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January 12th: Genesis 12 & John 6:22-40

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Abram's call and his time in Egypt; Jesus and the manna.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis chapter 12. 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. "I will make of you a great nation, "and I will bless you and make your name great, "so that you will be a blessing.

"I will bless those who bless you, "and him who dishonors you I will curse, "and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' So Abram went as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran.

And they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the Oak of Moriah. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west, and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord.

And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negev. Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "'I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance. "'And when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "'This is his wife. "'Then they will kill me, but they will let you live.

"'Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me "'because of you, and that my life may be spared "'for your sake.' When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.

And for her sake, he dealt well with Abram. And he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "'What is this you have done to me? "'Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? "'Why did you say she is my sister "'so that I took her for my wife? "'Now then, here is your wife, take her and go.' And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had." The call of Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 plays out against the backdrop of the events of Babel. At Babel, a number of men sought to make their name great, to build a legacy for themselves, to build a tower that reached to the heavens. In Genesis chapter 12, God promises that the nations that have been scattered will be blessed through believing Abraham.

He is called and promised that God will make his name great. In contrast to the men of Babel who sought this achievement for themselves, God is going to do this for Abraham. There's a radical break that Abraham is called to make with his past.

He has to leave country, kindred, and father's house behind him. He has to abandon the legacy that has been given to him. This is the first great test of Abraham.

Is he going to leave his past? And it's important to notice here that it is connected with the last great test of Abraham. The story of Genesis chapter 12 begins with the call. Now the Lord said to Abraham, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you.

And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so

that you will be a blessing. And there is a threefold intensification, your country, your kindred, your father's house. And in chapter 22, we see a similar call.

After these things, God tested Abraham and 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 of which I shall tell you.

It's a similar sort of call. The first is calling him to give up his past. And the final call is a call to give up his future, it seems, the son that he's invested all his hopes in.

Chapter 12 and 13 are bookend structures. As we look through these chapters, we'll see what scholars call a chiasm or there and back again structure. And it helps to understand some of the ways in which details are repeated.

If you look at through the passage, you'll see promises and appearances to God at the very beginning in verses one to three of chapter 12. And at the end in verses 14 and 17 to 17 of chapter 13. At the very beginning, he goes out with Lot in verses four to five of chapter 12.

And then he separates from Lot towards the end of the section in verses five to 13 of chapter 13. And then you have the description of the Canaanites being in the land in verse six of chapter 12 and in verse seven of chapter 13. It seems to be repetitive, but yet it makes sense if you have this there and back again structure, the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelling in the land.

Then he goes to Bethel and to Ai and he pitches his tent with Bethel in the West and Ai in the East. And he builds an altar there in verse eight of chapter 12. And then in the second part of the story in verses three and four of chapter 13, he returns to the same place.

Then we have him journeying to the South in verse nine of chapter 12, and then journeying to the South in verse one of chapter 13. He goes to Egypt in verse 10 of chapter 12 and then departs from Egypt in verse 20 of chapter 12. And then he goes into Egypt saying that Sarah is a beautiful woman.

The Egyptians will see her, say that it is his wife, take her and then he suggests that he say that she is his sister and that he will be blessed for her sake in verses 11 to 13. And it's exactly what we see and what immediately follows in verse 14 to 16. So this whole passage is a unified text and it's parallel through its different parts.

And as we see this working out, it helps us to see that this is a significant movement that's taking place. Some of the things to notice here, first of all, that he goes out with Lot. At this moment in time, Lot would seem to be Abram's natural heir.

He is the one who is the son of his brother Haran who has died. Abram has taken him under his wing and Lot and Abram have a sort of son-father relationship at this point. And it might seem that Lot is the one who's going to fulfill the promises that God has for Abram.

He arrives at Shechem. Shechem will be an important point in the story of Abram. Abram has just been promised here that his family will be made great.

Nothing yet said about the land, just that his family and name will be made great. And then he arrives at the point of Shechem and builds an altar there. But Shechem is a place where the family is divided on a number of occasions.

It's the site where Dinah is seduced by Shechem. And there's a breach in the family at that point as Simeon and Levi seek to avenge their sister and their father fails to take action. We see a similar thing in the story of Joseph.

