

# Scattered but Gathered

## Racial Justice Sunday 2024 Teaching Outline

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### Key scripture: Genesis 12:1-4 (NIV)

The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. ‘I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

### Introduction

- This sermon for Racial Justice Sunday is intended to be delivered as a message or read as an article, with points of reflection at the end. It can be also modified freely according to your own missional context.
- Imagine you were in Abraham’s shoes (he was then called Abram). You were just told to leave ‘your country, your people and your father’s household’. That’s pretty tough, isn’t it? It’s easy to listen to it as a story, but when the story comes as our own reality, it can be a life-changing decision, and not many people could actually take this as an invitation to the land God will show you.
- Abraham took it bravely, and he was about to begin a 2,200-mile journey from Ur of Chaldea to Canaan. Why did God initiate this kind of long dangerous journey in the calling of Abraham? There must have been other ways, more comfortable and settling. God, however, specifically called him to a destination far, far away, demanding that he leave the familiar behind and embrace the new ahead in total trust in God.

### Context

#### *Mission through exile*

- Here we witness a different mode of exile, which is unlike the previous cases of Adam and Eve, and then Cain, who were made exiles due to their sins. Exile for them was a means of punishment for repentance and renewal. Now God launched his mission through exile in a new way by scattering his chosen one, Abraham, and his whole family.



- From then on, the Bible would record more stories of God's exiles from Joseph to John, Daniel to Paul - and Jesus himself as well, from divine to mundane in his incarnation. They left their homes for God's plan of reconciliation and renewal.
- Now Abraham would meet all sorts of peoples - kings and princes, traders and robbers, kind people and bad ones - passing through palaces, markets and high streets along with wildernesses, deserts, slums and no-go areas. Surely this is a risky business, not for the faint of heart. Just to complete this journey safely, Abraham had to use all he had - his people, skills, wealth and energy. It was a daunting task even for a healthy young man, but Abraham was already 75 years old by the time God asked him to relocate.
- What did God want Abraham to be through this challenging and epic journey? To make Abraham 'into a great nation' as a 'blessing'. God wanted him to come out of his comfort zone, broadening his perspective and understanding of God's people of all nations. For this, he would go through nations and cities, from the empire of Egypt to Babylon, Negev, Sodom and Gomorrah, Nimrud, Nineveh, to Canaan, a journey which runs across modern-day Egypt, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine and Israel.
- He would meet with the peoples and interact with them, crossing the boundaries to deepen his understanding and to respect cultural differences, which is a crucial part of reconciliatory mission. Without this crucial process, to be a 'great nation' as a 'blessing' would have been impossible. This was God's test and purpose of the training through the journey.
- We still witness so many issues around us regarding this matter, from international wars to civil wars, from migrant crises to populist movements, to racial prejudices and violence institutionally and individually.
- According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch 2022, the pandemic worsened racial inequality to the level of the 1960s in the US, given that the pandemic 'disproportionally burdened' 'Black, Latino, and Native communities ... by the negative impacts of Covid-19, which has deepened existing racial injustices in healthcare, housing, employment, education, and wealth accumulation'. (Human Rights Watch, The Events of 2021, The United States)
- On top of pandemic strains and sufferings, the effects of the war in Israel and Ukraine have been felt worldwide, with ever-growing political tensions in many regions including Hong Kong, Iran and Africa. As a result, we witness so many displaced and scattered people - the modern-day exiles, voluntary or forced. Like Abraham they are embarking on a long and hard journey, facing the unknown.

### ***All peoples***

- For us as the Church, it is vital to reflect upon today's exilic movements across the world. Because these are stories of Abrahams today in their journey, taking the road in full trust in God. We as Church have a whole new



opportunity to welcome them and embrace them together by opening ourselves up to ‘all peoples’, as did Abraham and Jesus.

- We will go with them, getting to know each other more and praying together. That is ‘the ministry of reconciliation’ (2 Corinthians 5:18) of God by making peace through the blood of Jesus (Colossians 1:20). Jesus ‘himself is our peace’, and he has ‘made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility’ (Ephesians 2:14).
- Christ’s Church is the bearer of God’s promise of blessing through Abraham and Christ our Lord, so ‘all peoples on earth will be blessed’ (Genesis 2:3). We are entrusted with this.
- We are called to pause and ponder on the significance of the words ‘all peoples’. Of course, we need to keep holding to account our politicians and policy makers for racial justice issues. But we also need to do our bit by opening ourselves to ‘all peoples’ who are going through their own exilic experiences in their geographical or spiritual journeys.
- Abraham’s journey was an exilic movement that made him obedient and humble to God. It was also an eye-opener for him to really open himself to other people and cultures. His humble respecting attitude toward the Hittites demonstrates this in Genesis 23. When he bought a burial place for his wife Sarah, he rose and bowed down twice to them (vv7,12) as a sign of mutual respect and trust. The Hittites also esteemed him, calling him ‘my lord’ (v15). We can see there was a trusted relationship between them.

### ***Racial Justice***

- Racial justice is a big concept, but it starts with our simple day-to-day interaction with diverse people. Today’s exilic movements give us a new opportunity. Church should be a place to practise Abraham’s welcoming and hospitality to ‘all peoples’, culminating in Jesus’ sacrificial love to all.
- Racial justice starts with our relationship with the people we serve. That is our ministry of reconciliation and renewal. As a theologian points out, ‘Reconciliation as it should be lived and practised in Christian life is to do not only with broken relationships, but also with a lack of relationship.’ (Muthuraj Swamy, Reconciliation, London: SPCK, 2018, p6)
- How many racial injustices have been triggered and committed by this ‘lack of relationship’ and understanding? Our journey is to get connected again with God and with one another. As Abraham and so many other biblical figures experienced in their exiles, let us leave the familiar behind and take the road ahead to embrace the new in full trust in God together. ‘Our task is not just to tell but to live out the story’ of God. (Tom Wright, God in Public, London: SPCK, p37)
- We may feel scattered because of our differences and weary journeys, but we are gathered and united in God, as a great nation of God’s Kingdom beyond geographical boundaries, and a blessing to ‘all peoples’ on the earth.



**Questions for further reflection:**

- How does the word 'exile' come to you? What does it mean; what images does it bring to mind?
- How can you relate your personal journey to that of Abraham?
- Where can you identify yourself in Abraham's journey?
- Is your church welcoming and embracing 'all peoples' by seeking God's plan for them?
- What hinders you in opening yourself to others?
- What can you do practically for racial justice in your church and community?