

“In Between the Generations” // Joe Heikman
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This is the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain. This is believed to be the burial place of the Apostle James, and has been a Christian pilgrimage destination for the past twelve hundred years. These are pictures Keri and I took in 2008 when we visited to walk a part of that Camino pilgrimage route ourselves.

Construction of this building began in the year 1075. The last stone was

laid 47 years later. And the building was finally completed in 1211, 136 years after construction started. There were expansions and renovations since then, but the cathedral remains very much the same now, a thousand years later.

Those numbers can be pretty tough for us to wrap our heads around, particularly living in a city where the oldest original building is a mere 134 years old.

What does it say about the mindset of a people who would build a building meant to last for a thousand years and more? They weren't building this for themselves. The architect who designed the building knew that he would die before the building was complete. The people whose tithes paid for the whole thing were never going to worship in the space they paid for. The stonemasons and laborers who broke their backs carving the stones and moving them into place were never going to be remembered.

But they weren't doing this for themselves. They built it for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, for generations and generations after them. They built a building that would last for a thousand years, because they believed that they were part of a people, a culture, a faith that would last for a thousand years.

We are descendants...
are we also ancestors?

What about you, do you ever think about your descendants? Many of you are grandparents, and we have a couple of great-grandparents in our congregation. And I know that you think about what life will be like for them, with a mixture of hope and fear.

What about beyond them, those that will come after us a hundred, five hundred, a thousand years from now? That seems really far off, hard to even imagine.

And yet, the scripture and themes of today invite us to consider that big picture of past and future, a covenant with God for generations and generations, an *everlasting* covenant: [“as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen”](#)

Consider Abraham and Sarah, from our Scripture reading today. These are really familiar characters--many of us feel like we're on a first-name basis with them. Great-grandparents of the faith. We typically picture them at the top of the family tree, almost at the very beginning of the human story just 11 chapters into the Bible.



But they were actually much further along in the chain of humanity than you might think. A timeline based on the genealogies of the Bible place about 20 generations between Abraham and Sarah and the time of Adam and Eve, which works out to about 2,000 years. Or secular estimates would put the emergence of humans around 200,000 - 300,000 years before that time.

Either way, that puts Abraham and Sarah quite a bit down the line from the beginning.

I guess I always imagined that the world back then was young and mostly empty, filled with thoughts of the future, matriarchs and patriarchs were all around, people staking their claim on unclaimed territories with the intent of building their humble clans into future empires. (Perhaps I play too many board games).



But the world was not empty (again, estimates put the global human population between 25 and 75 million at that time) certainly not new. It's likely that Abraham and Sarah saw themselves at the end of the chain in the same way we do, mostly looking back to their ancestors and not thinking much about the future beyond their hopes for children and grandchildren, to carry on the family name.

And then God came along with the prophecy that they were to be the parents of a nation. All of a sudden, perspective changes. They're in the middle of the chain, not the end.

