

The Story: God Builds a Nation

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[0 : 00] Good morning, Braemar Baptists. It's good to see everyone this morning. It's good to see lots of new faces, which is always very cool. So for anyone who doesn't know me, and some of you won't, my name is Kent Dixon. It's my privilege to be the lead pastor here.

So a quick pastoral announcement. I will be away next weekend at the men's retreat. So I'm a man, so I'm also retreating. So I've invited Pastor Werner de Jong, who's the pastor of Holyrood Mennonite Church, to come and preach next Sunday.

So he's become a good friend of mine, and he's going to continue to preach in our series on the story, with the story of Joseph. So you think you may know the story of Joseph, but I think Werner may have something new for you.

So last week we began a new series called The Story. The story explores the Bible as one narrative, beginning, not surprisingly, at Genesis, and continuing through to Revelation.

And we'll be taking that journey together over the coming months. Do you watch TV? Are you a TV watcher at all? You've probably noticed that many action or dramatic TV series start a new episode.

[1 : 17] I think it's because we have short attention spans. With a recap of what happened last week, or a review of what's come before to bring people up to speed.

Previously on law and order, and then they give you a little recap. So let's do that with the story revealed in the Bible. Last time we discovered that God's vision in creation is what?

It should be a test, but it's not. Do you remember? Maybe you do. God's vision in creation is to be where? With us.

And all of creation, as you may remember I said this, all of creation is secondary to you. God seeks not just a personal relationship with all of humanity, but specifically with you.

God's plan has always been to be with his people. But he's also always allowed us to freely choose. Adam and Eve chose a different vision.

[2 : 27] They chose a vision that allowed sin and the sinful nature to enter humanity. Sin became a part of our spiritual DNA.

And yet, as we learned last week, even in our sin and rebellion, God passionately pursues us at great cost.

Do you remember last week that we considered that early clue to the restoration of relationship with God that we already saw in the story of Adam and Eve?

sacrifice. Sacrifice. The ultimate price of the death of Jesus Christ had to be paid to restore the connection between the upper story of God and the lower story of humanity.

And throughout our series in the story, you'll hear me refer to that, the upper story and the lower story. And I'll just give you a refresher on that. We won't do this every Sunday, but the upper story is how God is at work since the beginning of time, throughout history, through and for his people.

[3 : 42] That's the upper story. And the lower story, and you'll remember I said, lower doesn't mean lesser. The lower story is our story.

And it can often be confusing and difficult. But it can also be filled with joy and excitement and adventure. And it's in this lower story where we mess up, right?

We make mistakes, but we also learn to apply the big truths of God. And you'll recognize that often as we live our lives in the lower story, particularly as we face challenges and uncertainty, we often begin to ask upper story questions.

I was talking to some young adult students at King's University this week, and I was talking about this kind of thing, how we question even as Christians. Where is God?

Why is this happening to me? Does God really even care? Does he see what I'm going through? Does he love me, truly love me?

[4 : 55] And our sermon this morning is titled, God Builds a Nation. And in this part of the story, we discover that God decides to build a nation.

And through that new nation, he will win himself, win, sorry, us back to himself. And this morning we're going to look at three aspects.

Friend of mine said to me this week, you know, it would be good if you preached a three-point sermon sometime. Here's your three-point sermon. This morning we're going to look at the people God chooses to build a new nation, the details of God's plan for this new nation, and the turbulent beginnings of this new nation.

So let's begin by looking at the people God chooses to build this new nation. There's your points. Let's mull that for a moment.

So there's your points again. The people, the details, and the turbulent beginnings. So the people are in a place called Ur.

[6 : 05] And I've often thought of this, I think it started when I was a kid. I always thought this was a funny Bible name, because it's like they couldn't make up their minds as they were naming the city. Ur. What should we call it?

Ur. Use that. I guess. I don't know. So if you have your Bible with you, or you want to turn your electronic Bible on, it may have a map that shows the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

And look at that. I have a laser pointer. So there's Ur here. And there's the Tigris and the Euphrates. Those are the two major rivers in the region.

And Ur was located right there. And so a structure called the Tower of Babel, or Babel if you prefer, was being built in that area by many nations who all had one language.

Do you remember that from Scripture? If you don't know that story, we'll unpack it a bit. As this huge group of people worked together, they were building a tower. And the people became prideful and self-interested, as we often do, and began to turn away from God.

