

Sunday 21st June 2020

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, though separate let us worship together in God.

Hymn	Praise the Lord, ye heavens adore him; praise him, angels in the height; sun and moon, bow down before him, praise him, all ye stars and light. Praise the Lord, for he hath spoken, worlds his mighty voice obeyed; laws, that never shall be broken, for their guidance he hath made. Praise the Lord, for he is glorious; never shall his promise fail; God hath made his saints victorious; sin and death shall not prevail. Praise the God of our salvation; hosts on high, his power proclaim; heaven and earth, and all creation, laud and magnify his name. Anon.	Tune Sussex
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Prayer (based on Psalms 67 and 113)

Eternal God, you are gracious and bless us with the Spirit, a Spirit which indwells creation and with wisdom shows the way of love, a way with the power to unite all people in all places.

We praise you and pray that one day, in oneness, all people will come to live by your way of love.

In oneness we lift our voices to you giving thanks for the generosity of your creation, which when shared in love is more than enough for all people.

In the oneness of Jesus, whose way we seek to follow, we praise you now and forever more.

You are with us always, every moment of every day and every year, we are never alone, you unite all people, and you call all people to live in love.

You call us to spread the message of hope that lifts the poor and needy and humbles the mighty that all may be as one, caring and sharing together. You call on us to embrace the excluded and value each person for who they are in you. In you, miracles can happen as we learn to accept each other in love.

Eternal God, infinitely gracious and loving, we praise you.

The Lord's prayer

Readings	Genesis 11:27 – 12:3, 10-20 Acts 7:1-7
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Introduction

Genesis is often referred to by academics as the patriarchal narrative and we can understand why as the main characters in the story are all men, some of the big names in the story of the people of God, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. If it were a play these are the characters who would spend the most time on the stage. However, there are supporting actors, players behind the scenes we

must not allow a name label to cover the reality. In fact, it may be better to refer to genesis as the ancestral narrative, and in any ancestral story women play a part, they must. So, for the next few weeks we are going to look more closely at the role of Sarah and the part she plays in the familiar saga of Abraham, and in doing so we may highlight some of the disparity that exists between men and women throughout history and still today.

Neither Abraham nor Sarah were perfect, although at times in Scripture you might think otherwise. They were humans with the same baggage as most humans in long standing relationship. As Christians, our view of Abraham is often coloured by passages in the New Testament where Abraham is held in high regard, but as we look closer at the story in Genesis we will discover how far from the truth this really is.

As we begin our exploration we are introduced to Abram and Sarai, they do not become Abraham and Sarah till later in the story. We are told quite a bit about Abram's family, and even about his brother's families but nothing really about Sarai and her family. In fact, we are given only one piece of information about Sarai, she is barren, she cannot bear children. We are given no further information; we are left to imagine how Sarai felt and to discover later why this one piece of information is so important. We get a clue in 12:1-3 where God promises Abram that he will make him a great nation, and we can surmise that this means he will have children, in particular a male child but there is no mention at this stage of Sarai even knowing of this promise.

This, it appears, is God's redemptive plan for humanity but how can Sarai see herself as part of it when she cannot have children?

Take a moment to think about the heartache of women who find they cannot have children of their own. What do you think of the underlying maleness of God's plan as revealed at this moment?

Hymn

The God of Abraham praise (Tune Leoni)
who reigns enthroned above;
Ancient of everlasting Days,
and God of love:
Jehovah, great I AM,
by earth and heaven confest;
I bow and bless the sacred name
for ever blest.

The God of Abraham praise,
at whose supreme command
from earth I rise and seek the joys
at his right hand:
I all on earth forsake,
its wisdom, fame and power;
and him my only portion make,
my shield and tower.

The whole triumphant host
Give thanks to God on high,
'Hail Father, Son and Holy Ghost',
they ever cry;
Hail, Abraham's God and mine!
(I join the heavenly lays)
all might and majesty are thine,
and endless praise.

THOMAS OLIVERS (1725-99)

Reflection

If Scripture had statues, Abraham would be up there on a plinth, and in Acts 7 we see why this might be. The public image of Abraham in the New Testament is the hero figure, the faithful figure, the founding father of the people of Israel. Today we are seeing many statues challenged and it draws our attention to the lack of women on statues throughout history. It also brings to light the need to question history, a history that has placed men on pedestals whose background is not always what it seems, and close inspection of the story in Genesis reveals the facts behind the person of Abraham.

Abram, and we may assume Sarai, come from prominent families in the ancient city state of Ur, a place of great affluence built on violence, oppression and exploitation, where behind the beautiful facades the wealthy live in luxury whilst the masses slave away in squalor, like many parts of the world today. God challenges Abram to leave all this behind and to travel into the unknown and in return Abram receives two promises, firstly God promises that Abram will be blessed and become a great nation and secondly, God promises that Abram will himself be a blessing, not to a few but to all families on Earth.

To be a blessing was shorthand for a unique relationship which overrode the usual 'us and them', and was not about assimilation relationships but instead was about 'us for them, us with them', a 'for the benefit of all' relationship – perhaps an early reminder of the original oneness of creation. Abram accepted the challenge and takes Sarai off on an adventure without us hearing anything of Sarai's opinion on the matter. They travelled far, until they reached Canaan, the promised land of Exodus, but they had not been there long when a famine hits and they find themselves travelling again, this time towards the Egyptian border. Egypt was ruled by a Pharaoh and Pharaohs have a bad reputation for violence and victimisation, however, the current Pharaoh is different, but Abram does not know that and assumes the worst. He fears for his life and in fear hatches a plan which is cowardly and cruel. He turns to Sarai and having complimented her on her beauty, says that it puts his life at risk because other men will want her and so kill him. Instead he suggests that he will introduce her as his sister, which will save him but not help Sarai, although he does not seem to dwell too long on that fact. We are not told anything of Sarai's response, we do not know if she agreed with this, but it probably would not matter as Abram had decided. Abram's lack of concern for Sarai is quite shocking, and I wonder how you look at this from today's perspective? How would you have felt in Sarai's shoes, asked to lie about your identity to save somebody else, asked to deny the identity that gives you any status in a patriarchal society by your own husband? The woman we read of is silent. What does this say of Abram's relationship with God, what does it say of belief and faithfulness? This course of action threatens God's plan.

