

# Genesis 12:1-9

December 9, 2018

Willoughby Heights CanRC

Rev. R.C. Janssen

Read: Gen 11:1-9, 27-32; Hebr 11:8-16

Psalm 105:2,3,4,5

Text: Genesis 12:1-9

Amen-song: Hymn 67:1,5,6,7

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests, in many Christian calendars the four Sundays prior to Christmas are known as the Sundays of Advent. The word “advent” means something like “to be coming”, “to be about to arrive”, “to come to”. The days of Advent are the period of expectation with respect to the coming One, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Advent has never been big in Reformed circles. One reason for that is probably the wrong impression that celebrating Advent can give. For us today, Advent should be about thinking back how people expected His first coming, how He came, and then consciously experiencing the anticipation of His final coming which still lies in the future. But in the practice of many, Advent simply becomes an attempt to re-experience the sense of anticipation people had prior to the first coming of the Christ, hoping for a good and perfect world, a world full of light and bliss. It’s as if people want to relive the experiences of the old covenant saints, but go no further. And that’s a huge impoverishment of Advent.

However, it would also be an impoverishment to ignore Advent. To experience the weeks of December as simply part of our daily busy routines, with the added pressure that comes because of the family gatherings that Christmas bring, and then on top of that yet the commercialization of Christmas. Ignoring Advent would not be good. Advent can help us focus on the darkness of our lives without God and the light which came with the Christ and will come with the Christ. Malachi (4:2) spoke of Him as the Sun of Righteousness – that’s Sun with a ‘u’. Advent helps gain a deeper understanding of the Old Testament accounts. They are not just stories with a moral message, they are part of God’s story, of the History of Salvation. Being mindful of Advent can help us shape our expectation of the final coming of the Christ. The expectations of those in the past are to be examples for us, they serve to warn us, to instruct and encourage us (1Corinthians 10:11; Romans 15:4). As Hebrews 11 tells us, we are to have faith in God, the way the ancients did.

And last, but certainly not least, focusing on the path to the first coming of the Christ will have us marvel at God’s great deeds and how, in spite of all manner of opposition and frustration, He kept His promise. The very fact that God had the promise fulfilled should have us brim with confidence regarding the Return of our Lord and Saviour.

In two Advent sermons we want to pay attention to two key people in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ, two people pointed out specifically by the Gospel writer Matthew. Matthew begins his Gospel with the words: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

This morning we want to hear the gospel as revealed through Abraham, whom Scripture calls the father of all believers. The latter part of his life was one of constant Advent. This was the man who “did not know where he was going”, one who “did not receive the things promised”, seeing them and greeting them “only from afar” (Hebrews 11:8b, 13b). How did this man experience his walk of life with God? How did God make progress in the History of Salvation with this man? What do we, who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, learn from the accounts of the life of this man, accounts which God had written down and preserved for future generations?

Abram. His story does not begin the history of this world. For Abram lived around 2000 years before Christ. The world is older. There’s been a history of thousands of years as described in Genesis 1-11. A history that tells of the rebellion of humans against God. Of a man who was jealous of his brother and

killed him. A history that relates how human society degenerated into violence and immorality to the point that God's analysis of man was: "every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). God continued with Noah, but evil remained too. The only one that was righteous became drunk and lay naked in his tent. Grandson Canaan makes fun of his grandfather Noah, and father Ham is okay with it. Then there's the account we read in Genesis 11. Man became proud: "Let us make a name for ourselves." Before Abram there is a history of humans rebelling against God. And a history of God's response. Adam and Eve were banished from Paradise. Cain was banished from his family. Humanity was all but wiped out by the Great Flood. Ham and his son Canaan were cursed. The unity of humanity was broken by the introduction of languages and cultures. The history of this world prior to Abram as described in Genesis 1-11 is one marked by human rebellion and divine judgment.

In the time of Abram things looked bleak. Man cannot save himself from sin and misery. By nature humans are dead. They are called to trust God and obey Him, loving God and their neighbor. But by nature they hate God and their fellow human beings. Man is by nature a self-centred creature and when push comes to shove, humans will do anything to save their own necks. How is man to be saved from a life that is nothing but a constant death?

