

COVENANT COMMUNITY
Meta-stories in the Pentateuch

LESSON THREE: THE LAND COVENANT
THE SAGA OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Opening prayer

Challenge us, Lord. Shake us up. Knock off the old dead leaves of past seasons. If Abraham and Sarah could start a new family at the age of 99, surely You must have some adventure in store for us. Help us to hear Your call. Amen.

Navigating this lesson

Abraham and Sarah were migrants like so many people in today's world. They lived as aliens in Egypt and in Canaan. Sometimes we journey inward, embarking on a spiritual journey. Sometimes we are called to leave old assumptions and cherished beliefs behind.

Re-read the story of Abraham and Sarah in *Genesis 12:1 - 25:11*.
Count the number of times the word "covenant" appears.

Focus texts: Genesis 12:1-20, Genesis 20:1 – 21:7, Leviticus 19:31-37,
Matthew 1:1-17, Romans 4:13-25

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The Bible starts with the word "Go!"

Now the Lord said to Abram, "**Go** from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. { *Genesis 12:1* }

YHWH was a God of action and intentions. The Bible is about the "the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob," not the God of philosophers and theologians. *YHWH* said, "Go!" Nobody asked if *YHWH* "exists."

The Bible does not begin with the Creation. The Bible begins with the 12th chapter of *Genesis*.

Abram (his name doesn't get changed till later in the story) is told to pick up stakes, leave what's familiar, and Go! He's got tents and cattle and sheep and slaves and a wife. He's got a nephew named Lot whom he is grooming to take over the ranch. Abram rips up his roots on a vague promise from an unfamiliar deity. In return, Abram is promised land and posterity. There is no map; *YHWH* will tell him when they get there.

While poking around in a New England bookstore, a friend of ours found an old book that quoted from the town records of the earliest European settlers. In the town hall records of Milford, Connecticut, for the year 1640, he found this:

"Voted: that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof;

"Voted: that the earth is given to the Saints;

"Voted: that we are the Saints."

So by vote, some early American settlers convinced themselves that the Bible gave them the right to take the land for their settlement and purposes.

Contrast that with the 20th century American classic, Sand County Almanac, by Aldo Leopold: *"We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."*

Leopold suggests that the Abrahamic concept of land has led us into our current environmental crisis. He does not use the term "covenant", but by suggesting that we "see land as a community to which we belong," he suggests that we are called to expand our concept of covenant to include the land, the environment.

In the popular novel (and later movie), The African Queen, people struggle against the elements as they float down a jungle river. One character says "Nature ... is what we are put into this world to rise above." That view has possessed human consciousness throughout the ages. Whereas Abraham was called to "possess" the land, we are called to relate to land as community instead of commodity. Our covenant with the earth is evolving. The story is still being "written" in our lives and choices now. That's why we engage in Bible studies like this one – to discern (in community) how God continues to engage us in the ongoing work of Creation.

Abram and Sarai grow weary of traveling. The "promised" land turns out to be populated with peoples and tribes who do not welcome new settlers. Much like Mexicans crossing into Arizona and Texas, Abram and Sarai are rebuffed or

treated as second class citizens. They grow old without settling and without having children.

Then Sarah (newly named) surprisingly gives birth to a son. They name him “Laughter” (“Isaac” in Hebrew), remembering how they laughed at the idea of starting a family at 99 years of age.

...God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”
{ *Genesis 22:1-2* }

That is beyond weird! But Abraham saddles his donkey and trundles off. He binds his beloved son and gently lays him on a bed of dry firewood. He grasps the knife with which he will kill his son before burning the body as an offering to YHWH. Only then does an angel stay Abraham’s hand, pointing to a ram caught in some nearby brambles.



Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide.” { *Genesis 22:13-14* }

What a chilling story! Some have turned their backs on the Bible entirely because of that incident. What kind of a

God would demand the death of a child? Good point.

Some say this illustrates Abraham’s extreme obedience to God’s will. Others say it reveals God’s faithfulness by providing a substitute. And some say it foreshadows Christ as the “Sacrificial Lamb promised before the foundation of the world.” I would suggest that we step back a bit and view the incident in its broader context.

In the ancient Middle East, in the 2nd millennium BCE, desert tribes practiced child sacrifice. People feared the gods. They believed gods had to be pacified by offerings and sacrifices. Abraham “feared” YHWH. The ultimate sacrifice to propitiate a fearsome god was to offer up their firstborn sons – their most precious possessions.

But YHWH does not require a child sacrifice. The sacrifice of an animal could be substituted. Blood was still required (so they thought). The flesh was still burned to make a “pleasing odor” for YHWH to enjoy. People were evolving in their understanding of what it takes to have a relationship with God. By the time the mega-story of covenant reaches Jeremiah and Jesus (and us) the covenant between God and humanity has changed dramatically. We are still evolving spiritually in a covenant with the One who created the heavens and the earth, and who told Abram and Sarai to “Go!”

Some say that if God “requires” the sacrifice of His son on the cross, it turns God into a child-abuser. It may be time for us to consider the way in which atonement theology has been passed on through generations.

People fleeing violence and terror in Honduras and El Salvador and Guatemala must cross the Suchiate River which forms the border between Guatemala and Mexico. They try to swim from Tecún Umán to Tapachula, or they build rafts of discarded plywood and inner tubes. The Mexican Border Patrol, corrupt police, and criminal gangs often rob and rape them if they are successful. If they evade the police and the gangs they must then ride the tops of freight trains 2,000 miles through Mexico to the American border.