They cross the border and as Abram expected Sarai's beauty is noted. However, the men he encounters are not as ruthless as he imagined and instead tell the Pharaoh, who takes Abram's sister into his household and in return pays a bride's dowry to Abram. Abram becomes a rich man and Sarai is set to become Pharaoh's wife. Then things take a turn, plagues descend upon the household and Pharaoh smells a rat. He challenges Abram with the truth and Abram's worst nightmare is right in front of him. Drawing on all his assumptions he awaits execution, but the Pharaoh, perhaps recognising some divine action at play, simply banishes Abram and Sarai with a terse 'Be Gone'. The storyteller does not have Abram defending himself and of course Sarai says nothing, still the silent woman. How do you view Sarai at this point? Maybe we see her as calm and heroic, but there is absolutely no evidence, in her silence she is almost invisible.

This story is part of the history of Israel, and it was a story written by men, as much of history has been. Even the women who have made it into our history in any significant way often are nothing like the image with which they have been portrayed, we don't get the fighting and the heartache that goes with battling through the red tape of bureaucracy against women. All around us in the world are silent women, who have no say in the path their life will take, young girls married long before they are ready, bodies mutilated because of ritual and cultural norms that should not exist in today's world. Women, who escape the worst oppression and find themselves alone, afraid and

homeless, victims of an unjust world. Women, who in order to gain some identity align themselves with terrorist organisations and then find themselves pawns to be sacrificed for the cause, a cause usually led by men. I am not a feminist, but I am appalled at the plight of women around the world and here in 21st century Britain. These things should not happen and in God's Kingdom where every person is loved and matters they will not happen, so if we pray for the Kingdom to come we need to support organisations that seek to give women a voice in our world. Not because they are better than men but because they are human and part of God's creation.

In this story we see the faithfulness of Abram in setting out into the unknown, even if he faltered, more than once, as we shall discover. He was human and we all make mistakes. However, as God's people we are called to at least try to be a blessing to others, to make a difference in the world in which we live. God's promise to us, and every human, is that we are loved, we are blessed, we are worthy, and we are one. To be a disciple is to live this, and the story of Sarai challenges us to walk in her shoes, in our time, and challenge the system that forces women to be silent.

Prayers

Loving God, as we worship and praise you, we are reminded of what it means to be followers of the way of Jesus, and to accept your call to live more fully in our humanity. We understand that we are blessed but sometimes we forget we are to be a blessing, but you are gracious and forgiving and encourage us to continue the journey to know you more.

In our worship we bring our prayers of concern and commitment.

All around us we see the signs of separation, particularly now, and we pray for those who are missing the presence of loved ones, and especially those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. This experience of Lockdown has revealed much that is wrong in our world and communities, too many people who are alone and feel isolated, people who have no one to visit. We pray that we may play our part, in whatever way we can, to reach out to the lonely in our communities, offering support and conversation and a sense that they are not forgotten and invisible.

All around us we see signs of hurt and abuse, on screens and in papers, and it is difficult to see, we are ashamed that as we pray for your Kingdom come these things are happening. There are too many forgotten people, hidden in a system that values unfairly and acts unjustly. You call us to be a people of love, you encourage us to be a blessing for others, and yet in our world many do not feel blessed and do not feel loved. We are witnessing an uprising of despair driven by centuries of injustice, and this is fuelling violence, which is not loving. May we challenge the system that silences pain and frustration, may we fight peacefully for every human to have a voice and may we encourage a world in which there are equal opportunities for all regardless of colour, creed or gender.

All around us there are silent women, who have little or no control over the path their life takes, and who feel powerless to change the reality. We pray for the victims of domestic abuse, for women who are prisoners in their own home, for young girls forced into marriages or unwilling participants in ritual practices which endanger their lives. May we be generous in our support of those who challenge these practices, organisations who seek to release women from unjust circumstances which limit their opportunity to explore the fullness of their humanity and who offer a voice to the silent.

All around us are prisoners of poverty, people who fear for tomorrow, who must drink dirty water to live, or walk incredible distances to see a doctor. People who love intensely but whose fear for tomorrow extinguishes the flame of hope. Loving God, in your Kingdom there will be no poverty, and hope will burn brightly fanned by oneness and equal opportunity. May our way of living be a positive movement in the world, may our love enfold those who are victims of injustice, and our generosity make a difference, bringing the reality of your kingdom more fully into our world.

In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Our offering to God.

As we continue to worship apart but together, let us pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church by continuing to send our offering and exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know God's blessing on all we do. Amen

Hymn

Praise God, creator,
source of all being,
present around us,
and deep within.

(Tune Morning has broken)

When we are open,
accepting and loving,
we find connections,
journeys begin.

Praise God in singing,
dancing and playing,
showing God's wonders
through every word.
Sharing ideas,
new paths revealing,
journeys continue,
Spirit is heard.

Praise God for journeys,
leading us onward,
leading us inward,
broadening sight.
Praise God for loving
all of creation,
sustaining our living
providing our light.

Praise God in all things,
never forgetting,
love builds and fosters
oneness in all.
We are together,
held in creation,
bound in the Spirit,
part of the whole.

Heather Whyte 2020

Blessing

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.