[7 : 15] They said, God is up there. Let's get to him. Because we can do that. Forgetting, they forgot God's provision, God's care for them. And so to address the prideful and rebellious nature of the people, God confounded their languages and scattered them.

See, if you remember, in the early part of the Bible, God said, go into the world, be fruitful and multiply. And they said, now we're going to stay here and build a tower.

Because we can. And God said, not the plan. Get going. But it was in this region, that region of Ur, that God chose to create his nation.

Isn't that great? Man says, I'm going to do this. God says, no, you're not. But I'm going to do this in the same place. So in choosing the people to build his new nation, God chose the perfect leader, the most noble and wise family, the most perfect genetic specimens.

Right? Wrong. The Lord works in mysterious ways. You heard that phrase before. It's actually not from the Bible, but it was likely inspired by the Christian hymn, God Moves in a Mysterious Way, written in the 18th century by William Cowper.

[8 : 55] So why do people say that phrase? Why do we use that? Why does it resonate with us? Because I think we'd all agree that it's true. Just think of the times in your life that God has shown up to answer prayer or provided for something that you needed without you even realizing that he had done it.

Have you ever begged God for something specific and felt hurt or rejected when he seemed to close that door? And have you ever looked back at something like that later and realized that God actually had provided for you, had acted in an even more significant way than you could have possibly expected?

The Bible tells us that God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts. And God's choices can be really confusing to us at times, can't they?

They can be frustrating. It's because we have our own plans. We can have a clear picture in our mind of how we want something to go, but God acts in a completely different way than we expect. Is that familiar? Often God acts without us realizing he has acted at all because we just don't pay attention.

[10 : 30] At times, through our limited perspective, God makes choices or takes actions in ways that at the time can seem crazy or illogical to us.

Can't they? Have you ever felt that God called you to do something for which you felt horrifyingly unprepared, unskilled, unconfident?

Yikes. Welcome to the club. The story of the Bible contains all sorts of times that God uses unlikely or surprising people.

Who will speak for God? Moses, a man who hated public speaking. Who will lead God's people to victory?

Deborah, a woman who was not trained as a warrior. Who will be a disciple of Jesus? Matthew, a tax collector and a notorious sinner.

[11 : 40] Who will be responsible for authoring half the books or more in the New Testament? Paul, a man who had destroyed churches and killed Christians.

God has called and will continue to call and use the most unlikely of people.

If someone had told me even three years ago that I would be the pastor of a church, I would have told them, not a chance. That is not God's plan for me.

That idea is nuts. And here we are. God loves and is at work in the very things we think are unlikely. So we see that God did not pick the most likely candidates to begin his nation. But perhaps the very least likely, a man named Abram and his wife Sarai.

[12 : 46] Through them, we begin to see that God can and will use anyone. Even each of us, if we'll let him.

People still use excuses for not following God all the time. And maybe these are some of yours. What are some that you've heard from people or even used yourself?

I'm too old. I'm too young. I'm not experienced. I'm too experienced in a different way. I'm not skilled. I can never learn that.

I'm not spiritual enough. I'm too spiritual. It's out of my comfort zone. Did God really call me? Or did I make this up?

Surely there's someone else better suited for this. This is not really a good time for me. Honestly, I've used a few of those.

[13 : 49] God specifically chose Abram and Sarai. And we'll get to why are those names not familiar in a minute. He even changed their names to Abraham and Sarai.

In the process. He chose them. He re-identified them. He re-oriented them. He chose them despite expectations.

I think by anyone's definition, they were old. They couldn't have children. Both their parents and grandparents had worshipped pagan gods.

Do you see the unlikeliness here? They were perhaps the most unlikely couple to found God's nation. And yet he chose them.

He called them anyway. We read about that call in Genesis 12, 1-4.

[14 : 54] And we'll read that together. Michelle told me, I need to read with confidence because you are looking to me to lead you in reading. So I've been erring on the side of, no, they'll read it.

But she said, speak loudly and boldly and lead the people. So here we go. The Lord said to Abraham, go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you, I will curse.

And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. So Abraham went as the Lord had told him. We also read in Hebrews 11, 8.

Let's read this together as well. By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance.

[16 : 00] And he went out not knowing where he was going. Abraham went. He didn't think about it. He didn't consult with everyone he knew.

I'm a consulter. I think this is what I think. Do you think that's a good idea? Does that make sense? Makes sense to me. I'm a consulter a lot of times. But Abraham didn't do that.