There's a breach in the family at Shechem as Joseph is sold into slavery by Judah and his brethren. Another breach in the family. At Shechem, Rehoboam and the people are divided and the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom go their different ways.

And so all these breaches in the family of Abraham at Shechem present this site as having some significance. But yet it's at this very site that God promises that he will make Abram's name great and that his family would be a great nation. The very site where the breaches are found in the nation at later points in history is the site that God has promised beforehand that the family will be made great.

So passing through this point is an important thing. Later he arrives at Bethel and Ai. Ai is a significant location too.

It's at Ai that they fail to enter in and take possession of the land. Achan sins by taking devoted items and the people lose the battle. But yet it is at Ai that God promises that he will receive the land.

His offspring will receive the land. He builds an altar there. And so at these two pivotal sites in later history of Israel, we see Abraham building altars, walking through the footsteps that his descendants will later walk.

And that's exactly what we see in the story of his sojourn in Egypt. There's a famine, he goes down to Egypt as a result of a severe famine. When he's in Egypt, Sarai is taken, there's a threat to the bride.

There are plagues upon the Egyptians and Pharaoh. Israel or Abraham's house prospers and they're blessed. He's dealt with well on account of Sarai.

He's given sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys

and camels. And Pharaoh is afflicted until he releases Sarai and sends Abraham and Sarai their way. It's a story of the Exodus.

In advance of what happens in the book of Exodus itself, God is playing out the pattern of the Exodus in the great ancestor of Israel. Abraham walks in the steps that his descendants will later walk. He anticipates the path that they will walk.

Now, why does he deceive Pharaoh in this particular way? Why does he present himself to be the brother of Sarai rather than her husband? Well, if he presents himself as her brother, he's in a better position to protect himself and also in many ways her. As her brother, he can stall for time. He will be courted by Pharaoh.

Pharaoh will try and get on his good side and he's the one who would negotiate marriage arrangements. Whereas if he's her husband, he's the obstacle to be removed. And it's important to remember that Abraham's concern here is not merely his own skin.

Abraham, as we see later on, has a large fighting force with him, 318 men, which makes it likely that Abraham is surrounded by around three or more thousand people in his sheikdom. He's someone who's leading a vast company of people. And if he is killed, all of them are put at risk.

And so the way that Sarai is presented is not merely for his own sake. It's presumably for the sake of the people around him as well. One question.

As we read this passage, we see Abraham anticipating the path and the experience that his descendants will have in history. And yet there are other elements of this story that anticipate Abraham's own life and other events further on in his story and maybe in his immediate descendant, Isaac. What are some of the ways in which this event may have repercussions, the experience in Egypt, that it may have repercussions years later? What are some of the consequences that this event might have as it plays out in the story of Abraham and Isaac? John chapter six, verses 22 to 40.

On the next day, the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had only been one boat there and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum seeking Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, Rabbi, when did you come here? Jesus answered them, Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him, God the Father has set his seal.

Then they said to him, what must we do to be doing the works of God? Jesus answered them, this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent. So they said to him, then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat. Jesus then said to them, truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my father gives you the true bread from heaven.

For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. They said to him, sir, give us this bread always. Jesus said to them, I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I say to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me, I will never cast out.

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my father, that everyone who looks on the son and believes in him should have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day.

Following the feeding of the 5,000 in John chapter six, Jesus is followed by the multitude to the other side of the sea. Finding him there, they seek more of the loaves that Christ has provided. Many of the crowd following Jesus were likely people who lived in poverty.

Following around this wonder worker who was able to multiply loaves and fish might be a reasonably good idea for them. It would be a way to provide them with food and security and as they followed his mission, they might receive some of the benefits, maybe some of the power and the influence that might arise from it. And Jesus challenges them on this front.

They've appreciated the loaves, they've eaten their fill, but they did not see the sign. They saw just the material benefit of eating the loaves. They never actually saw what was truly involved.

And so he tells them not to labor for the food that perishes but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the son of man will give to you. That challenge is responded to by them with that question, what must we do to be doing the works of God? Perhaps a question like, what must we do to be saved? And Jesus challenges that question as well. The question that emphasizes the commandments of God in their plurality by responding with a singular work of God, which is that they believe on the one that he has sent.

