

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Family with a Future

Genesis 11:27-12:9

On the drive from Ur to Canaan, they were an odd assortment of generations. Terah, the grandfather, was in the second row of the minivan, reminiscing about what life was like before television. Abraham, Terah's son, was at the wheel, wondering to himself what the job market would be like in their new hometown. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was in the passenger seat, reading a brochure on infertility that she had picked up at her doctor's office. And Lot, the orphaned grandson, was in the back seat, glued to his phone, checking his Instagram account.

Instead of making it all the way to Canaan, the family's journey stalled out and they ended up settling in Haran. Terah eventually passed away. Looking back, life had never been the same for him after one of his sons had died years earlier. Now Terah himself was dead and buried, having never made it all the way to Canaan. Abraham was now 75, Sarah was still infertile, and Lot, their nephew, was struggling to settle into a steady career of some sort. The whole situation was very uncertain. Prospects for the family's future looked bleak.

That's when the Lord showed up and spoke to Abraham. God told him to resume the journey to Canaan. He promised to make Abraham into a great nation. So Abraham took Sarah and Lot, along with slaves and possessions, and set out for the place where God was calling them to go. After arriving in Canaan, Abraham gets another appearance from God informing him that this is the land promised to his descendants. Abraham then moves through the land, from north to south. Along the way, he, and presumably his family, perform acts of worship as a way of expressing gratitude for God's promise and the future that lies before them.

Now that we're at a point in the story where the spotlight is on Abraham and Sarah, it helps to remember that they themselves have already been embedded in a larger story. God's will and purpose didn't just get underway when he appeared to Abraham. We're already deep into the narrative of Genesis. By this stage, we've already been given eleven chapters describing how God created the world, how the world has fallen into sin and violence, how God has been involved in the life of the world's inhabitants, and now, how God takes the initiative to save, zeroing in on this one couple in order to launch his plan of redemption.

Remember that Abraham and Sarah didn't just appear out of the blue. They themselves have a lineage. Their family tree goes way back into the story of humanity. In the verses leading up to today's text, we get the fifth of ten genealogies contained in the book of Genesis. This one moves from Shem, one of three sons of Noah, to Terah, who also has three sons, one of whom is Abraham. And Abraham's family line is itself woven together with all the family units of the known world. Somehow, somehow, God has been present, involved, and engaged with the life of his creation. Human unfaithfulness and disobedience, and the evil that pervades the world, have not kept God from pursuing his goal of a reclaimed creation. And the way to this redeemed world begins with the word of God entering into one family's very uncertain circumstances.

For God, the redemption of the world is a multigenerational project. Grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. On and on the family tree goes. Earlier in our service, we gave thanks for the gift of Audrey Rose Quade, whose birth marks the expansion of her family's tree. Mother's Day is, by its very nature, a multigenerational occasion. Being a mother involves having a child, and being a child involves having a mother. One generation, having received life from those who preceded them, now gives life to the next generation.

This connectedness between generations is essential in the life of a congregation. We often speak of ourselves as a church family, partly to convey a sense of the closeness or intimacy of our relationships with one another. But thinking of ourselves as a family also has to do with the inter-generational shape of our life together. In other words, church is a community where the young and the old can come together and share life with one another. This doesn't come easily or naturally. Even when individuals of various age groups share the same pew, there can still be differences that make unity a challenge. These differences are often rooted in our life experiences. When you were born has a significant influence on the way that you view the world, how you perceive people of other age groups, and how you navigate your way through life.

Some experts maintain that generational differences are the largest challenge facing today's churches. In some churches, there are five generations within the congregation. This is something that's never happened before. Traditionalists (born 1945 or earlier), Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (born 1965-1980), Millennials (born 1981-2000), and Generation Z (born since 2000)—all assembled in the same household of faith, usually with different interests, values, and priorities. Sometimes this can be a source of friction. But it can also be a great opportunity for spiritual growth and connection. Christian congregations are in a unique position to bring people together across generational boundaries as a visible sign, a living embodiment of God's will for the human family.

