would be happy, right? Wrong! He would have been better off to suffer hunger in the Promised Land than to be rich in Egypt. Everything that Abram received in Egypt later caused him trouble. Later on, because of the great wealth he acquired from Pharaoh, Abram and Lot could not live together and had to separate (next week's story). Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant that Pharaoh gave to Abram brought division and sorrow into the home. Abram failed to trust God. Abram failed to obey God. Abram failed to fear God. How do you respond when the pressure is on? When the finances are low? When you're having conflict with your spouse or a co-worker? When you lay awake at night wondering and worrying. When you have no idea what to do next? When you are discouraged or angry? Whether you realize it or not, your life, character, and choices are influencing people around you: your spouse, your children, your family, and friends. You may be the only "Bible" they'll ever read!

If Abram had stayed in Canaan when the famine came, his faith would have grown. He would have seen the Lord provide for him. Since he did not stay in Canaan, the same famine that could have been a means of spiritual growth actually took him away from God and eventually brought great humiliation. What an important step it would be if we would learn that lesson about life. Instead of complaining, we would trust God. Instead of saying, "Why has God let this happen to me? Doesn't He care? Why has God abandoned me?" we would say, "Here is another opportunity for me to trust God. I wonder what wonderful things He is going to do with me this time." It is not always easy to do that. It sometimes takes more grace to stay in Canaan than to get there. But that is what God wants. He does not want our way to be easy, because if it is easy we will not grow.

And my last point is this: Even after Abram messes everything up, he can still return to a life of faith. You know the story - Abram and Sarai are allowed to leave, and they get to keep the goody bag that Abram received. The great news of the Bible is that there is life after failure. Now that God has delivered the family from this mess, how do they respond? In the following chapter, right after this story, we read this: "So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him, and Lot with him. Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place

where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD.” We have no clue as to how long Abram remained in Egypt. No altars were built in Egypt, to our knowledge, nor are we told that Abram ever called on the name of the Lord there. But finally he does right before God. Abram goes back to Canaan. He goes back to Bethel, “the house of God.” He went back to the altar! Hallelujah—there is life after the mess. Like Abram, when we lapse in faith we must return to the point of our departure from God if we desire once again to restore the joy of communion we once knew. Abram is today remembered as the man of faith—in part because he returned “to the place where his tent had been at the beginning”. The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings. Lets go from Fear to Faith. Don’t freak out - but persevere. And the family of God said, AMEN.