God will save man. He had promised salvation way back in Paradise, right after man had rebelled against God. The woman's seed will crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). Spoken as a curse to the enemy it is to us humans the mother of all promises. Liberation is promised by Almighty God. And, as man has proven to be incapable of bringing about that salvation, God will increasingly involve Himself in the salvation of man, until the fullness of time has come when the Christ of God could be born. And so one of the things we learn from our text this morning is that Almighty God is a caring, faithful God.

**We listen to the good news of salvation with this theme: In spite of our rebellion, God is faithful, continuing His efforts to save humanity through Abram. We will pay attention to (1) God's call; and (2) God's welcome.**

### **1. God's call**

It had been years since the dispersion of humanity over the face of the earth. Man no longer lived in one huge city, but in smaller settlements around the globe. Villages and cities were born. One of those cities was Ur, located at the end of what we today call the Persian Gulf.<sup>1</sup> It was an important city on the trade route between the Mediterranean, especially Egypt, and the Far East, especially India. Ur, it would seem, was a city where people had all but forgotten about Noah. They were idol worshipers (Joshua 24:15). In Ur lived Terah with his family. With them the LORD God decided to make a new beginning. This family will take history further on the road to salvation.

In Ur Terah's family consisted of three married sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. All three married. Nahor and Haran received children, Abram did not. Haran's son was Lot. Now in Ur the LORD called Abram to head out (Gen. 15:7; Acts 7:2). It's interesting to note that, initially, the whole family of Terah becomes part of this venture. Except for Haran, as he had already died. They all set out. But as they travel north-west along the banks of the Euphrates river, at the place where they should start heading south-west to Canaan, they stop. They settle in Haran. But at some point Abram continued the journey, leaving Haran behind.

It's not clear whether Genesis 12:1-3 tells of what happened in Ur or in Haran. The ESV allows for both interpretations by noting in the footnote that the past tense could also be a pluperfect tense. What we

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars will argue that "Ur of the Chaldeans" was actually in the region that straddles southern Turkey and northern Syria, where Haran is. The thought is that Ur was a village in the region of Haran.

need to note is the extreme nature of God's call. Abram is to leave his country, his kindred (his relatives), and his father's household. Abram is to become an emigrant. He has to leave everything behind that would support him in life. He has to go it alone, start life on his own. Oh yes, do remember that Abram was 75 when this happened. Sarai was 65. And they had no children. No future.

God's call is proof of God's faithfulness. Centuries, millennia earlier, God had promised to destroy the serpent. In the midst of fear and consternation God had provided comfort and hope. But it seemed to have gone nowhere. God had been more occupied with battling the rebellion of man than with saving man. But that's now changing. God grabs a man, takes him out of his life, has him live purely with God. "Abram, leave everything behind. Trust Me. Obey Me." Abram had to walk with God. And when Abram settled in the wrong place, God had him move on. God made sure His will is done, His plan is executed. Take note of God's loyalty!

Abram also received a tremendous promise. God will make him into a great nation. Incredible, for Abram's wife Sarai was barren. God would prove His power and loyalty by granting Abram a child. And through Abram, through Abrams children, there would be blessing. For the nation that would come from Abram would belong to God. God would not let this nation drift, as He had let the peoples drift ever since the Plunge into Sin. No, He would involve Himself very directly with this people. In this way God would secure the passage of His Plan for Salvation. And because of this, Abram's name would be great. Abram's name: later he would receive a new name from God, Abraham, father of many nations. And his grandson would receive a special name, by which God's people would be known: Israel, prince of God. And to safeguard the execution of God's Plan of Salvation, Abram's friends would be blessed and Abram's enemies would be cursed. Cain turned on Abel, and Abel died. But after Abram, when Esau turned on Jacob, God kept Jacob safe. And when Judah turned on Joseph, God kept Joseph safe. And eventually He even converted Judah! Abram, and all who will descend from him in the line to the Christ, will receive God's special protection and guidance.

There's a hint of God's future reconciliation through a descendent in the blessing Abram received. The last line of the blessing "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed." "In Abram", for the line of the seed of the woman that begins with Adam and Eve runs through Abram. And it will end with Jesus the Christ. For Paul refers back to this blessing in Galatians 3 and then notes: "so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." (Galatians 3:14).