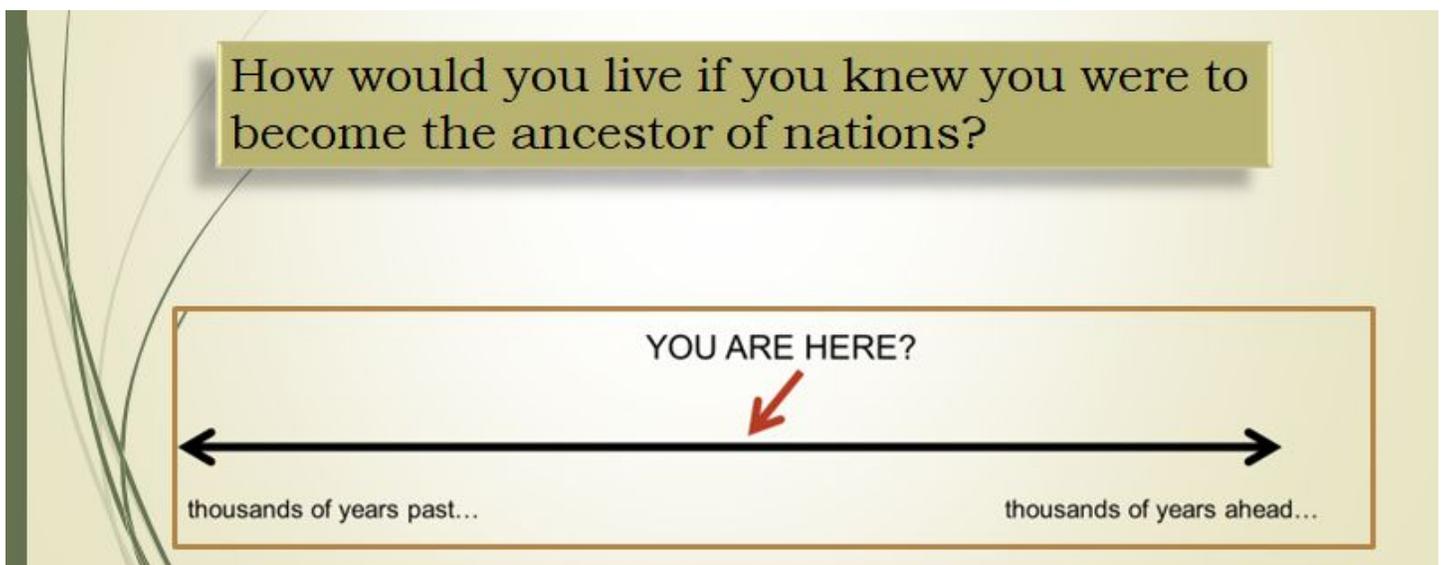


That's quite the change! The only thing I have to compare it to is the experience of becoming a parent. One minute, it's just me and Keri, working on our educations, maybe some thoughts of saving a little money for traveling and the hypothetical down-payment for a hypothetical house, mostly because that's what everybody says you're supposed to do.

But then we got pregnant, and all of the sudden a whole new reality shifted into gear: extended health benefits, getting our wills together, life insurance, a mortgage, pension plans, RESPS, RRSPs and HBPs, actual responsibilities and all the acronyms that come with them. The whole world shifted entirely, because now we were looking to a future 20-30-50 years down the road.

Now multiply that times a millennium or two...

What if, like Abraham and Sarah, we're not actually at the end of the chain, but rather in the middle? What if humanity is still in its middle ages, or even adolescence or infancy? What if someday humans look back on the 21st century in the same way that we look back at the 4th century BCE? Those youngsters had no idea what was coming!



That's an incredibly far-fetched idea, but that's how it seemed to Abraham and Sarah, too.

What if there are millions and billions of real, live, human beings who will follow in our footsteps?

Let me jump in here to say that this is not about a DNA-connection. We are truly all connected, and our impact on future generations go far beyond passing on our physical genes. Look at how many non-Jews have been grafted onto Israel's family tree. Here we are, most of us of Germanic heritage, talking about Abraham and Sarah as if they were actually our ancestors. Back to last week, God's covenant adopts all of us into God's family, so we are connected far beyond biology and genetics, and those who do not have biological children are just as much a part of this future as those who do.

And I'll also say that this is a huge question. If you're not in that mindset today, if you're in pain or dealing with stress or simply not interested, that's entirely understandable. I don't think we're built to think on this much of a macro level, at least not very often. There is value in considering this some of the time, and it's healthy to have some sense of the past and the future in general. But if you're not into this today, that's okay. I trust that God is speaking to you elsewhere in this service.

So what is the value in this gigantic perspective?

Ephesians 3:18

"I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

Ephesians 3

This age-to-age perspective is the length and breadth of the love of God. That's the promise, the everlasting covenant, that beginning to end, wherever you put those numbers, God is there.

When we look back, we expect to see the love and goodness of God, when we look forward, we expect to see the love and goodness of God, and we use that perspective now to live the present moment in the love and goodness of God.

(Which is entirely too broad of a statement to mean very much. I'll try again...)

Look again at Abraham and Sarah. Some call them the first monotheists. The parents of three major religions, followed by more than half of the people on the planet.

And there is so much they got so drastically wrong. Lying, cheating, violence. Patriarchy. Polygamy, in the kindest interpretation, or if we're honest, rape of a slave girl. In a few chapters after the passage we read today, when God finally provides the promised son who will grow into a great nation, Abraham takes him up on a mountain, fully intending to make him a human sacrifice.



This past, generations of Abraham's descendants, is full of terrible stuff. Their (our) holy scripture of is not a children's book--genocide, racism, slavery, incest, more rape, nationalism, religious abuse, and some pretty awful theology. They got God wrong a whole lot of the time.

