

March 1, 2026
Genesis 12:1-4a

Lent 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Call and Response”

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you ... So Abram went, as the LORD had told him.”

A ritual that accompanied any game in my childhood neighbourhood has “choosing sides,” picking the players for the teams that would soon be competing in baseball, touch football, kickball, or whatever sport we would be playing that day. Two persons were chosen as captains and then began the process of picking the players for their teams. The first players chosen were always the best athletes, those who had proven themselves to be outstanding in any sport. The next group were those who were competent players, who might not help their team but did not do any harm either. Finally, there were the “leftovers,” those who had no athletic ability and could cause great damage to their team by merely being on the field. This last group was usually chosen with great reluctance (I know, because I was always in this group!); if the captains had a choice, they would have bypassed this last group and left them on the sidelines.

Since we lived in the same neighbourhood for years with very little change in the lineup of potential players, choosing sides almost always had the same result – until one day, when something happened that shook the very essence of our after-school games. The captains began as usual, each choosing one of the star athletes for their first choice. But then something unexpected happened: when it was time for the second choice, Mike chose Jimmy, one of my fellow non-athletes who was always in the last group to be chosen. At first there was a gasp of shock, and then Mike’s teammates began to chastise him for this unusual choice: “*Why did you pick Jimmy? He stinks! He’s going to make us lose the game!*” But Mike would not be swayed; he repeated his choice of Jimmy, never explaining his reasons and refusing to change his choice.

There are times when the choice of someone to play on a team, lead an organization, or become an elected official seems to be an unexpected and even inappropriate choice. As a fan of the New York Giants, I remember when my team drafted an unknown quarterback from a small university in Kentucky who looked too young and too small to play professional football. Giants fans were outraged that the team would waste their draft choice on someone who would not have been chosen for a

game of flag football; but that quarterback was Phil Simms, who led the Giants to their first Super Bowl victory and is now in the Hall of Fame. In 2017, many people in New Zealand were shocked when a 34-year-old woman was elected Prime Minister; but Jacinda Ardern went on to serve her country faithfully for many years and has received many honours since her retirement from politics. In many circumstances, a person who at first appeared to be an unlikely choice turns out to be the ideal person for that position.

The story of God's relationship with God's people begins when God chooses a person to be the patriarch of this nation and the one who will receive the covenant from the Lord. The first eleven chapters of Genesis record the biblical account of the creation that God declared to be *"very good"* (Genesis 1:31), and how God placed human beings into this perfect creation with only one condition: *"You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you shall eat of it you shall die."* (2:16-17). Of course, the first humans violate this one commandment and soon find themselves banished from the garden, so that now *by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" (3:19). The world devolves into such a wicked place where *"every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually* (6:5) that the Lord sends a great flood to obliterate this sinful humanity; but having chose Noah to ride out the flood with a remnant of creation, God makes a covenant with Noah that *"as long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease"* (9:22). Even though humanity has not been faithful to God, God has chosen to remain faithful to humanity, a faithfulness that will result in the establishment of a new nation that will be God's covenant people.

The story of the beginning of this new covenant people begins with the introduction of a man named Terah who was a descendant of Shem, one of Noah's sons. We are told very little about him; he was a native of "Ur of the Chaldeans," a city in southeast Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) and that he had three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. While Haran died at a young age, both Abram and Nahor took wives, the wife of Abram being Sarai. For reasons that are not explained at the time, the author adds the detail that *"Sarai was barren; she had no child"* (11:30). Terah and his family were traders who followed the traditional trading route known as the "Fertile Crescent" that took them north to Haran before the route turned southwest toward Canaan and Egypt. It is in this place that the Lord, without explanation, speaks to Abram and commands him to *"go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you"* (12:1). God's command to Abram is radical; he is calling on Abram to leave behind everything that is familiar

and safe, everything that identifies him and gives him security, and to trust a God who Abram may not know to go to an unknown place that God will show him. God calls Abram to leave behind (in order of an increasing level of intimacy) his country, his clan and his house and to journey to a land that God will reveal to Abram only after he leaves everything behind.

This command to Abram is accompanied by a promise: *“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”* (12:2). These divine promises assure Abram that God will make him the patriarch of a great nation that will result in his being blessed to be a blessing. The Lord concludes this pronouncement by assuring Abram that *“I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (12:3). The promise of *“blessing those who bless you”* will bring Abram into relationship with those outside of the community that will be established through him; those who treat his people in life-sustaining ways will receive a response of blessing from God. On the other hand, those who treat the children of Abram with contempt will reap the consequences of their deeds; part of the blessing of God’s people means that they will be protected from those who mistreat them:

- “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and who repays in their own person those who reject him. He does not delay but repays in their own person those who reject him.” – Deuteronomy 7:9-10.

God’s choice of Abram will result in a blessing not only for him but for all his descendants who will bear his name; but the blessing will extend far beyond his own family but will lead to blessings for *all* the families of the earth; *“God’s choice of Abram serves as an initially exclusive move for the sake of a maximally inclusive end.”* (Terence E. Fretheim).