He didn't talk to everyone he knew and say to God, well, I'll get back to you. It's a great idea. I'll get back to you. He just went. Now, we can imagine that the process would have been very involved, right?

The logistics would have been complicated to move his entire family. He was not a poor man. He had a large family. He moved his livestock and everything he owned to an entirely new place.

The Bible doesn't get into the details of the move. But what we're given here is that he trusted. God called.

[17 : 06] God asked. And Abraham went. He obeyed. I don't know about you, but I often agonized over buying new dishes, let alone moving everything to another place.

But Abraham went. He trusted that God had a plan for his life. He trusted that God would care for him and his family. And he obeyed in faith.

Friends, I can tell you that I've wasted a lot of time in my life resisting God's call. Or trying to make my own way without trusting that he has a plan for me.

I've wasted a lot of time. Is seeking to follow God's call in your life going to be easy? Not always. And at times it will even be very difficult. It will require faith and trust and probably sacrifice.

[18 : 20] But is it worth it? Always. Always. Always. Always. We've touched on this a bit, but if they were such an unlikely choice, why did God choose Abraham and Sarah?

God chose an unlikely elderly couple. Why? So that all people would look to him.

All people would look to God knowing that all things happen by God. And through God. God wants people to see him through all circumstances.

And understand his plan. And that plan? It always defies human logic and explanation. Always.

And that's what makes it so wonderful and exciting and terrifying and amazing. So what was God's plan in building this new nation?

[19 : 32] Let's look at that verse again. I've highlighted like crazy. The Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse.

And all peoples on the earth will be blessed through you. So according to this passage, what do we see as God's plan for this new nation? God will make the new nation what?

Great. God will make Abraham's name great. God will do what to those who bless Abraham? Bless them.

And to those who curse him? God will bless all the nations of the world through Abraham and this new nation. And God will use the new nation to reveal his heart and his plan to win us back.

[20 : 36] It never ceases to amaze me that God has always been willing to work with, in, and through humanity.

Because, oh my gosh, we overcomplicate things, don't we? We seek to control. And our pride and rebellious nature creep in all the time.

But he sees us. He loves us. And he seeks to involve us in his plans. So with humans involved, the building of this new nation was complicated and turbulent, to say the least.

In Genesis 16, before the covenant with God is sealed and her name is changed to Sarah, Sarai, Abram's wife, what does she do?

She hears God, but she proposes her own way to start this new nation. Because that's what we do. We get in the way. Sarai gets it.

[21 : 51] She gets that God wants to build a new nation through her husband and his bloodline. But she's old. That's what she, conclusion she comes to.

What scripture says here is so typical of human logic at some points, isn't it? That in Genesis 16, verse 2, Sarai says, The Lord has kept me, hear that, kept me from having children.

Go sleep with my slave. Perhaps I can build a family through her. This slide is a painting from the 17th century of Dutch artist Casper Netcher.

And so this is kind of a 17th century look. But you can see Sarai going, well, I'm not so good. What about her? She's got a plan, right?

And Abram's going, well, he's got his hand up and he's thinking, I don't know. Is this the right thing? I was going to use lots of other pictures of this interaction from scripture, but some of them not so good to use on a slide in church.

[23 : 08] It's amazing. Artists get very creative anyway. But isn't this amazing that God has already revealed his intentions to Abram, that he will bless his family?

And if he's a good husband, Abram cleared it with his wife, not God's will, but said, hey, honey, this is great news. But she's already taken matters into her own hands.

She just heard this. Sarai has likely heard God's plans to bless her family, but she's already determined, well, God clearly doesn't realize how old I am.

And we can't have children, so I'll give God a bit of a hand. And I have to realize that I've often done that myself.

I've said, okay, Lord, I get the sense that you want to use me here, but I'm just going to keep working the angles just in case. I trust you.

[24 : 12] I have faith, but I'm not crazy. Can you relate to that? Covering the angles when God is at work? It's broken, isn't it?

Rather than recognizing that God has a plan and that that plan is at work and submitting her will to God in faith, Sarai is essentially saying that God must not be, this is hilarious to me, God must not be aware of their situation.

And even more than that, she's suggesting that God hasn't seen fit to give them heirs. Or he's somehow kept them from having heirs.

Do you remember I highlighted that? The Lord has kept me from having children. Huh? So then it's obviously up to her to make God's plan happen.

There's broken logic again. Sarai is short-sighted enough to want to get out in front of God's plan with a scheme of her own.