Can I say that in church? That the heroes of the Bible, from Abraham, Moses, David, all the rest, they had the wrong understanding of God a lot of the time. Even when their intentions were good, and they weren't always, but even when they meant well, their understanding of God was too small, too violent, too much like them.

In other words, these heroes were human. Of course they were. They were flawed and selfish and limited, and so their understanding and experience of God was also flawed and selfish and limited. They did not know God very well. Neither do any of us. And so my understanding of God is also too small, too much like me, etc. I don't have the whole picture, and neither did they.

What do we do with an imperfect past and an uncertain future?

So what do we do with that reality? Denial is always a tempting option, and many believers whitewash this history into the realm of fairytale heroes. Others throw out the whole thing, leaving it all behind to start something entirely new (as if that were possible). And many of us sit in self-righteous judgment, confident that we are so much smarter and moral and more civilized than they were. (That was quite the sanctimonious rant I just went on a minute ago!)

Or maybe, we can learn to look back with humility and gratitude. Most of you know that I grew up in what I'd now call a very fundamentalist Christian school. I could give you a long list of what that place did wrong, the bad theology and the misreading of Scripture, the spiritual abuse of skeptics, the fear of judgment, the legalism, the repression, the narrow-mindedness.



What do we do with an imperfect past and an uncertain future?

- Look back in humility and gratitude

If I sound bitter, well... I've spent more than a few years looking back in anger. (Speaking of self-righteousness...!) But, I'm learning, that bitterness isn't helping me to move forward. Living to prove that they were wrong doesn't look that much different than living to prove they were right; either way I'm still controlled by that past.

Plus, the stuff I'm angry about is not the whole story, either. The truth is that I learned a ton of things at that school, really good things. If you've ever been impressed by my knowledge of obscure Bible facts, well, I have six years of competitive Bible Quizzing experience to thank for that. :) I know that's not relevant to most of you, but it's super handy in my current job!

Or the understanding that faith and life are tied together intimately, that God wants to shape my character and not just my theology, I learned that in school. Or my pacifism, or the value of service, or community, even the ability to play guitar in front of a crowd without freaking out, that was all them.

I could be bitter, but it would be better to humbly acknowledge that that history had a huge role in my formation, as a pastor, parent, citizen, person of faith. And I can be grateful for that, because they gave me so much, freely, to the best of their ability.

No, it was not a perfect past, but there is much to be grateful for, to acknowledge and include as part of my story.

To include, and then, to move beyond.



What do we do with an imperfect past and an uncertain future?

- Look back in humility and gratitude
- Include and move beyond

Back in the day in my youth group, we used to play the game "telephone." I'm not sure how much longer this will translate in our wireless world... but as most of you know, you sit in a line, and the first person whispers a phrase into the ear of the person beside them, and then it gets passed down the line by whispers until it reaches the end. And then the final person shouts out what they heard, and we'd all laugh uproariously because the original phrase like "A partridge in a pear tree" became something like "an apartment that is rent free" or whatever. Not the most exciting game, but hey at least we talked to each other instead of staring at our phones... ;)

That's how some Christians look at this chain of history, as though the task is simply to pass the truth down the line. As though somewhere back there God spoke the final truth, and it's our job to receive that truth, to obey it to the best of our ability, and then to pass it on down the line.

Which sounds like a fine idea, but it's based on the assumptions that what they had back then was the actual truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And also that the transmission from generation to generation is perfect. And that every person along the way is capable of understanding

the original message and also that the same message applies to every single situation along the way. Those are some pretty big assumptions, and I'd say that the evidence suggests that truth just doesn't work that way.

There was another game I played in youth group. I'm not sure what this one was called, but it went something like this. The first person would start with the opening sentence of a story: "once upon a time, there was a girl who lived in an igloo, and one day while she was ice fishing she put her line in the water and pulled out a..." And then the next person would have to pick up the story, "a toaster. And then she put her line back in the water, and this time she pulled out a loaf of bread. Wow, she thought, I wish I had..." And then next person might keep going in that direction with a line about the girl going off to look for a place to plug in her toaster, or maybe they'd meet a mermaid on a unicorn and go off in a totally different direction.

You were always free to go in whatever direction you wanted, but the best stories accepted whatever had come before as a starting point, and then played with that to move the story along into new territory. The game was open-ended, it was about creating something new, about each person adding their bit that was interesting to them.