Interpreters universally consider this call to Abram to provide the key to the rest of Genesis and indeed the entire Pentateuch. The command/promise structure of the verses is similar to God’s call to Isaac in which the Lord instructs him to *“do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I will show you ... and I will be with you, and bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfil the oath I swore to your father Abraham.”* (26:2-3). But there is one significant difference between the two accounts: while it is clear that Isaac knows that it is God who is proclaiming this command/promise to him, there is no divine self-

identification in the call of Abram (such as “I am the LORD your God”); the narrator assumes that Abram knows that the one who is speaking to him is the Lord. It is a recognition that occurs many times in the Bible, including the account in Acts of Saul of Tarsus being struck down on the road to Damascus and hearing a voice calling to him “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*” (Acts 9:4). Even though the speaker never offers an identification, Saul knows immediately who is speaking to him: “*Who are you, Lord?*” (9:5). While we know nothing about Abram’s faith or his previous knowledge of God, he knows that the voice speaking to him is that of the Lord’s, as Jesus speaks of the sheep knowing the voice of their Good Shepherd: “*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me*” (John 10:27).

Abram hears the voice and recognizes that it is God who is calling him to leave behind all that is familiar to him, all that gives him his very identity, to travel to an unknown country that will only be shown to him after he embarks on this journey. In ancient times, it was very unusual for the firstborn child to leave the family: “*The pattern was for a younger son (Jacob, Joseph) to go while the firstborn son stayed home, charged with care of aging parents and unmarried younger siblings.*” (Wilma Ann Bailey). Abram has heard both God’s command and God’s promise; now the decision rests on how he responds. Will he choose to leave behind the family and country he has known and loved all his life to trust in a God who chooses not to reveal where he will be led? Will he turn his back on his family obligations to go to a place that God will show him where God promises great blessings to him and to others? It all depends on the choice Abram will make.

That decision comes when the narrator informs us that “*Abram went, as the Lord had told him*” (12:4). Abram never says a word; he never questions God or asks for more details. Abram chooses to trust God, and therefore is known by new name that indicates who he will become in responding in trust to the Lord: he is no longer “Abram,” which means “exalted father”; he is known for all time as “Abraham,” “father of a multitude.” Abraham’s faithful and worshipful response to God’s call will shape God’s promised future:

- “I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”
– 22:17-18.

The faithful response of this unlikely choice who God calls to be the one through whom God’s salvific purposes will be fulfilled will result in the establishment of the

people of Israel through whom will come the birth of a child who is identified at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel as "*Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham*" (Matthew 1:1). Abraham is presented in the letter to the Hebrews as an example of the faith that is the "*assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*" (Hebrews 11:1):

- "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs of the same promise ... By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'" – 11:8-12.

The example of Abraham's faithful response to the call of God plays a major role in Paul's letter to the Romans, including in today's second lesson where the Apostle proclaims that "*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*" (Romans 4:3). In Abraham, God undertakes a new beginning, calling Abraham out of his familiar and serene surroundings to being a pilgrimage founded on his trust in the God who leads him out; "*Abraham is the new beginning because in him God's purpose of calling sinful humanity back to trust in him becomes evident*" (Paul Achtemeier). In quoting Genesis 15:6 ("*And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness*"), Paul is stating that Abraham's vindication has already taken place; Abraham's faith is a sure sign that he is in partnership with God. Abraham's faithful trust in God that leads him to respond by stepping out in faith becomes a paradigm for Paul's teaching on the centrality of grace in the life of the people of God: "*For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')*." (Romans 4:16-17).

We are not told about the response of the family and friends of Abram when he announces that he is leaving them to follow the command and promise of a God who they may not have known. They may have been surprised, or saddened, or even hostile to such an announcement: "Why would God choose you? Is there not someone younger, or more qualified? Who is this God, and why would you trust in this God?" But even if those around him scoff at his calling or his response,

Abraham knows that God has chosen him to be the means through which God will fulfill God's purpose for the salvation of all humanity that is accomplished through Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham.

- “Thus, Abraham went out from his homeland and did not know where he was going. He yielded to my knowledge and abandoned his own knowledge; and by the right way he reached the right goal.” – Martin Luther, 1517.

The surprising choice of Jimmy to join Mike's team despite the outrage it caused our neighbourhood group became apparent when the game began. While others had dismissed Jimmy as having no athletic talent, it turned out that he was very good at catching a football, and because of this choice Mike's team celebrated a great victory that day. God's choice of Abraham may be a mystery, but it resulted in the faithful response of the patriarch not only of the people of Israel but of all people who have been redeemed through the death and resurrection of Christ which is the fulfillment of the promise that all will be blessed by the one who was blessed by God. It is a message to us that God continues to call unlikely people to accomplish God's Will – even people like us who may feel we are inadequate to such a calling. For us as it was for Abraham, *“it is a call to go ... [God] expects us to enter the unknown journey in obedience to God, who is known and unknown in many ways. By inference, we are being called out of our familiar surroundings to a place of God's own choosing.”* (Valerie Bridgeman).

Listen, God is calling. May we respond in trust and faith in the manner of Abraham, an unlikely choice who became the means through which God's Will has been accomplished *“on earth as it is in heaven.”*

Amen.