Thousands of people take this route. Hundreds die.

In the small town of Tecún Umán on the Guatemalan bank of the river, Father Alemand founded *Casa del Migrante sin Fronteras* (House of the Migrant on the Borders) on the site of a local dump. Missionaries of San Carlos Scalabrinianos have run *Casa del Migrante* for more than 20 years, providing a few days of food and shelter for hundreds of people weekly who make it as far as the river. The priests keep a meticulous record of every person who stays at *Casa del Migrante*, so they can tell others searching for family members if they passed this way hoping to reach *el Norte* – the promised land.

Murals adorn the walls of *Casa del Migrante sin Fronteras*. Maps show routes through Mexico. The most dangerous passages are marked, as well as places where temporary work or medical care might be available. Most of the migrants have never been more than a few miles from their home villages in Guatemala and Honduras. They try to memorize the maps so they can navigate the next 2,000 miles.

One mural depicts a migrant wearing a farmer's tattered clothes; his feet are shod in work boots. Roots grow out of the soles of the boots, but the roots have been torn out of the soil and are shedding clods of earth. Trains and police and gangs and the flags of foreign nations surround the migrant with his torn up roots. Beside him, in silhouette, are a man and a woman leading a donkey. The woman is pregnant – or perhaps she carries the baby Jesus. They are Mary and Joseph, of course, fleeing Herod's wrath, migrating to Egypt.



Mary and Joseph were poor. Abram and Sarai were wealthy. But the experience of pulling up roots and setting off for a foreign land was much the same. Mary and Joseph were not welcome in Bethlehem. Abraham and Sarah were not welcome in Canaan. They were forced to move on.

From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent... And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb. Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien.... { *Genesis 12:8-10* }

Abraham and Sarah, Mary and Joseph all spent time in Egypt as “undocumented aliens.” *YHWH* repeatedly reminds the Israelites that they were once aliens in a foreign land. When the population is later exiled to Babylon they raise a sad lament: “*By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps... How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*” (*Psalms 137:1-5*)

As this is written migrants are stuffed into rusty boats braving the Mediterranean Sea between Libya and Europe. The South China Sea is awash with shiploads of migrants turned away from ports in Malaysia, Singapore and Japan. Epic forces are driving people from their homelands every day. The plight of migrants fleeing violence, sexual predation, poverty and exploitation might be the world’s most pressing problem. As many as 50% of the people in the world today do not live in the country where they were born.

Abraham and Sarah set out to populate a promised land. The migrants (Pilgrims) who came to New England in the 1600s thought it was the “promised land.” America still represents the “promised land” of employment for Latin American migrants who endure extraordinary hardships to reach the borders of Texas, Arizona and California. Migrants trying to cross our southern border are part of an old old story.

Ruth is a much beloved Bible story and is often quoted at weddings. But when Ruth says, “Wither thou goest, I will go...,” she commits herself to life as an illegal alien in Israel. Israel did not welcome her, but Boaz married her. She was integrated into the life of her new nation.

The Pentateuch wrestles with the treatment of “aliens” living within Israel’s borders. Even the much-maligned book of *Leviticus* is explicit about how aliens should be treated.

When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one

of your native-born. Love him as
yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I
am the Lord your God.
{ *Leviticus 19:33-34* }

The *Zohar* is a 13th century Jewish mystical text. It says that Abraham must understand his own soul in order to move ahead; it is a sacred journey inward as well as to the promised land. Dag Hammarskjöld, first Secretary General of the United Nations, kept a poetic journal. Hammarskjöld wrote, "The longest journey is the journey inwards of him who has chosen his destiny."

Think of all that Abram and Sarah left behind. Losses are inextricably connected to spiritual growth. Even if our journey is inward we will have to leave attitudes, habits, and prejudices behind. The first step in a spiritual pilgrimage is purification, "washing off" a lot of baggage that will be nothing but a burden as we undertake the journey inwards. (The middle of "enlightenment" is "lighten".) Too much "stuff" clutters up our closets and garages and storage sheds. Our souls are often just as cluttered.

Father Abraham is a sacred figure to Jews, Christians and Muslims; he is revered in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Gospels and the *Koran*. Abraham is the model for Muslim life; (Mohammed is merely the prophet.)

But the story of Abraham's search for the promised land has a sad ending. He and Sarah live in Canaan but they are still aliens at the time of their deaths. Their grandchildren and great-grandchildren are forced by famine and circumstance to abandon Canaan in search of employment in foreign nations. They end up in Egypt laboring in the lowest paying, back-breaking, lowest respected jobs.

Until Moses is born.

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SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION
AND FOR REFLECTION, PONDERING, CONVERSATION

Does contemporary Israel have a claim to Palestinian land today?
Can any group or nation claim certain land on the basis of religion?

In practical terms, what does it mean that “we are called to relate to land as community instead of as commodity?”

Some say the theology of atonement turns God into a child-abuser. What do you think?

Did Jesus have to die on the cross?

How can Federated Church extend radical hospitality to aliens in our community?

At some point Abraham stops leaving and begins the long process of arriving.
Spiritual exercise: what is coming to an end (conclusion) in your life? What is beginning?