

I. Set Up

- A. Welcome. Introduction. Guests.
- B. This week we kick off a new series. It is based out of Genesis, focused on Abraham and designed to explore what we can learn from his life.
- C. If you have read Abraham's Wikipedia entry, you know it's impressive. He is honored as the founder of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. More significantly, God has some very favorable things to say about him in Hebrews 11 – the Hall of Faith chapter. Today we will begin looking at some of the critical moments in his life.
- D. But before we go there, I want to note that today also kicks off REACH, which we introduced two weeks ago when we were at the Genesee Theatre. REACH is the new initiative we are mobilizing behind. You received a Guide Book as you walked in. I'll explain those in a moment. First, watch this video.
- E. Video
- F. Explanation of the Guide Book.
- G. Prayer / Generosity Moment / Song.

II. Introduction

- A. This is a picture of the Jordan River – [Picture 1](#). I've been there a couple times. A few years ago, we had a baptism service there. – [picture 2](#). So, when I say I've been there, I've gotten wet in the Jordan River. I've seen it up close and personal. Here is what you need to know.
 - 1. It starts on Mount Hermon, which is 9,000 feet above sea level, and it ends 200 miles later in the Dead Sea, which is 1,300 feet below sea level. Which means, though it's not nearly as long as the Mississippi River, the Nile or the Amazon – and outside of flood stage it's never very wide – it is steep. As rivers go, the Jordan has a huge vertical drop.
 - 2. And that means, it has a deceptively wicked current, which in turn means, it cuts into the bank. Which means – and this is the key point – you cannot wade into the Jordan. You have to commit.
 - a) At the baptism we held, there was a ramp with railings for us to walk into the river, but the ramp wasn't there three thousand years ago when the Jews needed to cross the river to enter the Promised Land. And, oh by the way, when they needed to cross it, it didn't look like [this](#), it looked like [this \(picture 3\)](#) because it was flood stage. In some parts it's a mile wide and in other parts the currents are going 40 miles per hour.
 - 3. And there is one other thing top note before we turn to the passage in Joshua 3. Part of the reason the Jordan was such a barrier for the Jews is because they didn't swim.
 - a) The crossing we are about to read about took place forty years after Moses had lead the Jews out of Egypt. God had supernaturally delivered them – an event that included ten plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea and more. And he would supernaturally deliver them again, but they didn't know that. And with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, everyone who had been alive for the first crossing had now died, and those alive had spent their entire life in the desert.¹ Which means, they didn't know how to swim.²
- B. So, when they get to the river bank, they stop. And they don't move for three days. Joshua 3:2 reads:

1. After three days the officers went throughout the camp, giving orders to the people: “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before.”

C. And then we read that the priests – with the Ark of the Covenant on their shoulders. Which, if you missed the Raiders of the Lost Ark, had the Ten Commandments, and some mana and Aaron’s rod. And the big moment is when the Priests step into the Jordan.³ They cannot wade in. They have to commit. And it is when their feet hit the water that God parts the Jordan so they people can walk across.

D. It is a big, risky first step.

E. Before “Crossing Jordan” was a dramatic TV show, “Crossing the Jordan” meant taking a big dramatic step of faith.

III. Why am I telling you this? Because REACH is a bold, risky first step. It’s a call to love and obey – to step up and lean in. To serve and risk. To cross the Jordan. To REACH.

IV. Why are we doing this? We shake things up? Why not play it safe? There are several reasons:

A. One of them is an awareness that there are real problems and needs out there.

1. In some ways – and for some people – things are better than ever before. The market is lower than a few weeks ago, but high all the same. Medical advances keep rolling out. Life expectancy is up. There are lots of things to celebrate.

2. But lots of people are hurting and there is a growing gap between the haves and have nots.

3. And alongside of this there is growing spiritual confusion. Many – perhaps most people – currently believe that we can believe whatever we want to believe as long as we are sincere. They need to hear about God’s love and His plan and His Son. They need to hear that we cannot ever be good enough to gain eternal life. We receive it. They need to hear about Jesus. People need Jesus.