And that's precisely what they're failing to do. Maybe they want a series of commandments, but what they've failed to do is to believe in the one that the sign is

pointing to. They've never seen the sign.

They just ate the loaves. At this point, the people now challenge him to produce a sign, which is strange indeed. He's already multiplied the loaves.

What else has he expected to do? They focus on the example of Moses in particular. Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness. As it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat.

And they're saying, okay, you're the prophet like Moses, which is what they were describing him as in verse 14 of this chapter, the prophet who is to come into the world. Moses gave us manna in the wilderness. You should give us manna too.

You should give us this bread so that we can eat and have our fill. But Jesus challenges them. And the passage that follows is an unpacking of their statement, an unpacking of the words from Exodus and from the Psalms and showing that actually there's something far greater going on here.

Who was the one who gave them food? Not Moses. It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my father gives you the true bread from heaven. We've already seen in the book of John this use of the word, the true something, the true vine, the true light, the true shepherd.

Each of these cases, Christ is presented as the one who brings the reality, that which was always anticipated. The signs pointed towards these things, but he is the truth, the reality, the thing that fulfills the signs. Christ is the true bread from heaven.

The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. So the manna was always something that anticipated the greater bread that would come from heaven. The manna was bread from heaven, but the true bread from heaven is Jesus Christ himself.

He comes down from heaven and he gives life to the world. Now, Jesus is within this context, working off the background of reflection upon the character of wisdom, wisdom coming down from heaven, wisdom associated with bread and food. Think about wisdom's feast in chapter nine of the book of Proverbs.

Wisdom invites people to taste of her bread and her wine. And here we see that as well. And that invitation is one that is fulfilled in Christ.

Christ is the true bread that gives life to the world. He is the bread of life. Whoever comes to him shall not hunger.

Whoever believes in him shall never thirst. Similar words to those that were heard by the Samaritan woman. And yet they do not believe him.

There's a failure on their part to perceive what's taking place. And so Jesus' use of the story of the manna is one that takes up their cue, but twists it that shows that there is far more going on in that story. That that story was not just Moses providing food for the Israelites, material food.

It was a sign that anticipated by God's action a greater gift, a greater manna that would come in the future. And that manna is seen in Christ who is the fulfillment of wisdom, but also the fulfillment of the law. The law was also described in a way associated with bread.

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. The law, the words that proceed from the mouth of God are seen as something that is like bread that we eat, that we find strength and sustenance, that we can live by that. And Jesus' response to his challenges here is one that takes their words about the manna and unpacks and reveals a far more glorious picture that that was always anticipating something greater.

Now, already we've seen in this chapter that there is an Exodus pattern played out. But what we're seeing here is that the pattern is not just repeating. There's an escalation.

There's a movement towards something that was anticipated by the first Exodus and which exceeds it. This is the true bread from heaven. Christ is the one that is not merely repeating what Moses did in the wilderness, but is bringing the reality that that always looked forward to.

This passage is clearly reminiscent of other points in the gospel where Jesus presents himself as food and drink. He's the one who provides the wine at the wedding feast. He's the one who promises the water that will mean that those who drink it may never thirst again.

And yet the language of the manna offers another aspect that comes to the foreground, which is where Christ has come from. Christ has come like the manna down from heaven. He has come from the Father.

He's the one who's sent on a mission. He has an existence that precedes his earthly life. He comes from above.

And as he comes from above, he brings the life of the Father down to earth, the life of heaven in a way that the world can now feed upon it and find life. That origin of Christ is something that comes out within the gospel of John in a far clearer way than we see it within Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And this chapter perhaps is one of the strongest declarations of Christ's source from above and his destination that he will return above.

One question to meditate upon. Jesus concludes by saying, and this is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last

day. For this is the will of my father, that everyone who looks on the son and believes in him should have eternal life.

And I will raise him up on the last day. That looking upon Christ may bring back to mind the story of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness so that people may look upon it and find life and deliverance. Jesus' statements about faith in this particular section of John 6 are very important.

They present the theme of faith, which is a very prominent one within the gospel of John in a way that unifies all the different works of God and is also the focus of the will of God. What can we learn about John's vision of faith by reflecting upon these words?