

God's call

Bible basis: Genesis 12:1-9; 17

Key question: How do we discern in our own lives God's call to a relationship grounded in trust?



Called by God

Everything begins with God's call. In the beginning, God called the universe into existence. But that does not mark the end of God's interactions with creation. In this session, the core story of Abram and Sarai (later Abraham and Sarah) tells how God called our predecessors in faith into relationship grounded in trust. But we do not study this core story simply out of curiosity for "back then." In studying these stories we open ourselves to God's continuing call into the life of faith.



God calls all sorts of people into such relationship; even people like you and me. Even those who pray daily and tithe. Even those who might cause a wave of shock were they to enter one of our sanctuaries some Sunday morning. Why? God determines whom God will call, not us.

Think about some biblical characters that might fit those "surprising" standards. What, for you, makes their call both understandable and surprising?

Rahab (Joshua 2:1-14)

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Simon Peter (Mark 8:27-33)

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Jacob (Genesis 27:1-19)

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Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-10)

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Who was Abram?

Turn to Genesis 11:27-32. This is the first mention of Abram in the Bible. Write down everything these verses tell you about Abram. On the map below, note the places mentioned in the text.



Read back over Genesis 11:27-32. Is anything said there about why God calls Abram? Hmm. Let's try Genesis 12:1-9. Is anything said there about why God calls Abram instead of, for example, his brother Nahor? *Nada*. Nothing. Maybe Abram had some distinctive qualities, but the text says nothing. For the author of Genesis, it did not matter at this point who Abram was.

Why do you suppose that is so? What matters first and foremost is God's choice to enter into this relationship with Abram. Like the covenant with Noah we looked at last week, the covenant with Abram reminds us relationship with God begins in grace. Consider what all of this might have to do with you and with God's calling in your life.

1. First, what do you think it means to be called by God? Do you think it is an audible voice? Something else?

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2. What does it mean to you that God's calling is grounded "in grace"?

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3. What does God's grace mean for how you understand this relationship and for how you respond to God's call?

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God's call and Abram and Sarai's journey



Journey is a powerful image of the life of faith. At the very beginning of our faith story is the call of God that sets Abram and Sarai walking. God's call in Genesis 12:1 came with risks: Leave everything familiar and journey with me into the future I am promising you.

Look again at the map of their journey on page 14. Note how long they had already traveled to get from Ur to Haran. By the scale provided there, we are talking 300 or so miles – and that was probably as the crow flies, which is not how roads are designed. Already, the journey would have been physically daunting and now, hundreds of miles more... on foot? But the physical challenge likely paled in comparison with the social and emotional and familiar hurdles to be overcome.

Imagine yourself setting out on a journey that in all likelihood would mean you never again see the place you had known as home or be reunited with friends and family. What would be most difficult for you to leave behind, and why? In the space below, reflect on these questions and those things and persons they call to mind.

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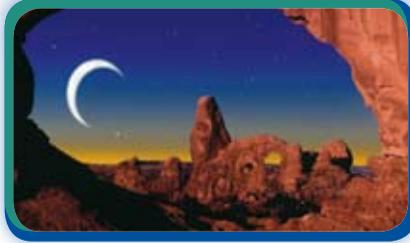
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God's call and our journeys



Like Abram and Sarai, God's call comes to us in the middle of real life. God's call comes to us in ordinary and extraordinary moments. When have you experienced the call or presence of God in your life?

Below is a time line for your life. At the far left margin is your birth. At the far right margin is this present moment. The line running through the middle connecting them is something of a "median" line. In the space above that line would be experiences or events in your life that you consider highpoints. In the space below that line would be experiences or events in your life that you might consider "down" times. Mark what you consider to be key or decisive moments in your life (education, illness, first job, marriage, leaving home, divorce, or others), and place them above or below the line, depending on how you experienced them. Do the same with experiences or events you associate with some awareness of God's presence or call, or perhaps crises in faith. Be aware, too, of how the "secular" moments may in fact contain glimpses or revealings of God's call in your faith. If you need more space, use a full size sheet of paper turned sideways.