4. The first reason to do more is because there are real needs out there.

B. The second reason to lean in is because we are called to lean in. We are called to be: light in the darkness; a source of hope; salt; Good Neighbors; Good Stewards; those who consider others more important than themselves; those who love their enemies; those who live in light of eternity.

C. A third reason to do more is because we can. There are lots of good things happening – people serving, people loving, people sharing. [But we can do more.](#)

1. We are resource rich church. We have lots of “know how” and “can do.” We have lots of talented and networked people.

2. And I believe that when we meet God we will wish we had done more.

D. The fourth reason was my big point at Vision Sunday: The church is God’s plan.

1. There are lots of ways to help others. But we cannot do everything. We need to focus. We are going to focus by multiply multiplying churches. We want to fuel a movement that reaches people and renews communities. That means, we focus on churches.

2. We believe this is God’s plan. His idea. When embraced, the church outperforms every other option, and we have two thousand years - and hundreds of thousands of case studies - to prove it.

3. As a result, our plan is to leverage ourselves in two big ways:

- a) first, by expanding what we are doing here – both reaching out to more people through more campuses and worship services – and serving more (especially among the poor);
- b) and by helping others (in particular our global partners) do the same.

V. Well, as we move through the REACH Initiative, we are going to focus on Abraham, who knows a few things about REACHing himself.

- A. He was a very significant person.
 - 1. In fact, saying Abraham was a significant person is like saying, Michael Jordan was a basketball player. It doesn't quite capture it.
 - 2. One half of the world's population – that is, all Jews, Christians and Muslims – point to Abraham as their father figure. And the Hebrew Bible – our Old Testament – is the second clue. It is essentially the story of Abraham and his descendants.^{4, 5}
- B. In addition to being a significant person, Abraham is also a fascinating person.
 - 1. He begins life as a semi-nomadic shepherd wandering around the Fertile Crescent, and ends up as someone who has walked with God and been used by God to bring about God's plans.⁶
 - 2. When you read his story, you see that he was involved making things happen. He shaped things. He stood with God against his society, his family and his culture to the benefit of everyone.
- C. A third reason we are going to focus on Abraham is because he is flawed.
 - 1. Looking at Abraham is not like looking LeBron James and saying – if I only tried a bit harder, I could dominate the NBA. No. I'd need talent, height, speed and youth before I could ever reasonably think, "I could do that." When you study Abraham you think – OK, maybe. And this is true in part because he does some spectacularly stupid things:
 - a) Like the time reported in Genesis 20 when he sees a group of men approaching and says to Sarah, his wife, "You're pretty attractive. If they find out we're married, they will kill me to be able to sleep with you. So I am going to say that you are my sister and they will leave me alone. No doubt they will take you. Good luck with that. But I'll be OK." I heard a great sermon by a pastor on the South Side of Chicago a few years ago in which he argued that God had to intervene and rescue Sara so that she and Abraham didn't have to go on Morey and take a paternity test to see if Isaac was their son.⁷
 - b) There was also the time where Abraham thought that sleeping with his wife's housekeeper was a good idea that she would support.
 - 2. On behalf of husband's everywhere, who have done many, many stupid things, I want to thank Abraham for providing some cover. "At least I'm not as bad as Abraham!"
 - 3. If you've read the Bible you know that there are no heroes other than Jesus. We get the real story about how bad people can be, which is a good thing – a comforting thing – because I am deeply flawed. It is encouraging to see God work with Abraham after he does some spectacularly bad things.
- D. A fourth reason to study Abraham is because in spite of getting some things wrong, he gets some things right.

1. Though Abraham does a lot of stupid things, he steps up at some crucial moments. And as a result, he is celebrated in the New Testament. He makes it into Hebrews 11, the Hall of Faith chapter. In fact, he has a starring role. Let me reread a few verses from there, which were read earlier during worship.

a) V:8: By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

b) V:9: By faith Abraham made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ⁹For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

c) V:10: By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.

E. There is a lot about Abraham to make him someone to study. So let's jump in.

F. FYI, when people talk about Abraham's call they usually start in Genesis 12. Which is understandable. But we need to understand the setting. We need to back up to Gen. 11.

