

## A Community of Promise

In his book *Searching for Home* Craig Barnes describes the life of his father. He failed his family, and walked out on them. The rest of his life was spent wandering from place to place. He never saw his family again and died alone in a little mobile home somewhere in the middle of Florida. Barnes says “we buried him a few miles down the road.”

He goes on

Standing beside the barren grave, watching the dry wind toy with a piece of litter along the road, I wondered if this was the identity to which I was tethered. I had never thought about home much before that afternoon, but since then it has been my great passion. What is home? Where is mine? And how do we conduct lives that amount to something more than getting a few miles on down the road to nowhere special?

The need for a home; a place of rest and security and belonging is very deeply rooted in us. The thought that we are “tethered” to a wandering homeless identity is abhorrent to us.

My mother lost her mother when she was only four. From that time she began a wandering existence – boarding school in term time, often staying with an uncle in the holidays. Her father, a farmer, more than once sold one farm and bought another in term time so that she would return from boarding school to a strange place – not her home. Indeed nowhere was home.

As a young woman she resolved to settle. And in God’s goodness she lived the sixty years of her adult life in the same house on the same farm. Her rootedness in that place was no accident – she had tasted the wandering life, and she chose to build a home.

Those two stories tap into one of the deepest threads in the human story. We began to explore it last week.

Last week we saw how Adam and Eve were created as relational beings at home on the garden of Eden. But their sin broke their relationship, and led to their banishment from their home. Every since then human beings have been “scattered” as the bible describes it – insecure, not settled, with uncertain relationships and most especially alienated from God.

Ever since then human beings have been building their own substitute communities – we called them cities of men. But those communities are always flawed and always disappoint.

But we also began to see that God sets out to rebuild a true human community – we called it the city of God. Today we are going to look at the founding of that new community, and try to understand what it's shape was intended to be.

We are going to consider its founding father – Abraham – whose name means “father of many”. At the end of Genesis 11 he appears as Abram – just one of many people now scattered over the whole world. But in Genesis 12 God begins to speak to him.

He is given a series of promises which become the backbone of the whole of the rest of the Bible story. Abram becomes Abraham – the father of the true community of God.

### ☞ *The Promises to Abraham*

It all begins in Genesis 12.



#### **Gen 12:1-3**

The promises made here became elaborated and clarified when God speaks to Abraham again in chapters 15, 17, 22. I want to distil them as follows:

- *Land*

In verse 1 Abraham is told “go to the land I will show you”. In Gen 12:7 God says “to your offspring I will give this land”. The land of Canaan which became the land of Israel or Palestine.

The second element of the promise is the promise of innumerable offspring.

- *Innumerable offspring*

In Gen 12:2 he is promised that his descendants will be “a great nation”, but in chapter 15:5 we read



#### **Gen 15:5**

The phrase “as innumerable as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore” is repeated again and again in scripture.

The third element I want to call enjoying God's presence

- *Enjoying God's presence*

It pops up in various places in Abraham's story and becomes a central theme later in scripture. In Gen 12:3 for instance God promises to bless and protect his people.



**Gen 12:3a**

In Gen 15:1 God says that he personally is Abraham's protection, and his ultimate reward.



**Gen 15:1**

And in Genesis 17:7-8 we read this



**Gen 17:7-8**

"they will be my people and I will be their God" is a repeated theme throughout scripture.

The fourth element of the promise is that these blessings – of land, innumerable offspring, and enjoying God's presence will be for all nations.

- *For all nations*



**Gen 12:3b**

God founds a restored true community on one man – Abraham – who became the father of one nation - Israel. But the intention was always that Israel would bless every nation on the earth.

The rest of the story of the Old Testament is about how Israel failed to do that. But the promises to Abraham were not lost. They were fulfilled in Jesus, but in new and surprising ways.

For the rest of our time I want us to see how those promises to Abraham are gloriously transformed and fulfilled here and now. They are the skeleton on which the whole of the New Testament is built, but just like your skeleton is vital for your shape but invisible, so we are going to have to do a bit of dissecting to see this.

☞ *The promises to Abraham in the New Testament*

We can start to grasp what is going on perhaps by examining the theme of land.

- *Land*

In the Old Testament the promise of land is absolutely essential, and it means the strip of land which now call Palestine. But the New Testament loses all interest in that particular place. Instead Jesus comes preaching “the kingdom of God”. In other words instead of Israel, living in the land under the rule of God’s king Jesus proclaims the dynamic rule of God in the world. Now not confined to any place, nor embodied in any system of government.

We could put it this way. Abraham’s promise of land is transformed in three ways. First of all it is spiritualised.

- *Spiritualised*

We can spot if we know, for instance that dwelling in the land in the Old Testament was often described as enjoying “rest.” But in Matthew 11:28-29 Jesus says

Matthew 11:28–29 (NIV - Anglicised)

<sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

We find rest now, not by living in the promised land, but by coming to Jesus.

Sometimes Abraham’s promise of land is globalised.

