



**Sermon: - 12th March 2017**

## **As Stars in the Sky**

*Genesis 12: 1-4a; Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17*

Some of you will be aware that I had a significant birthday recently. I really had wanted to avoid admitting to it and I'd hoped to go under the radar but I'd reckon without Facebook! From early in the morning on the day of my birthday friends were posting birthday wishes, lots of encouraging comments, and, much to my dismay, plastering my age all over my Facebook page. I was outed! So then when I was thinking about the sermon this morning it occurred to me that I've got something in common with Abraham. Not that I'm 75, before you think that that's the significant age, which is the age that Abraham was at the point where we meet him in the readings today. No, the thing I have in common with Abraham is something slightly different although it is age-related! On the night of my induction here one of my sisters commented to me, "Jane, at your age most people are thinking of winding down, not starting up a whole new career!" Well, over my entire adult life I've made a career out of doing the unexpected so why should I stop now! In the same way, here is Abraham, long past the age when most men are thinking of hanging up their working boots and settling down for a well-earned retirement when God effectively says to him, "get up out of your armchair, I want you to go on a journey".

"Where to, Lord" asked Abraham. Not an unreasonable question, indeed it could be called the \$64,000 question. If you're going to get up and go, aged 75, with all your goods with possessions, then you might like to know where you're going. Also, what we don't see from the passage, is that God was asking Abraham to leave a life that was pretty comfortable, a very good life. Ur was one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, the capital of the ancient Chaldean Empire in ancient Mesopotamia. It was a highly developed civilization for its time. Archaeologically speaking, there is ample evidence of wealth, of skilled craftsmanship, of, for its day, advanced technology and science. When Abraham left Ur, he turned his back on a great metropolis, setting out by faith, not knowing if the land to which he was headed could offer him anything like the same in the way of material benefits, or indeed anything at all. So as if it wasn't bad enough that God was telling Abraham to put on his walking boots, adding insult to injury, God didn't actually tell him where he was going.

“Where to, Lord” asked Abraham. “Well,” God said, “I’m not going to tell you, just go... leave all that is familiar. Leave this place where you have spent your life. Leave these familiar hills and plains. Leave the friends you have known since before you could walk. Leave your brothers, your sisters, your cousins. Leave all that is known. Pack up your household and leave this place. I will give you a land, but I will not tell you where that land is. Step out in faith, go from this land where you have lived for seventy five years, this place of your birth, go into the desert and I will lead you.”

How would we react if God were to say this to us? I think disbelief might well be one of our foremost reactions. But as if that wasn’t difficult enough to believe, God then tells Abraham that his descendants will outnumber the stars in the sky.

Have you ever seen the Milky Way when you are far outside the city, there are no lights, and therefore no light pollution. It’s astonishing! It really does look as though the sky is paved with stars they are so dense. And God tells Abraham that his descendants will number more than the stars. What an amazing promise!

But of course, there's a problem. As we’ve said, Abraham was an old man, his wife was an old woman and what’s more, they had not by that point been able to have any children.

Who could blame Abraham if he was incredulous? “What are you thinking Lord, how can this be?” Those of us who have children can never imagine the pain of those who want children don’t have them but there are people who long for children and suffer the pain of hope disappointed. We can try to imagine Abraham and Sarah, year after year in their youth waiting, hoping, praying, longing, and despairing. Year after year. Hope slowly diminishing, dying... And then, beyond all hope, God promises them a son, an heir. Hope, which they thought had died, springs afresh. A son! An heir! Again they wait, hoping, praying, longing... and then despairing. The days pass, the months pass, the years pass. Will God never fulfil his promise? Has he forgotten his promise? Has he forgotten them? Of what use is Abraham’s faith, the faith which led him out of his own country, towards a new country, if there is no son to hold the land when he is gone? Where will these descendants come from, these descendants which are to be as numerous as the stars?...

When will God act? ...

Will God act?...

Yet in spite of everything Abraham still had faith; he believed the impossible. He had faith in God, not in circumstances, and because of his faith God considered him righteous.

The story of Abraham started with God's call. With this came a promise of a land and children, more than could be numbered. Everything depended on this longed for child but at the point where we meet Abraham today his only heir was a senior slave. In the face of this impossibility, God repeats his promise. It seems almost ludicrous in the circumstances. But in spite of the apparent impossibility of what God was offering, Abraham put his trust in it. Abraham trusts God's word, in the face of all probability. And it was the fact that he trusted God and not anything he actually did that put him in a right relationship with God. And in the obedient action as a result of his trust came the fulfilment of faith – descendants which outnumber the stars in the sky.

And we are among those descendants. We are children of Abraham. We are adopted into his family. We are among those who are as stars in the sky, and heirs of the promise of God. There is something very special about being compared to stars in the sky. Let's spend a few moments thinking about that analogy and what it means for us.

*We are as stars in the sky...*

Without number

But each one unique

Beautiful

Each one lovingly created

Each one special

Each one loved

For its own particular beauty

Each one

With its own place

Giving its own special light

With its own warmth

Glowing in the heavens

Giving light to all

Giving life to all

Each one

Created

Known

Loved

By God

We are those descendants, promised by God, children of faith.

And this faith of Abraham, this righteousness, is our inheritance. The following chapters in Genesis show that Abraham's faith is not a warm emotional feeling, or a religious 'high', but a trust in God. Abraham demonstrated this trust in obedient action. God said, do this, however impossible it may seem, and I will do that, however impossible it may seem. And the reward of Abraham's faith was the fulfilment of the promise. And in the same way, God asks us to have faith. A life lived by faith; a life lived by trust in God's promises sits lightly to uncertainties in the present, and even the apparent failure of God's word. A life lived in faith hangs onto God's promises over and above the facts of the situation. Don't get me wrong, Abraham doubted, Abraham faltered; for Abraham, as for us, the life of faith could only be lived in the midst of daily uncertainties and demands. Yet ultimately he remained faithful, and in an active, not a passive, faith. A faith that got up and went out at the call of God, even into the unknown. A faith that believed the impossible because God had promised it.

This, in the letter to the Romans, is what faith is all about – a steadfast confidence in God's purposes and a life lived in the light of that confidence. Faith is not 'blind hope', but neither is it confidence in something we know is round the corner anyway. Faith accepts uncertainty, faith embraces doubt. Abraham and his family are prime examples of such faith. As we read in Hebrews 11: 1, "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

And as the heirs of Abraham, as those who number among the children of the promise, as those who are like the stars in the sky, we inherit that faith. For us too, faith is a journey which is rarely easy. For us too God sometimes asks or promises seemingly impossible things, for us too the journey can seem long and without direction, for us too there will be times when God seems to have forgotten his promises, for us too there will be times when we stumble and fall on the journey, but for us too, faith is what counts, faith will be

considered righteousness, and for us too the land we are promised in the long run is a heavenly home, where we will indeed shine like stars.