1. The first part of the chapter is the report about the Tower of Babel. Then we get into genealogies. Let me start reading there with verse 26.

VI. V. 26 After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran.

A. By the way, he gets called Abram and Abraham. Don't be confused or bothered by this. The name changes happen in Genesis 17 – at which point Sarah's name changes as well. Read the footnotes. The quickest explanation is that his name changes from Daddy to "big Daddy."

VII. V 27: Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. ²⁷While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. ²⁸Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milkah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milkah and Iskah. ²⁹Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.

VIII. V31: Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there.

A. What we are being told here is, human history is coming to a dead end.

1. Gen. 1 and 2 are good. Genesis 3 introduces evil. And Genesis 4-11 shows a rapid downward spiral – corruption, evil, decay, broken people. The only ray of hope in Genesis 4 – 11 is a single-family line. The family of Seth. They are the only ones trying to do the right thing, calling on the name of the Lord – which is code for worshipping God. But in Gen. 11:27 we are told it's game over.

a) Terah can be translated in one of two ways: first, as "moon" – which suggests that Terah has fallen into idolatry. Something that is confirmed later in Joshua 24. Ur was a hotbed of lunar worship. And he was now one of them.

b) Or it is a play on a Hebrew metaphor in which moon means, "the end." It's a bit like saying "caboose." Neither of these suggest there is a lot of future to look forward to.

2. So, Abraham's family has fallen into idolatry. On top of this, Genesis 11 makes it clear that Abraham and Sarah are not able to have children.⁸ Which means, the last candle is flickering out. The last decent family is going under. Bad is about to win. Darkness is sweeping over the entire land.

B. We need to start in Genesis 11 to appreciate what we are being told in Genesis 12. In the face of ruin, decay, loss and collapse, God steps back into the story.

IX. Genesis 12:1 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 'And 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. 'I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

A. This is the game changer. The intervention of God – more technically – the call of God. Changes everything. Please see this. Abraham is a good guy from a good family. But that is not enough without God. Abraham was from the best family on earth – but that was not enough without the call of God.

B. Sheri and I have three boys. We raised them here.

1. They grew up at Christ Church, which I like to think is a good church.

2. We did what we could to raise them right. Among other things, we prayed for them, we taught them to pray, we read the Bible to them, Sheri especially worked with them a lot when they were young to help them memorize Scripture.

3. We were not perfect parents – sometime when you have a few hours you can ask them and they'll tell you! – but we did a lot right and they are good guys. But they would be good pagans without the call of God. They would be nice, thoughtful, well-read, interesting idolaters without the call of God.

C. The point is, at the end of the day, your family is not enough. Sorry, but it's not. Abraham was from the best family, but he needed the call of God. He was unqualified for his assignment. Abraham is not the hero of this story. God is.

D. Furthermore, the Bible makes it clear that God does not show up because Abraham is qualified. It is the call of God that qualified Abraham.

E. In a sermon on this passage by Tim Keller, he made mention to a 1964 movie called *Beckett*, which I had not seen. So I tracked it down. It told the true story of Henry II – the king of England back in the 12th century, and Becket, his drinking buddy who was a priest.

1. Henry 2 is played by Peter O'Toole and Becket is played by Richard Burton. They have a great time drinking and chasing women together. And then, the Archbishop of Canterbury – who is the head of the Church of England under the King (or Queen) – dies. And Henry decides to appoint his friend to take his place. The King reasons that life will be great if his drinking buddy is in charge of the church because then he can get the church off his back.

2. But the appointment to be Archbishop – the call of God - changes Becket. Once he is made the Archbishop of Canterbury, Becket realizes that he can't be the lout that he's been. And so, to the horror of the King – he reforms.

3. There is more to the story (and movie), most of which pivots around the famous line the King utters, "Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest?" I'll stop there in the event you want to watch the movie. The point is, the call of God changed Becket. And it changed Abraham. And it should change us.