[25 : 24] So she brings her servant Hagar in to conceive a supposed heir. And I love how God cleans that mess up after Hagar and Ishmael have been cast aside by Sarai.

God blesses Ishmael and values Hagar, but his plan was never to begin the new nation that way. So naming them as parents of this new nation, God even changes Abram and Sarai's names to Abraham and Sarah.

But even that name change doesn't seem to sink in. Because when God makes it clear to Abraham and Sarah at 190 years old, respectively, that they will actually give birth to an heir, we read that they both laugh at the idea.

They think it's ridiculous. And when asked about it by Abraham later, Sarah even denies having laughed when she heard God's plan.

Oh, no, I didn't laugh. Yeah, you did. Ultimately, when Sarah does give birth to a son, she names him Isaac, which means laughter.

[26 : 53] You know, as I studied for this sermon, I had my eyes opened a little bit in a lot of ways, but here specifically. I've always thought of the fact that Isaac means laughter as, oh, Sarah was so joyful that, you know, God gave her a son.

Well, not really. The flavor here is more, I'm going to name him Isaac because this is just too funny. She didn't really believe that God could pull it off, and yet he did because he is God.

But as it turned out, many of you know this story, the ultimate test of Abraham's faith was still to come. God had called him to take his family and move to a strange land where God would bless him for generations to come.

God promised an heir to Abraham and Sarah, and despite their disbelief and attempts to take the reins of the plan, Isaac was born.

God's greatest test of Abraham is related to us in Genesis 22, verses 1 to 3. Let's read this together. After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, here I am.

[28 : 20] He said, take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains on which I shall tell you.

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

Are you seeing this again? God asked Abraham to do something, and he did it. He didn't hesitate, at least not as far as we can tell.

He heard what God asked, and he obeyed. And imagine the kind of faith this would have taken.

God is asking him to leave his home again, to head to a place where he has never been again. And he's clearly asking him to bring his son Isaac, the child whose birth could not be described as anything but a miraculous gift of God.

[29 : 43] And God is not being unclear here. He specifically asks Abraham to offer his only son as a burnt offering.

It's easy to think maybe Abraham didn't get it, but he got it. Offerings were not something new to him, something he didn't understand.

He knew that for a living animal to be offered as a burnt offering, it would mean death. It would mean sacrifice.

But Abraham obeyed. As we talked about last week, and I reminded us earlier on, the restoration between the upper story of God and the lower story of humanity would require sacrifice.

And here we are. God asks Abraham to offer his only son, Isaac, whom he loves.

[31 : 03] But do you see something here? Do you see what God asked? He asked for Isaac to be offered as a sacrifice.

He asked Abraham to be willing to go through with it. Abraham was. And Abraham was. Abraham responded in faith, trusting God.

And God rewarded his faith by sparing Isaac. And providing a ram as a substitute. A beloved son was born to build a nation.

Was offered as a sacrifice. And his life was spared. God asked Abraham to be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice.

And when he obeyed, God provided. God was. God. God. Centuries later, another beloved son would be sacrificed.

[32 : 20] But not spared. God, my friends, will win us back.

At great cost to himself. God. God. This morning, we've looked at the people God chose to build this new nation.

The details of his plans for the new nation. And the turbulent beginnings of it. In choosing Abraham and Sarah to begin a new nation, God reveals a pattern.

God chooses unlikely people who are not the smartest. Not the most beautiful or handsome. With the best resume.

God chooses ordinary people like you and like me. God. God. Despite what you may think about your personal abilities.

[33 : 28] You're not somehow disqualified. To be used greatly in God's story. God has likely already used you many, many times.

And he will continue to use you. To reflect his plan. To win us back. Let's pray. Father God, you are so good.

You are the great provider. We see in the story of Abraham and Sarah how you provided an heir. You provided a plan in your way and in your time.

Father, help us to be a people who recognize your provision. Your plan in our lives. People who willingly yield our will to yours.

Yield our purpose to become part of your greater purpose. For all of creation and all of mankind. Father, as we go and share a meal together now.

[34 : 36] Thank you for the blessing and nourishment that that will provide. Thank you for the friendship and fellowship that will grow as that food is shared.

Thank you for the laughter and joy that spending time together brings. As we are your children. And this is a family. Father, we love you.

We praise your name. And we thank you for all that you have given us through your son, Jesus Christ. In whose name we pray.

Amen.