

Raise Your Eyes

Genesis 13:1-18

April 25, 2021

Read Genesis 13:1-18

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

On the surface, this is a rather innocuous story – given what we have been reading. In Chapter 12, Abram was instructed to leave his family and all he knew to go to a land that the LORD would show him. Abram did just that. That was a pretty big deal. Then, when famine struck, Abram left that land, sojourned into Egypt, and convinced his wife to pretend to be his sister. When Pharaoh found out, he basically expelled Abram from Egypt. That, too, was a pretty big deal.

Today, we read about Abram's return to the land that God had promised him.

Abram's return to Bethel

Egypt was a bust for Abram. Depending upon how you want to read Chapter 12, Abram went down to Egypt as a foreshadowing of what would happen later with Joseph and Jacob – or – he was unfaithful in leaving the land that God had shown him (even in the face of a severe famine). Regardless, the episode in Egypt was humbling for Abram: he demonstrated cowardice by the way he handled Sarai, and was shamed when the Pharaoh found out and threw him out.

Last week we talked about God using imperfect people to accomplish his holy purpose. That is a tremendous word of encouragement for us; however, it does not remove or prevent us from experiencing the brokenness and shame like Abram felt for his conduct in Egypt. Having been expelled from Egypt – the wakeup call – Abram journeyed back to the land God had shown him. In fact, he went back to the very beginning. "He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning."

That is more than a narrative exposition to set the scene for what was coming next. Abram was going back to the beginning. Abram was starting over. Egypt was more than a mulligan; but it was an episode that illustrated to Abram the significance of the relationship that the LORD had established with him, and how Abram needed to understand the differences and consequences of faithfulness and faithlessness.

Don't rush by that. Take note. When we find ourselves shamed, ruined, broken, or lost because of our own poor choices, poor behavior, inattention, or failure to treat others as they ought – we have to go back to the beginning. It is humbling. It is painful. It is difficult. It is all of that and necessary. We have to come to Jesus.

Failure and sin are things we all experience – even as Christians. We may know we are forgiven people, but that does not erase the memory and – often – the shame we carry. We all have skeletons in our closets; moments that cause us to cringe, times in our lives when we just were out

to lunch, or words that we spoke that we wish we could swallow back down. None of us have been on a straight line of maturity and holiness in our walk of discipleship; at least, I know mine has not been devoid of detours and potholes.

When I was in college, I did not have a clear path ahead to what I wanted to do. Dickinson College is in Carlisle, PA. There was a Methodist Church adjacent to the campus. I went a few times early in my freshman year, but it was not a congregation where a college student would fit in easily. Further, the college life did not lend itself to a Sunday morning schedule. I would go to worship with my family when I visited home, but at school it was occasional visits to Intervarsity Fellowship events and that was about it.

Then, I went from Central Pennsylvania to Indianapolis for law school. I was a foreigner in a foreign land. This was back before cellphones and Zoom. This was back when you had to wait until 11:00 p.m. for the phone rates to go down or you were going to get tagged with a huge long-distance bill. Indianapolis was at least 5 hours away from the nearest person I knew; a full 8 hours from most everyone else I knew. I did not meet anyone other than other law students; and that's not exactly the most supportive network you will ever encounter. If pressed, I would have a difficult time telling you much of anything from that first year. It is a bit of a fog of sitting miserably in the library, looking around the room, wondering if this is what adulthood was all about. It was a dark time in my life. I was torn between pressing on to accomplish my goal of "surviving law school" or quitting and going home in shame for failing. Neither was a particularly happy option.

At some point during my second year, it occurred to me that I had not been to worship in a long, long time. I prayed all the time of course: "God, help me do well on this test." "God help me make it financially." "God, I need you to do this for me..." I thought of myself as a good Christian because I had grown up going to church. I even patted myself on the back for the times I remembered to say, "thank you," after one of my prayers was answered in a way that was pleasing to me. Finally, though, I realized that my solitary life was not sufficient. I actually felt ashamed because I knew that I was not living as I ought to by skipping worship. I did not know where to go or what it would be like to stick my toe in that pool again.

Finally, I got up the courage to go to the large Presbyterian Church on the north side of Indianapolis. We were Presbyterians growing up, so this seemed like the easiest re-entry point. I remember the anxiety I had pulling into the parking lot. I sat in my car for a few minutes debating whether I would go in. I wanted to get in and out without connecting with anyone. I calculated that it would be easy to do in a large church.

