

Following in the footsteps of faith Genesis 11: 27 – 12:9

There are three questions I want to ask?

1. What did he believe about God?
2. How did God speak?
3. How did Abram respond?

And in asking those questions, there are three more to ask:

1. What do you believe about God?
2. How does God speak to you?
3. How do you respond?

But before we get going on them. A bit of background.

Abram or Abraham as he was called later is a dominant figure in the Jewish faith, the Christian faith and the Muslim faith. He is ‘our Father Abraham’ to the Jew; and ‘Abraham the Beloved of Allah’ to the Muslim. To us as Christians he is the model of faith.

It is useful to know that he is important to Jews and Muslims because here is a starting point for a conversation about faith in God with both Jews and

Muslims. They understand his importance as Patriarch and prophet.

The story begins , not with Abram leading the way but Terah, his Father. Having married, he had three children who married and Terah was blessed with grandchildren. Then we are told he leaves Ur in Mesopotamia and moving north along the Euphrates valley to Harran. The Bible does not say why he moved. We can speculate that he was uncomfortable with the religion surrounding the Ziggurat of Ur, its most significant landmark.

What we do need to remember is that this was much more fertile than it is now. In fact the whole area sweeping from Ur across to Canaan and down to Egypt is called the Fertile Crescent. It was the cradle of civilisation as it supported much larger population than elsewhere in the world.

Harran was on what is now the Turkey/Syria border. The journey from Ur to Harran was 600 miles and would have taken over 6 weeks to travel going through Babylon and Nineveh . But at this point Terah stopped, and set down roots. There is no explanation of why. Canaan was the intended destination and that was 400 miles further on - another months journey southwards.

At some point , it is not clear when or where, Abram hears God speak and responds to him in obedience by leaving Harran and travelling to Canaan where God expands on his promise to bless him.

So we come to the three questions:

1. What did he believe about God?
2. How did God speak?
3. How did Abram respond?

This is the point the revelation of God begins in a new way. But Abram couldn't of known it at the time. In fact he possibly knew very little about God. He only has 11 chapters of the Bible to go on! They were not written yet so he learned the stories from Terah, handed down from generation to generation. So he understood God as Creator. As he stood at night looking at the stars, he could feel the magnitude of creation. He knew that God had intended to be able to meet with Adam and Eve. He knew about sin. How Eve was deceived and Adam too. He knew that God. He knew that sin brought huge consequences. Separation from God, exclusion from the garden of Eden, hard toil and death.

Abram also knew the flood story how he destroyed all the world, preserving only Noah and family. He also

knew the Babel story, how human ambition had led to a Ziggurat, like the one in Ur and God had scattered them, producing the development of multiple languages with all the difficulties of understanding each other.

He lived in a world where God was feared. No one has any real idea what God was like. God was worshipped by man-invented rituals that tried to placate an unknown being. To make sense of it all, people around him worshipped anything that appeared to be mysterious. The sun, moon, sexual reproduction, special stones, trees and so on. So they worshipped many gods.

So what Abram believed about God in this culture, we can only speculate. And that is the point. We live in a society that has little idea what God is like. Just as Abram did.

The question is, what changed Abram's thinking?

The answer is God did. God spoke to him. God revealed himself to Abram. But God reveals himself as someone who is seeking to bless Abram in a special way.

So how did God speak? I don't know! Which is problematic for us. If only we knew where he was and what he was doing, we could make a pilgrimage and do the ritual and maybe God will speak to us. Many people throughout history have done just that. Monks live at Sinai, vast numbers visit Jerusalem, Galilee, Lourdes, Walsingham, Makah, the list is endless.

They go just to be in the right place. They perform rituals, say prayers ever trying to reproduce the same scenario in the hope that God will speak to them, like he did to others. We don't know how God spoke to Abram but we know God speaks. And when he speaks he calls us to a walk of faith. God speaks in many different ways to us, sometimes through what someone else says, rarely a hear a voice but it happens, in dreams and other ways. But As the writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 1:1

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,

When Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John, Luke 9:36 says

A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

If you want to hear God's voice today, turn to Jesus, Listen to him. He is the Word of God. He is the way, the truth and the life. That is why we call the Bible "God's word" because it tells us about Jesus and what prophets and Apostles and disciples have heard him say and seen him do.

Listen again to what God said to Abram:

"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

² *"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;*

*I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing*

³ *I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."*

There are two key elements here :

1. The command to go
2. The blessing God was going to give.

Please, please, note that there is no conditions on the blessing. It is not if you go, I will bless you. God knows Abram is going to go and God is going to bless Abram. When we read Hebrews we discover that the action of going is most importantly an act of faith. Hebrews 11:8

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

He went because he believed that the best place for him to be was where God wanted him. This has resonance with Jesus' declaration "I am the way, the truth and the life... in John 14:6

The best place for you and me to be in where God wants us to be. The life God wants for you is the Jesus' life and that is found by following the Jesus' way. God wants to bless us but the greatest blessing of all is to be with him and that means going where the Spirit leads us.

Abram never saw the fulfilment of God's promise. As we see when we read on, he had two children and a large retinue but it would be generations later that God would fulfil his promise and make Israel a great nation. Ultimately the final line of the promise

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you."

Was fulfilled in Jesus. You are receiving the blessing Abram was given because God wants to bless you as you put your faith in Jesus and obey his voice.

Third question was How did Abram respond?

He left an urban life, bought tents camels donkeys to carry all his possessions, his family and his staff and set out. It must have been quite a big caravan. They all had to adapt to living in tents and travelling. And they all followed where Abram went. And he went where God told him to go. Canaan – and there he learned more about the promise. The nation was going to live in Canaan. So our chapter comes to an end with Abram and his entourage sightseeing the land God had promised!

So what are you going to do when God speaks to you? Will you receive the blessing? Will you go where God thinks it best for you to be?

You may well not be asked to move into a caravan but God always wants to take us further into his presence. That means being on the move spiritually, reading his word and listening to the changes God wants to make in your life and my life. God wants to bless you. He loves you so much he sent his only son to die for you, he wants to bless you with the Holy Spirit , he wants you have the best life, his life, the Jesus' life and you get that by following in the Jesus' way, just as Abram did. He believed God and is was counted to him as righteousness.

So the challenge for us today, is to imitate Abram, the man of faith. Find out more about the person of Jesus and as you do so listen for his voice telling to live our what he says. Imitate Abraham, who staked everything on God's promise. He set out on a journey of faith. The action demonstrated his faith. He was rewarded by discovering God kept his promises even if it did not seem that way for a long time. Trust God. Step out in faith and you will discover he keeps his promises and will bless you and keep you by his Spirit and bring you into his heaven for an eternity that indescribably great.