In calling Abram away from his country, his family and household, God emphasized how necessary it is for us humans to rely, not on others but on God for bringing about salvation. Abram had to learn to live by faith.

Here's one thing we can learn from the call of Abram. God's faithfulness. God fulfills His promise. We see how man's rebellion does not prevent God from achieving His purposes. It might, in our perception, create delay. But it does not cause God to abandon His plan. And so, what's true with a view to the first coming of the Christ also holds for the final coming of the Christ. We can depend on God. The call of God to fulfil one's role in God's plan of Salvation should be responded to with faith. There will be a church professing faith until Christ returns.

We should also note Abram's response to God's call. Abram was originally an idol worshipper. He knew of God, but did he initially truly serve God? Called to leave Ur, he kind of runs stuck in Haran. But look, Abram got up and left, again. He gets all his stuff together, Sarai gets ready for the road again. Lot decided to tag along as well. Nahor remains behind in Haran. And maybe Terah too, we don't know when exactly Terah died. Abram and company began to wander south along the trade route that ran through Syria. Via Damascus he would have entered Canaan and reached the Valley of Jizreel. And there, instead of heading further along the coastal route, he ascended what would later be known as the hill country of Ephraim.

This is amazing. If you were reading the Bible for the first time and were to start reading in Genesis – kind of hard to imagine as most of us have grown up with the Bible but still; if you were reading the Bible for the first time and were to start reading in Genesis, and then come to Genesis 12, you'd think "people aren't like that." In the first chapters of Genesis there's just one man who is like Abram, doing the unthinkable. That was Noah, who built an ark at the command of God. It makes us wonder, what made Abram respond in faith?

Indeed, Abram's faith is a miracle. Abram did not know where he was going. God promised him he'd be the father of a great nation. But he was old, his wife was old, and they had no children. And yet Abram went. He took God's outstretched hand and said: "LORD, I trust you. Lead the way. I'll go where You will tell me to go."

And Abram wanders into south, to Canaan. To Canaan. Boys and girls, remember who Canaan was? Canaan was the man who had made fun of his grandfather Noah. The man who was cursed. And once in Canaan, Abram doesn't skirt the nation, take the route by the sea. Instead, he climbs the hills of Canaan. For that is where God is leading him. What makes him do it?

It's not as if Abram is of himself such a strong believer to begin with. He sets out from Ur, but settles in Haran. God has to get him going again. And when we read on in the history of Abram, we see him wander into Egypt. On two occasions we find him unsure whether God will protect his wife. At one point in time he agrees to Sarai's plan on how to father a child. As one reads through the accounts on Abram one sees a man growing in faith. Where does this faith of Abram come from? What causes him to grow, rather than to slide back into unbelief? Of course, it is God. Faith is the work of God in man. God is not only the one extending the call to Abram. God is also working in Abram to accept the call. The call and the promise come from God. And so does the response of faith.

Brothers and sisters, this is how God works. This is how *your* God works. When He begins something, He brings it to completion. In spite of opposition. In spite of ignorance and disinterest. God continued on the road to Salvation, on the way to the crushing of the head of the serpent. God continues, also today, on the road to Salvation, on the way to final defeat of Satan and the ushering in of the new creation. Will you trust God to do as He has promised? Have faith in your God, just as Abram had faith in God and went, though he did not know where.

## **2) We come to Genesis 12:6, and to our second point: the welcome of God.**

There Abram stands at Shechem. Shechem is the geographical centre of the Promised Land. Abram was thus surrounded by Canaanites, who had been cursed by God. At that time Shechem was also something like the capital city of Canaan. For it was the religious centre of Canaan. "The oak of Moreh" is not just a reference to a geographical location. Canaanite religion centred around trees. The oak of Moreh was a centre of cultic worship. Something like a temple.

Abram by the oak of Moreh in Shechem, the centre of Canaan. That's Abram standing in the middle of the devil's playground.

It's like a Christian in Mecca or Las Vegas today.

And then God said: "To your offspring I will give this land."

There's a few things that this welcome says or implies.