X. What was the call of God to Abraham? What is he told to do?

A. Get out of town.

1. If you read Genesis 11 carefully, you realize that Abraham's entire family – his father and others - set out from Ur for Canaan, but they only made it half way before they settled down. The call from God to Abraham was, finish the trip.
 2. God makes it clear to Abraham that he needs to keep moving, even if his father and brother are not willing to go there with him. The Hebrew here is pretty emphatic. The King James gets the gist of it with the line: Get thee out.
- B. The first thing we see about the call from God is that Abraham had to take some next steps. The second thing we realize is that this call demands a step of faith.
1. What God says is: Go to the land that I will show you. Not “go to the land that I have shown you.” Not “go to the land 250 miles from here.” Abraham doesn't get any specifics. It's not, “take the third exit after the overpass.” God does not tell Abraham where he is being sent.
 2. And he doesn't often tell us either. I remember leaving a job in Washington without having the next job. My Dad went apoplectic.
 3. There was a time when I would promise people that if they followed God, God would be – for lack of a better description – safe and reasonable. People would say, “I don't think I can let go because if I follow God He may make me, “go to Africa as a missionary or do this other thing that I don't want to do.” And I would say, “Don't worry about that. God is for you. God is good.”
 4. And while I still believe that. I believe that God is for you. I believe that God would never ask you to act in any way outside of what was best for you. I do not think we generally understand what is best for us.
 - a) We want safe. We want easy. We want reasonable. We want fun.
 5. Why do we expect that the call should be easy?
 - a) We seldom see that in life. In fact, we often hire coaches to push us to take next steps so we can grow and get better.
 6. And we certainly do not see easy in the New Testament. What Jesus did was not easy. What the disciples were called to was not easy.
 7. I think we should expect that God would invite us to step past our comfort zone into places that lead to growth and transformation.
- XI. What is God calling you to do? What is he calling us to do?
- A. I am always pushing you to lean in – to be more intentional about cultivating your relationship with God. Because the important is seldom urgent.
 1. I push you to be baptized – you can sign up today
 2. We encourage small groups and serving and time resting in the love and presence of God
 - B. With REACH we are looking at a collective next step: to love and obey.
 - C. The idea of multiplying churches – starting new campuses here and helping our global partners do things there. The idea of raising a million dollars for work in North Chicago. Well, I can think of easier things. Safer things.
 - D. I'd love to take all of the risk out of this. And don't get me wrong – to the extent possible through planning and organizing, we have done a lot of that.
 1. We have had teams working on next steps, identifying possible sites; piloting the housing project, developing the jobs initiative. We are not flying blind.
 - E. But in this case there is a sense of taking a step into the Jordan.
 - F. I have reviewed the fact that:
 1. In Genesis 12, when God asked Abraham to go, he didn't tell him where. And when Abraham asked for more details, God said, “trust me on this.”

2. And in Genesis 15, when Abraham asked God, “When is my son going to show up?” God said, “Trust me on this.”

3. And in Genesis 22, when God told Abraham to take Isaac to offer a sacrifice, he left out some very important details.

G. So, what is the call of God on your life? On mine? On ours together? In case you missed it, I’m ready to REACH. And we are gearing up to take a next step: to help fuel a movement that Reaches People and Renews Communities.

H. And I believe that it will change us. Grow us.

I. We do not go back to who we were.⁹

XII. Men and women, we are on a quest. It’s a bit unnerving. But it’s also exciting. I want to be part of a movement that makes a difference in light of eternity. That’s the plan.

XIII. Of course, it’s not like this should be a surprise.

A. Jesus left his home – in heaven. He gave up his comfort and security. And he came all the way down. And He did what was asked and it cost Him his life.¹⁰

B. We have a lot to learn from Abraham. I’m excited for what comes next. Let’s pray that we learn to lean more fully into the call of God.

XIV. CP Wrap Up -

A. There are two things that stand out for me as I think about what Mike shared.

B. The first is, Terah – Abraham’s father – didn’t make it to Canaan. He died in Harran. We don’t know why he stopped - whether he was afraid, complacent, or had simply become comfortable in the middle ground. But he didn’t make it. Abraham did. It wasn’t easy. As Hebrews 11:8 tells us. It took faith:

1. “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.”

