

The Cruciform Life: Abraham
by William Morrow

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Texts: Genesis 11:27–12:9; Galatians 3:1-14

I imagine that most of us, by this time of year, regard the Winter conditions around us with some degree of discontent. Spring we reassure ourselves is just around the corner. However, when the weather puts the lie to that hope, we are apt to feel dissatisfied. It is with the concept of dissatisfaction in mind that I turn to think about the cruciform life of Abraham. I invite you to ponder for a few minutes this morning, the spirituality of sacred discontent.

The stories of Abraham, or Abram as he appears in this morning's reading, were told by the Jewish people at the time they also found themselves living in Ur of Chaldees. That's where they had been forcibly deported by the Babylonians after the conquest of Jerusalem. And it was deep in southern Mesopotamia that they heard the call to return home and rebuild their lives in the difficult terrain of Palestine and reconstruct the Holy City.

But, why should they leave? Life was good in Mesopotamia. After a rocky start, the deportees of Judah had begun to climb the social ladder. They were acquiring land, their families were growing, their businesses were prospering and... they were supposed to give this up for what? To many contented to live in Babylonia, the thought of uprooting themselves and returning to Jerusalem must have sounded crazy.

This is the cultural background to the stories of Abraham. He also was asked to make a crazy choice: to leave the land he knew, his relatives, and the society he grew up in to make a risky journey into unknown territory at the behest of God. Of course, we feel concern for the vast number of displaced persons in the world today, for refugees fleeing from war and poverty, desperately seeking a new life often at terrible risk to themselves and their families. But Abram wasn't one of them; he was rich and successful, certainly not in any physical danger. He had no natural incentives to move.

In fact, given the logic of those ancient times, immigration was tantamount to suicide on the installment plan. The call to leave family, native land, and business connections—to travel with a barren wife to an

unknown destination would be felt as the kiss of death by a reader steeped in the traditional cultures of the ancient Near East. It was a journey which would cut Abram off from the social fabric that guaranteed personal survival in this life, and even on the other side of the grave.

The story of Abraham is rich with the features of the cross-shaped life that I talked about in last week's sermon. There is movement from one way of being a person to another. In our bible story, that is literally symbolized by the transition from Ur to Canaan. There is also cultural transgression, because Abraham's choice seems so contrary to the accepted wisdom of the time. What he chose to do by listening to the voice of God went against the ways his society thought the good life was guaranteed. But, of course, Abram's journey also presaged resurrection. For its result produced a new moment in God's economy: Abram's faith will come to bless all the peoples of the earth.

In fact, both the Old Testament and the New assure us that this counter-cultural faith of Abraham's, this cruciform life of his, was a vehicle that came to bless all the world. But, just what on earth do the stories of Abraham bless us with?

Now, I suppose at this point some of you are expecting me to reach into my preacher's magician's hat and pull out a rabbit called, "faith." If so, I am sorry to disappoint. I think the stories of Abraham point us in a different direction. And, for the time remaining, I want to ponder the virtues of "sacred discontent," for that is surely one of the characteristics of the faith of Abraham.

Clearly, Abram was not content with things as they were. But his discontent cannot be explained by the barrenness of his wife. After all there were solutions to that problem that did not involve leaving Harran. No, what motivated Abram was something deeper, some disquiet with his very self and the culture that constructed it, some deep-seated discontent with life as it was that he heard as the voice of God. The symbols of what he rejects are the cities of Ur and Harran, which represented of all that was sacred in Mesopotamian culture. They were centres of intellectual attainment, places of wealth and respectable religion. But for all this, Abram was not content. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, he was willing to be homeless while looking for a city "whose builder and maker is God."¹

Perhaps we can gain some perspective on Abram's motivations by considering the teachings of the ancient rabbis: Traditionally in Judaism

¹ Hebrews 11:8-10

Abram is regarded as the first monotheist. According to rabbinical tradition, he lived in a culture that found gods in all the powers of nature. For example, they thought different gods manifested themselves in stars and storms, the passions of sex and war, in health and disease. It was also a culture that was confident in finding the divine presence in statues made of wood and stone. All this, say the rabbis, Abram rejected. The motivation for his journey was nothing less than the search for a better way to relate to the Creator of the universe, born out of a refusal to equate God with any natural phenomenon.² This same choice faced the early Jews living in Babylon; and they told these stories of the awesome choice of Abraham to encourage themselves as they faced the challenges of leaving Babylon: to make the journey to a place where they could worship the One they believed to be the true God with integrity.

