

FOUNDING FATHERS 1: A STUDY IN THE BOOK GENESIS
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MARCH 5, 2017

Next week a little musical is rolling into San Francisco. Maybe you've heard of it. It's called *Hamilton*. If you haven't heard of it, you have at least heard of the guy it is named after and concerned with. *Hamilton* is the story of Alexander Hamilton, but more than that, it is a sneak-peak at all of our Founding Fathers, men like Jefferson, Washington and Madison and the birth of this great nation.

It harkens back to a time of great heroism and tectonic shifts in the world. We look back at the moment as a group of small colonies rose up against the giant world superpower. We look back and see those colonies slay the giant and declare independence. In that process, we see war heroes fight valiantly and bravely. We see men and women making huge sacrifices and taking bold steps. We see a nation formed and watch as a new country emerges based on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That is the story of our Founding Fathers. That is the story of the show *Hamilton*.

Beyond the heroics, we see real people. We see people who lie, cheat and steal. We see backroom deals. We see authoritative power-hungry kings. We see people cheat on their spouse. We see people get violent and duel. That also is the story of our Founding Fathers. That also is the story of *Hamilton*.

Sometimes when we look back, history has a nice glossy finish. Men were noble and brave. Women were honest and loyal. When you dig a little deeper in history, you often see the other side. You see frail, broken people. People who fall short, mess up and break down. People who hurt others to get what they want. People with the best of intentions that wreck the lives of others. It's messy.

The great truth is that our history is messy and heroic, broken and beautiful. That is the story of the Founding Fathers of our country, and all of that and more is true for the

Founding Fathers of our faith. For the next six weeks leading up to Easter, we are going to explore the birth of a nation. A nation that began as a people called forth, a nation that stumbles and soars. A group of men and women with the best of intentions that often still fall short. A nation that is enslaved by a ruthless king and a nation that ultimately wins their freedom against all odds. The story of the Founding Fathers of our faith is eerily similar to the Founding Fathers of our country. In the same way we have glossy snapshots of Hamilton, Washington and Madison, we sometimes do the same for Abraham, Jacob and Joseph.

For the next six weeks, with an assist from the music from *Hamilton*, we are going to look at our Founding Fathers. The big thrust for both sets of Founding Fathers and the big thrust for us is the same. Freedom. Each week, we will hear the song, *The Story of Tonight*. It's that iconic song, "Raise a glass to freedom. Something they can never take away. No matter what they tell you. Raise a glass to the four of us. Tomorrow there will be more of us. Telling the story of tonight. Raise a glass to freedom."

The goal was freedom. Freedom from tyranny. Freedom from enslavement. Freedom from oppression. Freedom from sin. And they raise a glass to freedom. This story will culminate with Moses on Palm Sunday, raising the glass of freedom as the Passover lamb is slain and blood is spilt. Then we have Easter, a glass is raised at the final supper, new wine for a new covenant. Freedom is found. There is a messy road from here to there, but freedom awaits. That's what we all want, freedom from the rat race. Freedom from cycles of sin. Freedom to live in the joy, hope and peace of God. In order to find that, we have to take a close look at the Founding Fathers, warts and all. Heroic and messy. Beautiful and broken. At that intersection, we will find grace. At that intersection, we will find freedom. If we are going to discuss Founding Fathers, we have to start with Father Abraham.

Genesis 12: 1-4

This is the moment that launched a movement, a movement that launched a people, and a people that became a nation. It all starts with Father Abraham before he was a father. In fact, before he was even Abraham, he was just Abram.

It says God called to him and made him a series of promises: to bless him, to make him into a great nation and to make his name great. All he has to do is leave. A big part of that becoming a nation business is having a child, which they don't currently have, and by all biological notions seems impossible. So it's a big promise with a big ask. Start a nation with a son but leave everything. The first song we selected from *Hamilton* for this week is *Dear Theodosia*. It's Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton singing to their respective first-born children. It's that loaded moment and that child they have always wanted. That's what Abram wants. It's a big promise and a big ask.

This is one of the heroic moments of Abram. We find out in a moment that he is 75 years old, married and has created a life for himself in Haran with his family, his servants and his animals, and God asks him to travel towards Canaan some 500 miles away.

While I am sure it is obvious, it is worth noting how spoiled we are now. With a couple of clicks, you can read up on any locale in the world. You can map the quickest route to get there by trains, planes and automobiles. You can ship your stuff. You can look at pictures of your new hometown. You can read all about it. You can scour websites and find what homes are available and secure one before you ever show up.

When God calls Abram to leave, he is telling him to leave familiarity, safety and comfort all as a 75-year-old man. He will face bandits along the road; he will face territorial people who already inhabit the land. They will walk 500 miles and see what God will do, and Abram agrees. He steps out in faith. That is Founding Father stuff right there, extreme faith and obedience, stepping out and trusting in a God of whom he has no scriptures and no other spiritual community. He doesn't have elders or pastors to look to for advice, he

doesn't have his favorite scriptures to consider and look to for inspiration. God speaks to him and somehow he goes. That's amazing.

