

9/2/14

Preacher: John Malcolm
Series: The Big Picture
Theme: Week 4 - Signs of Hope
Readings: Genesis 12.1-9
Genesis 45.1-11
Exodus 3.1-10

We are in our big picture bible series in which we are trying to look at the big themes of the bible in 14 weeks.

The idea is for us all to have a better grasp of the bible and to be able to better understand the great themes that flow through it.

If you are new to bible reading, this will be a great help to you because the great themes will give you a framework to help give structure to the wide variety of stories you read.

If you have been reading the bible for years, this will help you to fit the themes together so that you have a clearer understanding of the fine details you have discovered over the years.

Although there are many authors in the bible, who have written over a period of around 1500 years, there is another single Author, God, who has inspired the writing of this book in a way that has continuity.

In some ways the bible is like a tapestry – many bold threads and themes are found early in the Old Testament. Sometimes they are prominent then disappear for a while only to return with boldness later in the story.

This week we begin to see signs of hope in the lives of Abraham, Joseph and Moses.

Abraham's story highlights **faith**

Joseph's story teaches us about God's **sovereignty**

Moses highlights God's **revelation** from the burning bush, Mt Sinai and the tent of meeting. And for the Jewish people God's revelation to Moses reaches a pinnacle with the giving of the law. We will come to the commandments next week.

One of the great themes of the bible becomes evident in God's choice of people to act on his behalf

Before we look too closely at the signs of hope we find in their stories, we should acknowledge that **they, and practically every other hero of the bible is flawed.**

Occasionally, God does choose a person who has a godly reputation and we can clearly see why God would choose him or her.

But often God works through people despite their flaws.

To save his own life, **Abraham** said his wife Sarah was his sister and a local king almost took her as his wife.

Abraham went along with Sarah's idea that since she couldn't have a child, he should sleep with her maid Hagar and have a child with her.

Joseph was proud and boastful. As the favourite son of his father Jacob, he was spoiled. Added to this he had dreams about his brothers serving him and he boastfully told them about it.

His relationship with his brothers was so bad they wanted to kill him, but at the last minute settled with selling him into slavery and convincing their father he had been killed by wild animals.

Moses was a murderer who went on the run and hide out in the desert.

Even among Jesus disciples we find:

Peter – a hot headed lying fisherman

John and James – proud brothers who schemed to have the best seats in heaven.

Thomas who doubted Jesus

Judas who betrayed Jesus
Matthew who was a profiteer taxing his fellow Israelites on behalf of the occupying army.
And Simon who was a terrorist freedom fighter.

A great theme and one of the signs of hope is that God reaches out to unworthy sinners and lovingly includes them in his plans.

Because of all the other flawed characters I see in the bible, I know there is hope for me.
If God only reached out to use wonderfully righteous people, then I wouldn't have much hope.
So we read the bible and find both Rahab the prostitute and Ruth the Moabite are included, Jacob the conman and Jonah who ran from God are there, even Saul who persecuted Christians is part of the plan.
This means there is hope for us all, however unworthy we may feel, whatever we have done, however far from God we have fallen – there is hope for us.

There are several big themes in Abraham's life, but today we simply focus on his faith in God

Just as an aside, sometimes following an encounter with God, people in the bible have their names changed.

So Abram, becomes Abraham. Sarai, become Sarah, Jacob becomes Israel and Saul becomes Paul.
When you become a familiar with the bible you get to know who is who, but don't be surprised when people are renamed.

In faith Abraham responded to God's call.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. Gen 12:1

... So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; Gen 12.4

In the New Testament the writer of Hebrews looks back on Abraham's life saying, **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.** Heb 11:8

Abraham is noted for his faith. He trusted in God even though he didn't know where God would lead him.

Faith turns out to be the most important quality God looks for in humanity.

God does not look for beauty, power, wealth or knowledge. Rather the thing that catches God's attention is faith.

