

“Deal or No Deal”

We know this story about Abraham. Even if we’ve never heard it or read it, we know it because we’ve lived it. It is a story about a choice that may come suddenly and dramatically or slowly and almost imperceptibly. It may come out of the blue or it may come bubbling up from within. But it comes, and it comes to us over and over again. It is the choice between a known present and a highly uncertain future; between life as we are living it and life as we have begun to suspect it could be; between the life we’ve settled into (and perhaps even settled for) and think of as our own, and a new life toward which we are summoned. The new life does not belong to us. It comes to us as a gift... if we have the courage—and, yes, the faith—to receive it, to do this new thing. We know this story. We know this choice. We may face into the choice and live into it, or we may deny it and run away. Either way it defines us.

We know all about Abraham and this moment when God says, “OK, Abraham: deal or no deal?”

It’s a crucial moment, here in the twelfth chapter of Genesis. We are being introduced to the central character in the whole great story of salvation history. No, it’s not Abraham: in fact at this point his name is still Abram. The central figure of the Bible and even of our lives is God’s promise. God makes a three-fold promise to Abraham; and what becomes of these promises is really what the Bible is about. Everything else is a footnote to these nine verses.

Even though we’re only eleven chapters into the Bible, it hasn’t been easy getting to this point. We’re already into Plan B. Plan A began with creation, and God’s design for a universe of blessing in which the good earth, crowned and cared for by humankind, would live together in the harmony of God’s shalom. Well, that began to go south almost immediately; when, as the story goes, there were only two people on the face of the earth and only one thing they could do that was wrong. All they had to do was to stay in their place, not try to be God, not mistake themselves for the center of the universe, and everything could stay in its proper relationship to everything else. But we know how that worked out for Adam and Eve.

And it turns out that the rest of us are just like them, which is what their story really means. Ultimately earth became so hopelessly corrupt, so estranged from God, that a drastic remedy was called for: the flood. But that didn’t solve things, either. Right out of the ark we were back at it, trying to make everything revolve around us. So God, again so the story goes, confounded our languages and multiplied our cultures so we’d have trouble working together on our ill-founded projects like building towers into the heavens to glorify ourselves and take over from God.

Now in chapter twelve God is trying again, but this time on a much smaller scale. No more broad-stroke: let’s start over with one family at a time, and let’s pick a pretty dismal case. We’ll start with this guy, Abram. Why? Nobody knows why... God knows

why. Abram's prospects are slim: his wife is "barren," cruel-sounding biblical shorthand to say that this couple, both childless and aged, has no genetic means of projecting themselves into the future. They've come to the end of the road. Abram is seventy-five. Even to call him Abraham, a name that means "father of a multitude," would be a sick joke at this point. And until just a little while ago he has still been living with Mom and Dad. He's not the kind of conspicuous worldly success we might expect, not where we might think God would want to start over.

Abram is sort of in process. Along with his family he has left the ancestral home in Ur—part of what today is Iraq. They had set out for Canaan and made it about halfway, to a place called Haran. It is there that Abram's father dies. So what should Abram do? Should he go back to Ur? Should he continue on toward Canaan? Or should he stay in Haran? After all, even in biblical terms seventy-five is an age when you might want to think about settling down.

Then he hears a voice—audible or inaudible we don't know. But apparently a god—remember there were many in Abram's world—has a plan. We know nothing more about it than that; Abram knew less. But this God—a god, *the* God—offers him a deal.

Here's what you give up, Abram. Give up your country—your *eretz*, your land and the customs and religious understandings that go along with it—and become a nomad. Give up your extended family, your kindred. And give up your father's house: relinquish the claim on the future that has been laid out for you, the role set for you to step into now that your father has just died. In other words, give up everything that tells you who you are: your nationality, your clan and your place in the world. Surrender your security.

And what do you get, Abram? I will make of you a great nation, *gowy*. (Remember: Abram's wife can't even see menopause in the rear view mirror.) And I will give you a land, *eretz* that I will show you when you get there. There is no Chamber of Commerce description yet about milk and honey. And I will bless you: your name will be great and through you will all the families of the earth be blessed: through your choice all the peoples of earth will come to know God. Notice the powerful affirmation of universal purpose here: God is starting over, but God has not given up on the plan for all creation. God is simply going to implement it through this *schlemiel*, Abram.

Abram is not quoted as saying anything. He just goes. "So Abram went as the LORD had told him." He goes with his wife Sarai and his troublesome nephew, Lot, whose father had died earlier, and all the stuff and people they had acquired in Haran. As the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament says, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going." Deal.

The deal will be renewed and embellished at regular intervals. The description of the land will become more explicit and robust. Abram will have his name changed to "Abraham." And the promises, over untold generations, will teeter precariously between disappointment and fulfillment. Some new conditions will be added, and some new understandings offered. At one point or another each sides—God and those who think of

themselves as Abraham's descendants—will accuse the other of breach of contract. But this one initial great choice will become the foundation of countless other choices.

From the get-go God's promise looks precarious and it's hard to tell which is more improbable: the promise of many offspring or the promise of land. The offspring will be in peril and the land will be in dispute. It still is. From time to time the family of Abraham in all its diversity will forget all about the part that says that they are to be a blessing to the world, and they will act as though they are in it for themselves, for special privilege or status and to the exclusion of everybody else. We still do.

But in its totality what happens to this deal is the story of the rest of the Bible and the continuing story of all of us. Deal or no deal?

So what do you think about this Abram character? Is he a real historical person, or is he some sort of prototype? The question of history is beyond our capacity to answer. Obviously something started the great Abrahamic faiths. But the origins of all the stories that come down to us from their beginnings around nomadic campfires are lost forever. But what those ancient stories tell us about our Father Abraham is as vivid as today. He's a patriarch, a progenitor in faith. He binds together the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He is a model of faith, as extolled in the Epistle to the Hebrews. And he tells us a great deal about ourselves.

He tells us that, spiritually speaking, we are descended from a long line of risk-takers and misfits. He teaches us that truly responding to the presence of God in our lives means trading a known present for an unknown future. He reveals that ultimately we are not defined by our country, our kindred or our parents' house; that we are called to leave those things behind either literally or figuratively or both as we journey on to discover who it is that we are called to become. He shows us that a life of faith is a life in motion, in flux, a life on the way: the journey is our home. And he tells us that the real key to knowing God is not fixed formulas and established dogma but a willingness to set out not knowing where we're going. The journey is our home... really.

Why do this? Why would a person leave the known for the unknown? Why set out not knowing? To set out in faith is to be drawn by a promise. Faith is not just about being better accommodated to life in Haran, lubricating the clanging machinery of the lives we know. Faith is responsiveness to the voice, the nudge, the inner restlessness, the question we can no longer shrug off, the painful truth we can no longer avoid. It is responsiveness to the nagging awareness that life has a deeper meaning and a greater purpose.

Faith is not something we acquire and consume. It is not a spiritual vitamin we take each day. It is the living of a relationship; and a calling is a crossroads in that relationship.

Walter Brueggemann says this of Abraham's choice: "Faith is the capacity to embrace [God's] announced future with such passion that the present can be relinquished

for the sake of that future.”¹ Ultimately Abraham lets go of the life he has because of his passionate embrace of the future that belongs to God.

We are called to be a part of the continuing story of the worldwide interfaith community of blessing that begins with Abraham; to see our lives not as ends in themselves, but as serving a greater purpose and vision. The call comes to us as a series of choices between the security of a known present and the hope-filled excitement of an unknown future in faith.

We know this story. We know this calling. We know the promise. Deal, or no deal?

Amen

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¹ Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis* in the series, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, p. 106.