

The first time that I visited the Holy Land, our group hiked around the nature preserve at Tel Dan, which is at Israel's very northernmost edge, bordering Lebanon and Syria. The excavations there revealed one of the oldest stone arches ever constructed, a gate from the Canaanite period. Our tour guide, who was a retired American pastor, told us this was likely the place where Abraham, Sarah, and their extended family first entered what would one day become the Promised Land. Although that very well may be true, there is no indication in the Bible or any other source to verify that sentiment. The area did figure into biblical history later, which is probably why it became an historic site and part of the Israeli national park system. But as we read today, Genesis only mentions that once Abraham made it into Canaan, he eventually went to Shechem and Bethel.

That tour guide is perhaps not the only one to have attached a little nostalgia to Abraham. In today's reading from Romans, Paul uses Abraham's life and experience as an example of supreme faithfulness to God, claiming that Abraham always trusted that he would become the father of many nations, that he did not weaken in faith even when considering his age or that Sarah had been barren, and that he was fully convinced of God's ability to do what God promised. That is quite an endorsement that Paul gives Abraham, but it's also not even close to the truth.

Abraham certainly gets at least partial credit for following God's call when God says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Remember that Abraham did not have GPS, the postal system, or an international calling plan. For him to leave his country and his family would have meant going to a place that was completely unknown to him and probably permanently losing contact with the rest of his family. But Abraham goes, mostly obediently. I say mostly, because God told Abraham to go from his kindred to become this great nation...but right from the beginning, Abraham hedges his bets: he takes his nephew Lot with him so that he has a blood relative to be his heir, because Abraham was already 75 and didn't have any children of his own.

Still, God keeps reiterating the promises of land and offspring to Abraham. But whereas Paul tries to tell us that Abraham never doubted God, the rest of Abraham's story in Genesis shows us that's just not true. Many times Abraham whines to God, complaining that he has no

proof that he'll possess the land and that he has no children so a slave will end up with his inheritance. In their impatience and distrust, Abraham and Sarah decide that God needs help making these promises happen, so Abraham forces Sarah's slave Hagar to bear his first son, Ishmael; that didn't fulfill God's promise, but it did ensure family discord as Sarah becomes jealous and punishes Hagar for Sarah's own plan. Twice in dealing with the local rulers Abraham thinks he has to lie to protect his land and his family, so he keeps telling people Sarah is his sister. Finally God has to put Abraham in a deep sleep to make the covenant with him through a vision, so there is no question that it is God who is acting faithfully and not Abraham. Paul claims that Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness, but it was the faithfulness of God to Abraham, in spite of all the compromises Abraham makes, that proved God keeps promises. If salvation was up to us and our faith, we'd be in big trouble; even Abraham, our great Ancestor, the best example Paul can find of faith in God, doesn't look too good when we consider the process as well as the end result.

So it's good news that God remains faithful to us even when we are anything but trusting. But even more than that, God chooses to work through us, imperfect as we are, instead of waiting for us to prove our faithfulness or our righteousness. Of course, God works through us imperfect people because imperfect people are the only people God has to choose from, but still... There was nothing in particular that Abraham had done to make God say: *you, you go*. But God still sent him. There was nothing in particular that Abraham did *after* God sent him—in fact, we could say that Abraham gave God plenty of reasons to *decommission* him, but God never did.

So, too, Jesus, calls his disciples. Matthew wasn't a repentant tax collector; he was sitting at the tax booth, doing a job that was part of a system of exploitation and impoverishment when Jesus sees him and says, "Follow me." And Matthew did. It's the beginning of his journey, not the end; an invitation, not a reward for righteousness. And so it is for us. Whether we were baptized when we were too young to remember or we were called to faith much later in life, discipleship is a process. Placing faith in God, like placing faith in anyone else, comes from living in relationship and learning that the other person is trustworthy. If scripture shows us anything, it's that God is trustworthy, never giving up on us, no matter what. May God give us the courage to follow when we're called, to go where God would send us, and in that process may we joyfully discover how faithful God is to us.