Birth ————— Present

As you look back on those experiences:

1. Were you keenly aware of God's call or presence at the time something was happening or did that come more by hindsight?
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2. Are there patterns or connections between significant moments of transition in your life and your experience – then or now – of God's call?
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3. What, or who, has helped you discern God's call in those times?
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4. What wisdom have you gained for your spiritual journey from these experiences of God's call?
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New names, new possibilities



How long does change take? Twenty-four years have passed between the promises of Genesis 12 and the narrative of Genesis 17. Abram and Sarai are still on a journey. Not only are they still walking. They are still childless. If you were promised something by someone and 24 years had passed, would you still be expecting that promise to be fulfilled?

To make matters more extreme, the text declares Abram's age to be 99. I suspect that those who make it to this age tend to be looking back more than ahead. But God is not yet done with call, nor with promises. God declares, "I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5). Notice the verb tense there. It is not *will make* – it is *have made*. God speaks as though this promise has already taken place. Meanwhile, Abram knows he is 99 and childless. Would you still trust?

God persists, reminding Abram of the promise made a quarter-century ago. And the persistence takes an intriguing form: God changes Abram's name. He is now *Abraham*, literally meaning "ancestor of a multitude." God is not done with this naming business, either. Sarai's name becomes *Sarah*, which means "princess."

What is it about new names that suggests the promises still hold life? In the biblical world, names were closely connected to identity. What one was called often tended to be associated with who one was – or, who one was to become. Perhaps even more fundamentally, however, the gift of a new name promises the gift of a new identity.

And here, old Abram and Sarai become new Abraham and Sarah. The change in names brings the new possibilities of life transformed – and birthed – by God's call and purposes.

New names are given and the covenant now hinges on Abraham and Sarah exercising trust.

Or, to use a synonym for trust: *faith*.

Faith *does/trusts/commits*



1. For you, what does the word *faith* mean?

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2. Write about a time in your life when you either felt very confident in your faith or a time when faith seemed far from your grasp. In either case, how was God present?

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A new name does not guarantee faith. But in the story of Abraham and Sarah, faith becomes the basis of their response to the promises and covenant of God. And through the story of Abraham and Sarah, faith becomes the basis for our response to the promises and covenant of God.

In English, the word *faith* is used only as a noun. We do not have a verb “to faith,” and that is unfortunate because faith, in the biblical witness, implies action. Faith is not passive. It is active. Look at the story of Abraham and Sarah. Faith was not a body of doctrinal content about the nature of God. Faith meant putting one foot in front of the other the rest of their lives. So it is for us. Faith is not simply what we *believe about* God, although it is that. Faith is what we *do* in response to God.

The Abraham and Sarah stories convey the sense of faith as “trust.” First there was the trust that the journey – leaving home and going out into places never seen – was indeed a matter of God’s call. Then there was the trust that the heir through whom the promise of numerous descendants, a land, and being a blessing to the families of the earth would eventually be born, and that the promise would live on long past the lifetimes of Abraham and Sarah. Trust in God relies upon promises. Perhaps more fundamentally, trust in God relies on the good God seeks for us and all creation.

Faith is not just believing what the Bible says or what God says – faith is believing in the call and promises of the Holy One. Faith is not just what we believe about God. Faith involves commitment to those ways and calls. This commitment transforms our lives, just as it transformed those of Abraham and Sarah.

1. List some songs or Bible verses that express something about your faith – what you believe.

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2. Write about a person who, for you, is an example of faith. Why is this so?

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Looking back - and looking ahead



Review what we have covered in this session. In the space below, write about the idea from this session that has been most important for you and how each section relates to your practice of faith and Christian community.

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Blessing

Holy God, your call comes to us all, in times and in ways and sometimes in persons we do not expect. You call us to trust and to exercise justice. You call us to hope and to live in a way that brings hope to others. Open our eyes to follow you in new ways to new ones, and journey with us. Thank you for the gift and grace and for the relationships we have with you and in community. In Jesus Christ. Amen.



Faith practice

Imagine that a young adult or child you care about is asking you, “When the Bible says God calls us into relationship, what does that mean?” What might you point to from the Abraham and Sarah stories, or from one of the other call stories on page 13, that would provide a starting point for the conversation? What might you point to from your own life? Write about your thoughts in the journal you started last week.