There is a story in the NT when a centurion asks Jesus to heal his sick servant and trusts Jesus can command the healing without having to go to see the servant personally. Jesus responds *When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith* Mt 8:10.

And when Jesus' disciples become upset in a storm, fearing that their boat might sink, *Jesus replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"* Mt 8:26

One way to think about this series about the big picture of the bible is as a jigsaw puzzle.

If it were a jigsaw puzzle, faith is not simply a piece of the puzzle, it is a corner piece.

Faith helps give shape to every part of this puzzle and faith will be found in every important piece of the puzzle.

It is so important that the writer of Hebrews says, *And without faith it is impossible to please God,...* Heb 11.6

Abraham's faith was tested when God asked him to sacrifice his son.

Isaac was the son of promise, through whom Abraham was to have grandchildren who would grow into the nation God had promised him.

If he sacrificed Isaac then this plan could not come to pass.

On the way to the place of sacrifice, Isaac thought it was odd that they weren't taking an animal with them to sacrifice.

Abraham spoke prophetically when he said, *God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.* Ge 22:8

In faith we see Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, until God stayed his hand at the last moment.

In response to Abraham's faith another part of the puzzle is revealed, God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice.

In the life of Jesus, who is called the lamb of God, we find God providing his only Son as a sacrifice for our sins.

We won't dwell on this today, but pick it up later in our series.

Many of us are familiar with the story of Joseph either through the bible story or the more modern musical version by Andrew Lloyd Weber.

Some of you might have had a part in the musical at school or youth theatre, while others might have gone to watch your children in the show.

The story of Joseph begins with his father Jacob spoiling him and giving him a coat of many colours.

Joseph has vivid dreams and is able to interpret them, seeing his brother bowing down to him.

Neither the coat nor the dreams endeared Joseph to his brothers. In fact they were fed up with him, very angry and willing to kill him.

Rather than kill him, they sold him as a slave and then broke their father's heart by claiming his beloved Joseph was dead.

Joseph went on to serve Potiphar until his wife accused Joseph of molesting her.

Then Joseph served a long sentence in jail, during which time he accurately interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh's servants, one of whom was executed, while the other went back to his old job serving the Pharaoh's wine.

When Pharaoh had strangely disturbing dreams the cupbearer remembered Joseph, who was then called to interpret the king's dreams.

God revealed there were to be 7 years of plenty and 7 years of famine.

Joseph became prime minister of Egypt, saving the country from famine and at the same time making the king very wealthy.

In the course of the famine his dream about his brothers was fulfilled when they came looking for food and, not recognising him, they all bowed down before him.

After some interaction Joseph revealed who he was, dispelling their fears and worries of revenge saying, *... do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you ... God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.* Ge 45:5-8

And later when Jacob died and the brothers feared that now with their father dead Joseph would take his revenge, he said to them, *Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? **You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good** to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.* Gen 50:19-20

This introduces us to the big theme of God's Sovereignty

This story takes place over many years, over different geographical regions and in different cultural settings, in the field, the gaol and the palace.

At the time of being sold into slavery, neither Joseph nor his brothers could foresee the deadly famine. No one could imagine how a spoilt brat, sold into slavery could rise to become prime minister of Egypt.

Yet God used this.

In fact what Joseph's brothers did to harm him, God used to bless them and the people of Egypt with the saving of many lives.

The NT affirms this saying, *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* Ro 8:28

This is a mystery to us. We cannot always see the hand of God at work. Yet even when humanity does its worst, God can turn it into something good.

When the Romans, the Jewish religious leaders and the crowds did their worst to execute an innocent man on the cross, God used that to open the door of forgiveness, taking our sin and placing it on Jesus so we could find peace with God.

Don't twist what I am saying to infer that God makes bad things happen or is pleased when evil flourishes.

What I am saying is that God can take what we mean for evil and bring good from it.

In the story of Joseph, God sovereignly provides for his people before they even know they have a need.

This reminds us that in every bible story we read, in the pages of human history since the bible was written, and even in our own lives God is at work to achieve his purpose and plan.