- *Globalised*

For instance in the beatitudes in Matthew 5 Jesus says

Matthew 5:5 (NIV - Anglicised)

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.

In the Old Testament the meek would inherit the LAND – Palestine – but Jesus says they will inherit “the earth” – the world.

In Romans 4:13 the apostle Paul says

Abraham... received the promise that he would be heir of the world

And then the third dimension of this transformation I am going to give the horrible title of eschatologised.

- *Eschatologised*

I am sorry about that – but perhaps you will remember it. Eschatology is the study of what will happen at the end of time when Jesus returns.

You know the joke about the theology student who said to his tutor “What is eschatology?” And the tutor replied “Don’t worry about it. It’s not the end of the world.”

Often the New Testament makes it plain that our full enjoyment of Abraham’s promise of land awaits the new heaven and new earth. The meek don’t fully inherit the earth now – indeed we are presently as tossed around and helpless in this world as anyone. But in eternity we will be fully at home, we will fully enjoy living in God’s totally renewed creation forever.

But now here is what we need to see this morning. Although the fullness of God’s promise to Abraham awaits eternity, it is manifested in part now **IN THE CHURCH**.

- *Manifested in the church*

In 1 Peter for instance Peter addresses the Christians as

Strangers in the world, scattered (1 Pe 1:1)

Just like Adam and Eve, and Cain we are scattered, we are still not properly home.

But that makes the glory of 1 Peter 2:9-10 even more extraordinary

1 Peter 2:9–10 (NIV - Anglicised)

<sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. <sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.

All those titles belonged once to Israel

chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God

now they belong to the church – the people of God. The church doesn’t need to own land. Local churches live as places of security and rest and belonging in a hostile world, looking forward in confident hope to the day when they do inherit the world.

Now I want to just spend a couple of minutes clarifying a couple of things so that we get the full weight of this. The first is how the New Testament uses the word

“church”. Sometimes “church” is used to describe all believers in every place and in every time. Church literally means “a gathering” and the early Christians visualised themselves as part of a heavenly assembly of every believer.

But the other way in which “church” is used is of a local gathering of believers. There is no other use of the word “church” in the pages of the New Testament. (For those who want to study this further I will post an appendix to my sermon transcript for you to study.)

So we often speak of the church in Britain – we know what we mean but as far as I can see it is a foreign concept to the bible. There is only a church universal and churches in Britain. We use the term “the Church of England” or “the Baptist Church in England” – such an idea is not found in the pages of the bible. Of course local churches should relate together, and they may understandably choose to create structures which help them to do that – but a national or regional structure is not the church – each local gathering is.

I point that out here to help you to see the dignity of little gatherings of believers like us. Local gatherings like this are God’s chosen manifestation of his kingdom on earth.

And also a word about para-church organisations. That is Christian organisations that are set up to fulfil a specific purpose – often evangelism and discipleship of specific groups. I mention it because we have an extraordinarily large proportion of people here who belong, or have belonged to such organisations.

The New Testament endorses the formation of para-church organisations. The Apostle Paul formed a little band of evangelists for his missionary journeys. But everywhere in the New Testament local churches are the centrepiece of God’s plan. Paul’s apostolic bands were commissioned by a local church. They maintained a measure of accountability to the local church. Their task was to plant local churches. And Paul’s bands of disciples were formed and dissolved at will. But in the new Testament if a church dissolves a death has occurred.

The local church is manifestation of God’s kingdom on the earth. As Bill Hybels loves to put it, I think without any biblical exaggeration

The local church is the hope of the world.

Finally back to Abraham and his great and precious promises. They shape the kind of community that God wants to build among us. Here is the only place on earth in the here and now in which God intends to realise those promises.

The promise of land has been reshaped now into a home for God's people – here!

- *land*

If this is not in some sense your spiritual home then you are not enjoying what God intends you to enjoy.

- *Innumerable offspring*

The promise of innumerable offspring is manifested amongst us as we constantly add new people to God's kingdom. As Emil Brunner once wrote

The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning

Praise God we have the great privilege of seeing people coming faith reasonably regularly.

- *Enjoying God's presence*

The New Testament is rich in descriptions of the special sense in which God now dwells amongst his people – just as he promised Abraham that he would be our God.

That is why praise and worship is a central part of what we do when we gather. That is why the gathering of God's people Sunday by Sunday is so important – God does business with us here in ways that he just does not do if we don't meet.

- *For all nations*

And one of the wonderful things about the local church is that we are called to gather all kinds of people together into one "people of God." In East Oxford we have the inestimable privilege of literally reaching out to every nation under heaven. A few people here can remember us baptising one of the first believers in the kingdom of Bhutan. What if we were doing that sort of thing annually, monthly even!

This is the place in which all the promises to Abraham become focused for this area.....

Dignity, privilege, glory, beauty,

Craig Barnes' father never did find a home. My mother found a physical place, but never was integrated into a local church. But you

you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God