We often jump ahead at this point to the great story of Abraham and Sarah being given a child, but don't miss this. That is almost a quarter century later. Abraham leaves home at 75 and is wondering and wandering for 25 years. In those intervening years, several difficult things happen. Abraham doesn't really seize any land or call it home, so he is often living on the edges of town, always a stranger and always somewhat homeless. They have to leave their newfound land and sojourn in Israel for a while because there is a famine. They have to deal with foreign enemies and the threat of death.

You can understand why God has to keep reassuring Abraham. God ratifies and restates his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 and again in Genesis 17. Twenty five years later, Abraham is told by God again that he will have a son and become a great nation. You can understand why Abraham might be getting a little bit jaded. In Genesis 17, God reiterates his promise and says the sign of the promise will be circumcision. At age almost 100, Abraham is supposed to circumcise all the males in his community and also himself. Just to be clear, this is a thing that has not been done before. Imagine, having followed this man away from Haran, wandering about for 25 years, dealing with famine, homelessness and foreign enemies, and now the old man tells you he has heard from God and everyone needs to be circumcised. Not only that, Abraham himself has to be circumcised. This isn't an easy sell.

The story of Alexander Hamilton is really quite amazing. His mother, Rachel Fawcett married a sugar farmer on St. Croix named John Lavien. They were not rich and had no titles. Their marriage was contentious including great domestic abuse. Rachel finally fled from her abusive husband to St. Kitts. There she met James Hamilton and eventually had two sons with him. As it turns out, she never got divorced from John Lavien. At any rate, they were poor in the Caribbean and eventually moved back to St. Croix. At this time, James Hamilton found out his wife was still married to John Lavien, so he left her and the boys. A few years later, Hamilton's mother died of a sickness. He was left in the charge of his

cousin, who then committed suicide. At age 14, he was an orphan, abandoned a few times over. Eventually he went to work for a trading company. You hear the stories of his amazing life and you can miss how rocky the journey was.

The same is true for Abraham. The short version is the man of faith follows God, miraculously receives a child and becomes the father of a nation. In the meantime, he probably waivered often through 25 years in which he faced famine, homelessness, foreign enemies and a God who seems to keep forgetting about him, but that same God keeps reassuring him. He finally calls out to him a quarter century later and says, "It's time for you to have a kid, but before you do that, undergo a very private and painful medical procedure."

This had to feel a bit like Charlie Brown and the football. God keeps putting it out there, Abraham keeps lining up the kick, but he seemingly keeps whiffing, keeps falling on his backside. Like Hamilton, you kind of just want the man to catch a break, and finally he does. At the ripe old age of 100, he has a child, Isaac. The child of promise. The son who will father Jacob. Whose name will be changed to Israel, birthing the Jewish nation and the twelve tribes.

When you imagine it all, you have to be amazed. What faith! What courage and bravery! I guess that is why Abraham is in the Bible. He persevered through a 25-year journey and trusted God. That's why he is a Founding Father. But don't forget, what is heroic is often also messy. What is beautiful is also often broken. That is true for Abraham.

I don't want you to miss this. While he was brave and faithful in those 25 years that he trusted God, he was also a coward. He also left some damage in his wake. Back in Genesis 12, we get the first taste of the complicated nature of our Founding Fathers.

Genesis 12:10-16

This is the famine, we mentioned earlier. What I didn't mention is that they went into Egypt and there were two problems, the King of Egypt took whatever he liked and apparently Sarah was an exceptionally gorgeous senior citizen, so Abraham tells her to say she is his sister. Why? To save his own hide. The logical progression does not take too much imagination. The thought is they will take Sarah, she will become the wife/property of the licentious king, and oh, to top it all off, Abraham gets compensated for the whole deal. He just sold his wife to a licentious king to do with her what he likes all to save his own hide.

I know this was a different time and a different place, but I think we can all agree this was cowardly. All the while, Sarah is thinking, "I left Haran for this?"

That is only one episode. The more striking episode might be found in Genesis 16 and following.

Genesis 16: 1-6

They are 10 years into this journey. They have dealt with homelessness, licentious kings, famine and cowardly husbands, and they take matters into their own hands. This is where the son, Ishmael is born to Hagar. It's easy to zoom past this episode and jump ahead to the birth of Isaac, but we shouldn't. Sarah and Abraham hatch a plan. I don't want you to miss this from Hagar's perspective. She is a lowly Egyptian servant. She doesn't have a Bill of Rights or OSHA helping her out. She is a slave, and if your master tells you to have sex, then you do, but it gets worse from there. After doing the thing she was told to do, her mistress gets jealous and upset with her and treats her harshly. So much so that she runs away. She eventually returns and Ishmael has standing as the first-born son. That is until 13 years later when Sarah has Isaac. The promise finally comes true, and she does have a son, and the jealousy reaches its peak.