In my opinion, the rabbinic tradition does a credible job of peering into the biblical account and perceiving a vital motive for Abram's actions. It suggests that Abram acted on a kind of sacred discontent. It proposes that the motivation for Abram's journey was to find a better account of God than the one he grew up with. According to the rabbis, young Abram knew that God couldn't be put into a statue. To put this insight into our terms: Abram realized that you can't God in a box.

Certainly, the God of the Bible refuses to be put in a box. That, of course, is the scandal of the cross. As we saw last week, the idea that the Messiah should suffer and die was right outside of the box as far as the disciples of Jesus were concerned. It was not on their radar that God's chosen change agent in history should identify with the socially undesirable and die as one of them. In fact, in every age to contemplate the cross is to allow it to call into question conventional ideas about how God relates to the world and who God wants to relate to. The cross is a vehicle for sacred discontent.

Sacred discontent was also at work among the Galatians. And it is no accident that in the passage we read this morning Paul mentions both Abraham and the cross. Like Abraham, the Galatians had acted out of dissatisfaction with their ancestral religions. As in Ur of the Chaldees, their fellow citizens worshipped many deities and carved images of the divine. It was a costly choice, because it also brought them persecution; but the Galatians had turned to Christ and embraced faith in the living God of the Jews. Nevertheless, Paul also counseled the Galatians to be discontent with efforts to turn them into Jews. Not because he thinks that Judaism is invalid, but because he does not think that is the way

² Rabbinic legends about Abraham are summarized in Louis Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1956).

non-Jews were called to relate to God.³ There is another way for them, and that is the way of the cross.

Why is the concept of sacred discontent so important in a biblically informed life of faith? Herman Schneidau, a scholar of the Bible as literature, once wrote, “In philosophical terms, what the Bible offers culture is neither an ecclesiastical structure nor a moral code, but an unceasing critique of itself.”⁴ Or to put this in other words: contrary to the human propensity to want to think along with Robert Browning that “God’s in His heaven, all’s right with the world,”⁵ large portions of the Bible are anything but content with the world as it is, and it is this discontent that it seeks to bequeath to its readers.

Speaking personally, I have spent my professional life reading the literatures of the ancient Near East and of the civilizations of Greece and Rome. I can assure you that there is nothing like the Bible in these other civilizations. No other collection of writings is as relentlessly critical of the powers-that-be. In the Bible, the people of God are constantly being faced with their own shortcomings and the short-comings of the leaders. The Bible is a masterpiece of sacred discontent.

This perspective should come as no surprise to people who worship in a Presbyterian church. As I shared in a children’s story here during the Summer, the great motto of the Reformation out of which Presbyterianism was born is the Latin phrase, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est*. In high-falutin theological language that translates as “the reformed church is always in need of being reformed.” But as I put it to the kids, “a church that has been fixed up always needs to be fixed up.” Without sacred discontent, there would be no Reformation.

Now, I wouldn’t be surprised at this point, if some of you listening to this sermon found it a bit abstract. And, as I said last week, as I preach these days I find myself running into a certain dissatisfaction with the preaching moment. One of the hopes I have in tying this series of sermons with the Bible studies at St. James is that there will be an opportunity to discuss your perceptions of the scripture’s cruciform paradigm as well as mine. And so I leave you with these questions. I wonder if you can point to a time in your life when you made a decision that went against the grain, one that seemed to contradict the received wisdom of the times? Was there a time when you felt compelled to strike

³ For this perspective on the teachings of Paul see, Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁴ Herman Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 16.

⁵ Robert Browning, “Pippa’s Song.”

out on your own, to make a risky choice? May I suggest, that if that choice resulted in something better in life, some experience of blessing for you and others, that choice was also the result of sacred discontent. And in that moment is it possible that you, like Abram of old, were also responding to the call of God?