First of all, God says "Abram, you've arrived. This is it. This is where you were going." The journey has come to an end. God's first promise has been fulfilled. Once, when Abram has a child, he can point his son to the land. "This is what the Lord is giving you."

A son... God uses the word "offspring." There's that promise again of children. Abram would have enough descendants to fill the whole land. But there were still no children. Not even one. It's been a while since Abram left Haran. But Sarai's not expecting. Will it be?

And note too, God does not say *Abram* will be given the land, but *his offspring* will receive the land.

The journey has come to an end, but Abram cannot simply settle down. He has to pitch his tent in no-man's land, in the hills between the towns of Bethel and Ai. Abram is a stranger in the promised land. A permanent resident, but not a citizen. He has to practice patience. God does not fulfil His promises overnight. God is looking for faith in His promises.

And Abram's response is indeed, one of faith. He hears God's word of welcome and the first thing he does is build an altar to the Lord. He builds his own altar. He does not use one of the altars of the Canaanites. He doesn't use the great tree of Moreh by Shechem as his centre of worship. He serves another God. And thus he worships with another altar. One does not mix the worship of the one true God with the worship of other so-called gods.

This building of an altar is also a signal to the Canaanites. Altars were monuments of the claim of a divinity to a region. By building an altar to the LORD, to Yahweh (note the capital letters!), Abram claims the land of Canaan for God. Picture it: the stranger Abram builds an altar in the playground of the devil, right in the centre. In Shechem. And a little while later another one, between Bethel and Ai. The LORD is present in Canaan.

For the Canaanites this was a warning. Once they had been cursed by God. Would the presence of Abram remind them of their curse? Would they turn from their wickedness to serve God as they ought? Or would they continue in their sinful ways, in their accursed idolatry, and thus fill the measure of sin to the point that God would execute His judgment over them? We know what would later happen. The point is, it isn't as if Canaan could not have known. Abram lived in their midst as a sojourner and bearer of God's promise. So would Isaac and Jacob after them. When Israel comes to Canaan almost 600 years after our text Canaan could have known...

God is faithful. God's welcome to Abram indicates that a first part of the promise has been fulfilled and more is coming. Abram responds in faith. In the midst of idol worshiping Canaan he will serve and worship the one true God.

But Abram is not quite there yet. He doesn't feel comfortable in Canaan's centre. And so he journeys on, heading south towards the Negeb, moving to the fringe. And when famine strikes, he heads further yet, away from the Promised Land, into Egypt. Abram's faith has yet to grow.

What we do see is how God is faithful. And we, who live today, we have seen it in the coming of the Christ. The Son of God became a human being. Like Abram, He stood in the midst of the devil's playground. In fact, the devil even showed our Saviour that it was all under his control (Matthew 4). But Jesus the Christ remained faithful to God. He did not move on but challenged Satan, building an altar on which He sacrificed Himself right in the middle of the Promised Land. And thus the promise of God made to Abram that through Abram all nations would be blessed was fulfilled. We too, whatever our ethnic background, belong to God's people, belong to the household of faith, consider Abram our father.

Now, even today the History of Salvation has not yet run its course. In a sense one can say, we've been saved. But in another sense it's more proper to say, we're being saved. Like Abram we live by God's promise. Some promises fulfilled, others yet to be fulfilled. We look forward to the Return of our Saviour and Lord from heaven, to judge the living and the dead. We look forward to a new creation. We look forward to God's dwelling with us.

Abram claimed the land for the LORD by building altars. We claim the world for Christ by building churches. They are a call to the world, to return from evil ways to serving God. They are evidence of our faith, our conviction that God will win through. Let us never slacken our pace but run the race that is set before us, by faith, being sure of what we hope for and convinced of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

**In spite of our rebellion, God is faithful, continuing His efforts through Abram.** Advent is a time of looking forward to the coming of the Christ of God. Abram rejoiced at the thought of seeing Christ's day. And he saw it (John 8:56). We've seen it too. Let us confess our God, who is faithful still. Let us learn from

Abram, who lived by faith. Let's be encouraged to walk as he did, rejoicing at the thought of seeing the day of Christ that is yet coming. Knowing full well, that we will see it. For the good news is, not we, but God will make it happen.

Amen.