Genesis 21: 8-14

This is the Founding Father and the Founding Mother sending a single mother and her young son away, essentially to die in the wilderness. This is the first single-mother story in the Bible. It stems not from divorce or death, but from Abraham and Sarah engineering their own plan. Forcing an Egyptian slave woman to bear them a child. Then getting jealous enough to send her away to her death.

As you might know, God is the Father to the fatherless and the protector of widows, so he provides for them and turns Ishmael into a great nation as well. Don't miss this, the same man of faith and belief has turned his wife over to a licentious king and sent his firstborn son and a slave woman out to their deaths in the wilderness.

I'd like everyone to sing along, "Father Abraham...had many sons...and many sons had Father Abraham." You don't feel like singing? Why? This is THE Founding Father. He was heroic and he was a mess. His life was beautiful, and it was broken. Here is a theme that I don't want you to miss today. We often enslave ourselves on the path to freedom. We often mistake Canaan for Egypt. The things that we think will free us often enslave us. The story arc from now until Easter will take us through Genesis and into slavery and eventually freedom. But don't miss this, even here, the seeds of slavery are sown.

Here is something I hadn't thought about or noticed before. We will get to Joseph in a few weeks, but you probably know the story. Joseph's brothers are jealous of him, so they sell him into slavery in Egypt. They are thinking about killing him first, but then they see a caravan of slave traders, and they come up with an idea.

Genesis 37: 25-28

Ishmaelites begin the process. They carry Joseph to Egypt which will eventually lead to the enslavement of the Jewish people. The very thing they thought would free them eventually

enslaves them. Abraham wanted to be free from the stress of waiting and waiting for a son, so he chose another way. The offspring of that son, Ishmael, eventually carry the offspring of his sons into slavery.

Life is kind of like that. As we enter this Lenten season, that spiritual reality still rings true today. The things we think will free us will often enslave us. Egypt often looks like Canaan. This past week, some of you may have begun the process of Lent with acknowledging Ash Wednesday. That moment when you put the ash on your forehead in the shape of a cross reminds you of the 40-day journey towards Easter. For some, this includes giving up something for Lent, something that is central to your life or problematic in an effort to refocus your efforts on God.

What I am wondering is which of you will also admit to celebrating Fat Tuesday? Fat Tuesday is the opportunity to eat, drink and be merry before you give it all up for Lent. In Italy, this is celebrated as Carnevale, which quite literally means carne-meat, vale-farewell. Farewell to meat. Meat used to be often given up for Lent, but maybe on an even deeper level, farewell to the flesh.

The great irony is that many of us go through a weekly Fat Tuesday-Carnevale rhythm. The things we think will free us often end up enslaving us, and we get caught in this incessant cycle. Indulge, overdo it. Swear it off, and then start all over again. How do we find freedom? First and foremost by acknowledging that the things we want we often don't really want. That the things we consume often consume us. When Jesus talks about denying yourself and picking up your cross, it often sounds dark and miserable. When Jesus tells us to die to ourselves, it's because he is offering new life. We often quote Jesus talking about dying to yourself, but we forget the "so that." So that you may have new life. So that you may walk in the Spirit. So that you may know joy and peace. So that you may know freedom. The strange irony is also conversely true. The things we think will enslave us often free us. When you tether yourself to Jesus and trust in his plan, it can seem confining or enslaving, but the exact opposite is true. When you tether yourself to Christ, that alone is where true freedom is found.

Some of you today are looking at some choices you made years ago and realizing right now the consequences. You are seeing the thing that felt like freedom now has led to slavery. Addiction, broken relationships, psychological wounds. You name it. I want you to know Jesus offers a new life, but you have to give up the old one. You have to be willing to trust and follow. Without shortcuts. Without workarounds. Egypt often looks like Canaan and Canaan often looks like Egypt. When you commit to the Jesus way, counterintuitive though it may seem, you will find freedom.

I want to close by reminding you that your story is heroic and messy. Beautiful and broken. And God is there in the midst of all of it. Alexander Hamilton had a tough early life, but it led him to read and to write. When he worked for the trading company, it forced him to consider the economy of trade and cash flow. He learned how to keep ledgers and balance books. Can you see how that might be beneficial for a statesman who ends up calling for the financial unity of the nation, leading us to balance our books and becoming financially strong?

In the midst of the pain and brokenness, he grew. What seemed like a disaster, God uses for good. That is almost the exclusive point of Genesis. Yes, Joseph gets taken into slavery, but that ends up paving the way to care for the tribes of Israel in the midst of an enormous famine. We often travel from Canaan to Egypt and back again. Many times we mistake freedom for slavery and vice versa. As we prepare for this Easter season, I want you to know true freedom awaits.