During the past year, one part of our church family's life that has felt a huge impact has been our children's ministry. Not being able to gather in person for Sunday School, Children's Church, or Vacation Bible School has left our congregation's boys and girls without opportunities for face-to-face fellowship, Bible study, and worship. It has been hard to get into a rhythm with our children's sermon. Our day care ministry had to close. As we look ahead through the summer and into the fall, I ask you to join me in prayerfully seeking the Lord as to how we can begin to renew our congregation's commitment to and engagement with the youngest generation here in this church family.

And as we do that, God will continue to unfold his plans and purposes for our congregation. Some of that will begin not just here in the congregation, but in your own household, with your own family. That's one of the critical places where you proclaim and practice the promises of God. I like the way one person has put it when he says:

Abraham was chosen to be a blessing to the whole earth, but his vocation was to begin to take effect in the simplest way. He was called to teach his own household, who again would hand down the truth to their households. His being a blessing to the world depended on his being a blessing to his own home.¹

The life of this family called Grace Baptist Church is tied to the life of your own family. How you and your family receive and respond to the word of God in your life together bears upon how we as a congregation receive and respond to the word of God in our life together. If we want to be a blessing to one another here in this household of faith, then some of that

has to begin by being a blessing to one another in our homes. We have to preserve and transmit the promises of God within our own four walls.

Reflecting on his childhood in China, Author Os Guinness tells about how, at age five, he was sent to attend a boarding school far from home, in Shanghai. He says:

Obviously, the conditions behind the decision to send me out at that age were extreme, and I was not the only one launched on that path so young. But it was the first time in my life that I had been away from my parents and on my own. So, to give me a constant reminder of the North Star of the faith at the center of our family life, my father had searched for two small, smooth, flat stones and painted on them his life motto and that of my mother. For many years those two little stones were tangible memos in the pockets of my gray flannel shorts that were the uniform of most English schoolboys in those days. In my right-hand pocket was my father's motto, "Found Faithful," and in my left-hand pocket was my mother's, "Please Him."²

Though the stones were lost when Guinness and his family fled during China's communist revolution, he says that he never forgot the lesson of those little stones. "Found faithful" and "Please him." That was part of what his parents passed on to him. And his experience is a challenge to reflect on how others have transmitted to us the call to faithfulness, and how we're transmitting that call to succeeding generations in our households and in our church.

A couple of years ago, one financial advisor wrote about how it has become harder and harder to pass on family heirlooms, particularly the big, old stuff. Things like dining room tables and chairs, end tables, armoires, and the like. Many children just don't need or want these types of items from their parents, especially if they're trying to avoid clutter in their lives. One person has summarized it this way:

This is an Ikea and Target generation. They live minimally, much more so than the boomers. They don't have the emotional connection to things that earlier generations did. And they're more mobile. So they don't want a lot of heavy stuff dragging down a move across country for a new opportunity.³

Abraham and Sarah probably would have been Ikea or Target shoppers. In that day and time, mobility was a way of life for many people. Especially when you've been summoned by God to leave behind all but your immediate family and set out toward a place that God will show you, it's important to live minimally. Clutter can make it hard to follow the call of the Lord. So Abraham and his household had to simplify. They became experts in moving on.

As we and our church keep moving on, we'll need to keep holding the generations together in one household of faith. We'll need to keep reminding one another of God's word and teaching one another his ways. We'll need to keep gathering both the young and the old to worship the Lord and to give him thanks for his redeeming work. We'll need to keep blessing one another and being a blessing to others. We'll need to keep returning to God's promise that he's at work, forming a family with a future.

¹ James Strachan, *Leadership* (vol. 7, No. 2).

² Os Guinness, *Impossible People* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016) n.p.

³ Lloyd Alter, "Nobody Wants the Family Heirlooms Anymore." Treehugger website. June 17, 2019. <https://www.treehugger.com/nobody-wants-family-heirlooms-any-more-4867655> (May 6, 2021).