I was savvy enough from growing up going to church every Sunday to know how to be anonymous. I chose to go on Palm Sunday because I knew there would be a good attendance and a lot of visitors. I waited long enough to see the majority of people get through the door. I hustled up the long sidewalk through the front yard and got to the door only to find a group of people stuck in the narthex. The usher said, "I'm sorry, we do not have any seats left in the pews. The only place we can put you is in the old choir loft that is behind the pulpit."

So much for anonymity.

As the group headed back out the door, I debated dashing to my car . It was too far away not to be conspicuous, and I had the deep sense that I was supposed to be there. So, again, with a deep breath, I walked with the group and we filed into the choir loft behind the pulpit. I remember looking out on this congregation – the sanctuary seated somewhere between 750 and 1,000 – and thinking, “I wonder if anyone recognizes me.” I had a simultaneously terrifying and unbelievably peaceful thought, “God does.”

I am sure that the sermon was Palm Sunday related, but I could not tell you who preached or much of anything else factual from that morning because I was lost in my own thoughts. I knew that I needed to be here. I needed this community. I needed to hear the word proclaimed. I needed to be connected with others, to stop pretending that I was a lone wolf able to make it on my own in the way I was going. It was less an epiphany than a personal come-uppance. I remember having the vivid picture of kneeling next to the tax collector who was beating his chest crying out, “Have mercy on me, a sinner!”

In short, I was convicted. Although I knew stuff about Jesus, I had walked a long way from Jesus. I had the foundation my parents had given me, but I was a far way off from it. I was empty, lost, lonely and broken. Yet, in that moment, I knew I had to go back to the beginning. I kind of knew that before I went, but it was confirmed as I was sitting there. What surprised me was that God was willing to receive me at the beginning.

The transition back into a walk of faith was not instantaneous. It was not a Damascus Road experience, per se. I had not been opposed to Christ or the church, I simply had drifted away. Change occurred over time and changing back occurred over time. I took baby steps at first. I discovered there was an earlier service that was in the chapel to the side of the main sanctuary. I could sneak into one of the back pews quietly and sit among people who were also sitting quietly among the back pews. We passed the get acquainted pad for months before I verbally said, “Good morning,” to the guy I had been sitting near each Sunday. It was a few months more before I had anything resembling a conversation with the older couple who sat in the pew in front. But make no mistake: during those months, God was at work in me and on them. I realized that God was at work when I missed two weeks because I was traveling and my pewmates asked about my absence when I returned. During that time and with those people, I rediscovered the mystery and wonder of God’s great love for me.

When we find ourselves shamed, ruined, broken, or lost because of our own poor choices, poor behavior, (in my case) inattention, or failure to treat others as we ought – we have to go back to the beginning. It is humbling. It is painful. It is difficult. It is all of that and necessary. We have to come to Jesus.

Abram versus Lot

Back to Abram: Abram was materially wealthy in his return. Economic poverty was not the root of his humbling. It is worth noting that, because it avoids the “If you just come back to Jesus, you will get everything you ever wanted.” Material wealth was not the issue for Abram or Lot. This is not to say that Abram was somehow too spiritual to be concerned with earthly things; it is just to say that the important part of this story is Abram’s relationship with the LORD.

When they got back into the land, both Abram and Lot continued to prosper. They did so well that their employees began feuding in competition over the best land. What followed is remarkably relevant today; it gives a quick compare and contrast of the consequences of attitude and focus. Abram went to Lot to make the situation right. Abram took the initiative, declared the priority of his relationship with Lot – “let there be no strife between you and me...for we are kindred.” Then, Abram offered Lot the choice of which land he would desire.

Both were materially wealthy. Both were successful. Abram offered Lot the choice in order to keep peace between them. Lot looked with eyes to see how he could profit.

What are your priorities? How do you make decisions? Lot looks very familiar. He did a personal cost/benefit analysis. He saw lush and he saw rock. Lot looked at the plain of Jordan and saw potential. Think Hawaii; or more specifically, Kauai. But don't miss the references and the nuance: “The land [Lot] chose was like the ‘Garden of the LORD’ and ‘like the land of Egypt,’ a positive description within the context of Genesis. But the author then adds that the land chosen by Lot is found in the area ‘toward Zoar.’ As the subsequent narrative will show, Zoar was the city where Lot had to flee for safety from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.”¹ Further, Lot ignored what he knew about the culture and context of the people of the lush land. This was not unknown territory: Lot knew. One commenter astutely recognized:

True, the men of the plain were ‘wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly,’ as the chapter says with grim emphasis. But Lot evidently never thought about that. He knew it, though, and ought to have thought about it. It was his sin that he was guided in his choice only by considerations of temporal advantage. Put his action into words, and it says, ‘Grass for my sheep is more to me than fellowship with God, and a good conscience.’ No doubt he would have had salves enough. ‘I do not need to become like them, though I live among them.’ ‘A man must look after his own interests.’ ‘I can serve God down there as well as up here.’ Perhaps he even thought that he might be a missionary among these sinners. But at bottom he did not seek first the kingdom of God, but the other things.²

What are your priorities? How do you make decisions? Jesus told his disciples, “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33) Paul's exhortation to Timothy in our New Testament reading echoes this reality.

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share,¹⁹ thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.²

¹ Frank E. Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, Genesis, p. 119.

² Alexander Maclaren, *Maclaren's Expositions*, Genesis, Genesis 13.

Friends, we have to admit that we are blessed upon blessed with material goods. By the world's standards, we *are* rich. We look and see the Bill Gates, Warren Buffetts, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerbergs of the world and think, "Oh, *they* are rich." But the truth is that we are.

The story is told of a struggling congregation. The finance elder got up and said, "We have a money problem. We have plenty of money; the problem is that it is all in your pockets."

When Abram went back to the beginning, he remembered that his first service was as a steward of God's call on his life. The material things he possessed – including the land – were significant only in service to God who had given them. It is why he could offer Lot the choice of land when, as the patriarch, he had both the standing and authority to declare to Lot. Abram's generosity and Lot's self-interest illustrate the difference and consequences of attitude and focus.

What are your priorities? How do you make decisions?

God's renewed promise

Finally, Abram and Lot were moving south from Bethel when they separated. Lot – without deference or thanks – took the road toward Jericho and the Jordan Valley, eventually crossing at the fords of Jordan and moving south on the east side of the Dead Sea to the vicinity of Sodom and Gomorrah.

After Lot separated from Abram, the LORD appeared to Abram again. The LORD renewed the promise of land and offspring. Abram took the road south through Jerusalem and Bethlehem and into the Negev and arrived at Hebron.³ There Abram built an altar to the LORD; having started over in this land, he built a new altar to the LORD in this land as an act of renewed devotion.

We are seeing this quite a bit, so I am only going to touch on these things:

1. **God's plans are not thwarted by our disobedience.** As the LORD declared later in through the prophet Isaiah, "as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return until they have watered the earth...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:10-11) Abram may had detoured into Egypt, but he returned and God renewed the promise that would accomplish *God's* purposes. God's plans through Abram may not have occurred in a linear fashion in our eyes, but they were accomplished nonetheless.
2. **God's timing is not our timing.** We would prefer things happen in a straight line, predictably, and within our control. Abram was 75 and childless when he started on this journey – and 75 years seems like a long time to us. Abram made it to the land God showed him, and then left because of the famine. He returned, humbled. Then began the process of fulfilling the promises God had made him. God renewed the promise and Abram walked

³ John Walton, NIVAC Old Testament, Genesis p. 415.

the breadth of the land God would give him – the land God would conquer generations later when Joshua led them into this Promised land.

3. **God is faithful.** God's promises to Abram were fulfilled. He told Abram, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever." God's patience with Abram is evident. God's word is true. As we remember Genesis is the first of the larger work of Genesis through Deuteronomy, we see that God's word came true. God remained and remains faithful to his word in and through each generation. The invitation – the call to us – is to have eyes to see that faithfulness now and in the midst of our own time. As God has been faithful, God is faithful and will be faithful.

So, raise your eyes. See what God has done. See what God is doing. See what God will do. If you have wandered away, if you are lost, if you are hurting, if you are anxious, if you are despairing about what you see in the world around you, raise your eyes to God. Return to Him. Strive for His Kingdom and righteousness first and know that He is faithful. His kingdom has come, His kingdom is coming. Worship Him, because He is God.

Amen.

Prayer

Hymn: My Faith Has Found A Resting Place

Questions:

1. How would you describe your walk of faith? Has it been a straight line or have there been detours? Highs and lows? Can you think of a time that God has drawn you back or that you realized how far you wandered? What was it like, how did it feel, and what happened to make you return? What was that experience like?
2. What are your priorities? How do you make decisions?
3. How do you see yourself in God's big picture? What is your role? What is the role of this congregation? How has God dealt with you? With us? How have we responded? How should we respond going forward?