We may not see in the high or lows, in success or failure or even in the heights of human achievement or the worst of our inhumanity – still God works.

God doesn't cause the bad in our world, but he sovereignly uses it.

I understand this raises many questions about sovereignty and free will, or when God causes an event or simply uses an event we cause.

There is a mystery in this which won't be clear to us until God makes it clear at the foot of his throne.

Nevertheless – here we begin to see that God is sovereign.

In the time between Joseph and Moses the people of Israel flourished and grew in numbers.

Initially the people had been welcomed in Egypt, but then their numbers had grown to a point where their presence posed a threat and the Egyptians came to dread them.

A new king came to the throne, one who did not know about Joseph. He decided to subdue the people of Israel by forcing them into slavery. He also decided to curb their population growth by having their boys killed at their birth.

Into this situation Moses is born, hidden in the bulrushes, rescued by an Egyptian princess and raised in the royal household.

Things turned sour when Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and he intervened and killed the Egyptian.

Moses was forced to flee into the remote desert of Midian where he found refuge for 40 years and where he became part of a family of shepherds.

Moses became the first great prophet of the bible.

God spoke to Moses from
the burning bush,

then from Mt Sinai
and later from the tent of meeting.

Moses was called to speak the words of God to the Pharaoh, commanding him to let the people of Israel go free; then he spoke to the people of Israel about the Promised Land and later spoke to them again giving them the Ten Commandments.

Looking back on his life it was said, *Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face*, Dt 34:10

The office of prophet was one of three great offices that were to become important to the people of Israel: Prophet, Priest and King.

We will discover more about these over the coming weeks.

As prophet Moses did not prophecy so much about things in the future as he did about things in his present day.

These were God's word for the current Pharaoh.

These were God's words for the people of Israel who were slaves and who needed know God had heard their cries.

God was speaking to the people of Israel, preparing them to leave Egypt, warning them about the Passover of death, giving them directions through the Red Sea, and giving them commandments to shape their newly forming nation.

Throughout Genesis God has spoken, mainly to individuals like Noah, Abraham about their own lives, but now the **tempo changes** and God is not simply speaking to Moses for Moses, but to the people of Israel through Moses.

As you continue to read other great prophets will arise: Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah and others.

We see another big theme – God gives revelation.

This is another great theme, found earlier, but now coming into clearer focus – God speaks, God gives revelation, God sends his words to his people.

God's revelation is not limited to speaking through prophets, but he does use the prophets in significant ways.

God is not silent – God will raise up people to speak for him.

In time kings will turn to the prophets to hear from God.

Sometimes people will listen to the prophets and sometimes they will reject, and even seek to kill them.

In time the people will begin to look for a great prophet, a voice in the wilderness who will herald the coming of the messiah.

Then Jesus, the messiah, will come and speak the words of God.

He will be the greatest prophet, the clearest voice to speak the words of God.

Over time some people would be prophets, others would be priests and a few would be kings.

But Jesus the messiah would himself be prophet, priest and king.

In this piece of the big picture we find:

Faith - God taking Abraham on a journey of faith, which reminds us that God calls all sorts of flawed people

Sovereignty - Even through adverse circumstances of Joseph's life, God acts sovereignly, to provide for his people

Revelation - God revealing his will, speaking and acting through Moses, God fulfils his promise to Abraham, giving his people freedom, and leading them towards the Promised Land.

All this has meaning for us

God calls us to be people of faith who will walk with him.

God is sovereign over our lives - we begin to see that God is sovereign, working to a plan, drawing history towards his own purposes, and we can be part of that plan.

God still speaks to us by his Spirit bringing the scriptures to life and calling us into his family.

In the week ahead I invite you to read part of the story of one of these men.

Read it with an openness to learn about faith.

Look to see how God's sovereign hand is at work.

And look for God to reveal something new to you from his word.

Let us as a church

Once again put our faith in God.

Trusting in his sovereign will for us

And knowing he will speak to us, guiding us in the path we should take.