2. Following God is seldom easy. But His plan is unstoppable. He will prevail.

C. The second thing that stands out is that Jesus has gone before us.

1. Mike opened talking about the Priests crossing the Jordan with the Ark of the covenant. Well, as is so often the case, this was pointing ahead to Christ.

2. The Ark contained the Ten Commandments (which symbolized the Law) and a jar of manna (living bread) and Aaron’s rod – which continued to sprout even though it was cut off – it was a demonstration of God’s power over death.

3. Well Jesus fulfilled the Law, He is the Bread of Life and he conquered death. And, of course, he crossed something far more treacherous than the Jordan River. He

D. God has lead the way and He will continue to do so. I look forward to walking through this with you.

1. Mike mentioned Baptism – maybe that is one of the steps you need to take. Sign up today for the baptism on Feb. 25th

2. .

3. If you would like to be prayed for...

E. Go in peace.

⁹ Joshua 5:6

¹⁰ Unlike many of their contemporaries – the Egyptians, Phoenicians and Greeks, the Jews were not seafaring. In fact, they did not like water. And in the Bible we see this idea bubbling up: God is over described as being “mightier

than the Sea; in Genesis water is represented as the antithesis of order and light; when John describes Heaven in Revelation 21 – and he sees this amazing place that he cannot describe – among the things he says, right alongside “the streets are made of pure gold that is like glass (i.e., transparent), he also says, “And behold there is no Sea.” To a Jew, the Sea meant trouble. Even baptism seems to reflect this – we are lowered into water in an act that is symbolic of death.

‡ The challenge is for the leaders. The people will follow on dry land. But the 12 priests have to take a first step into the water (3:17, 4:7, 22).

‡ Genesis 1-11 is universal history: creation, fall, flood. It deals with big cosmic issues that sets the stage for God’s intervention. But that is all prelude. The story starts with Abraham, about a dozen chapters into the book.

‡ There are other things that might be mentioned here – such as the fact that Abraham is not only significant for what he does, he is a place holder that allows God to show his faithfulness. Many people misread the Old Testament. They look at people like Abraham, David and Daniel as models for how to live, and stop there, missing that, for the most part, these people are more often than not examples of messing up and opportunities for us to marvel at God – the lengths God will go to to rescue us. There are times when we find these people doing things right, but the first take-away is less, I need to be like that. I need to go kill my Goliaths – and more, “Wow, God protected made a promise to Abraham and he kept it over time. He watched over his family. He provided him with a son and land, and he kept this small, no-nothing, backwater tribe and brought them to the place of power – and more importantly than that – used them to deliver his Son, our savior.

‡ When I was in college, one of the raps against the Bible was that it was not based on real history, that the stories evolved over time and that it was all made up. One of the specific charges was that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because no one was writing at that time. (Moses, by the way, came after Abraham). So, the argument was, Abraham was a primitive, illiterate, barbaric, nomadic, mouth breather. However, archeologists now note that Ur, where he lived until he was in his 70s – was a city of great wealth and considerable culture, containing a library and a university. (Now, I am starting to think that many students at universities today cannot read, but the archeological evidence from Ur suggests that back then, those students could. By the way, about a Nano-second after it was obvious that Abraham had the ability to write, which meant that Moses did as well – suggesting that he could have written the Pentateuch after all – the claim was that he copied it from much earlier cultures. Wow, you guys really, really do not want to allow for the possibility that

‡ The sermon was by James Meeks.

‡ Bruggeman says that the barrenness for Sarah is a metaphor for hopelessness. It’s all over

‡ A few weeks ago I heard a literary critic asked the difference between The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit – both of which were written by Tolkien. And he said, The Hobbit is a children’s adventure – it’s “there and back again.” And when you go on an adventure, it spices up your life, and then you come back. The Lord of the Rings is a quest – it’s not something you chose. And you never really come back, you die or you are so changed you can’t come back. Men and women, Christianity is not an adventure. It’s a whole new agenda. It changes you. (I got this from Keller)

‡ I do not want to suggest that it is easy for Abraham, or that it will be easy for you. There is no promise of that. The Book of Proverbs tells us how to increase the odds that life will work. But the book of Job follows and makes it clear that we can do the right thing and still get waylaid.