I think that game is a better metaphor for how to live in the middle of history. It's naive to pretend that there was a time back then where they had everything figured out and we just need to capture that truth and pass it on. And it's also naive to pretend we're so much smarter and purer and ready to go off on our own way. And also to forget that what we do now will ripple throughout the future.

A better way is to accept that history in all its complicated wisdom and foolishness, to include in our own story whatever we can make out that is good and worthwhile from the past, and move forward the best we can into new territory.

Include and move beyond. Appreciate what has been handed to us, and then work that into the shape and form that will move our story along.

And that approach, actually is what has made this story of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah so enduring. That is one of the great gifts of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the ability to honor the tradition and at the same time contextualize it and move ahead.

The ancient Jews did that with their rabbinic tradition--it wasn't enough to have the Torah, the Law, each generation of teachers added their own interpretation and the whole thing moved forward as this great conversation.

The Christians of the second and third centuries did much the same: they didn't just repeat the teachings of Jesus, they built on them, added meaning and depth to them. "Let's see, Jesus talked about God as Father, and Paul talked about Jesus as the fullness of God, and then we have this experience of God as Spirit...how can God be all three of these at the same time and still be the same

God?" So they invented/articulated this new concept, "Trinity." It didn't matter that this idea wasn't part of the history or laid out directly in the sacred scriptures, it was consistent with what they knew of God from the past, and it made sense and was useful in the present, so they added it to the story. And now that has been handed to us, and it's our turn to decide what to do with it.

Include what has come before, then move beyond it.

That is the tradition of Christianity, the tradition *is* change, the tradition *is* growth.

(more Rob Bell to recommend/credit: check out his ["Intro to Punk Wisdom"](#) podcast for more on where this "include and move beyond" idea comes from. For an extended look at where we've come from and where this whole thing is going, I highly recommend his talk ["Everything Is Spiritual"](#))

And that means, as we look to the future, we can fully expect the future to ultimately move beyond us, as well. The future a thousand years from now will look as foreign to us as we look to the folks who built the Cathedral in Santiago. There probably won't be Mennonites in the future. Or maybe we'll have a whole planet. Who knows! The Christian church might thrive, or it might die. Faith may take on new forms and practices that seem totally strange to us. And yet, God is there.

Where is our trust, is it in God or in the structures and forms that we use now?

The future will move beyond us. And rather than being threatened by that, we should be excited by it, because that's what we have done ourselves, and that's what they are meant to do.

Let's practice that posture for a moment.

Think about one of your ancestors. That could be someone you know, a grandparent or great-grandparent, or someone from your family line that you've heard stories about. Or it could be some hypothetical person from some point on this timeline, whatever you like.

Now imagine yourself in conversation with that person. And if it helps to close your eyes and picture this actually happening, go for it.

A conversation between you and your ancestor:

- *What would you tell them that you're thankful for?*
- *What would you want them to know about your life now?*
- *What might they say to you?*

What would you say to that ancestor? What would you tell them about the things you've learned from them, the things that they passed on that stuck, the things you're grateful for?

What would you tell them about faith and life now? What do you think they'd be surprised by or excited about? What life-giving things would you want to share with them?

What do you think they would say to you, not in criticism but in their best moments, what would they be proud of? What do they recognize in your life now that resonates with the things that were important to them?

Now flip it in the other direction, generations into the future. Picture one of your descendants, someone who has followed in your footsteps.

A conversation between you and your descendant:

- What would you want them to know?*
- What would they be thankful for about your life now?*
- What might they invite you to let go of?*

What would you say to them? What gifts would you want to give? What hopes would you want to express?

And what do you think they might say to you, about the things you've left behind for them? Again, not in a critical moment, but in their most gracious moment when they're able to appreciate and affirm your gifts. What might they be thankful for in what you've passed on?

What might they invite you to let go of? What might not matter so much in the future as it seems to matter now? What have they left behind, and how might you understand and bless that leaving behind as a sign of faithfulness and growth?

If you're picturing someone that is actually alive right now, either of a past generation or someone younger than you, I'd encourage you to actually seek out this conversation in real life. You might be surprised by what you learn.

So that's my invitation today, to live in gratitude for the past and openness towards the future. For God is present, yesterday, today, and forever. Amen.