

Blessed and Sent

Genesis 12:1-9

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With this sermon, we begin our narrative lectionary. The narrative lectionary follows the overarching Biblical story of God and God's people. Preaching from this lectionary will hopefully give all of us a sense of how God has been at work throughout history and of how the story of God and God's people continues today.

Our text today is the call of Abraham, but there is a lot that has happened in Genesis leading up to this story. Chapter 12 is a new beginning of sorts, after the many other new beginnings that were told about in the first chapters: the new beginning of creation, the new beginning outside of the garden, and the new beginning after the flood.

All of those stories are the backdrop for this story, and particularly, the last few verses of chapter 11, beginning in verse 27, place this story in the context of a genealogy of Abraham's family, which contains important information. We learn that Terah had 3 sons, Abraham, Nahor and Haran; Haran was the father of Lot; Haran died before his father, Terah; Abraham and Nahor had wives, and those wives are named in this genealogy: Abraham married Sarah, and Nahor married Milcah. And then we learn something surprising, something that isn't usually included in genealogies: Sarah was barren. And to make sure we caught that information, this is followed by, "she had no children". Interesting, in a genealogy, a record of family relationships and descendants, we are told that Sarah and Abraham have no children, essentially ending that family line.

The next verse then tells us that Terah took Abraham, Sarah and Lot, and they left Ur to go to the land of Canaan. We don't know why Terah decided to move, nor why he only took these family members and not his whole family. But we are told he set out to go to the land of Canaan. However, when they got to Haran (same spelling as his son in English, but in Hebrew the pronunciation is a bit different) they settled there. Then Terah died.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis end with a genealogy in which we find out that one part of the family has no children, a journey is begun but not completed, and a father dies.

Like other Biblical stories which begin in hopelessness and chaos, this story is no different. Up until this point the stories have been a series of beginnings and

endings, stories in which God's vision for creation is different from how people choose to live into that vision. God creates the world and celebrates its goodness. Adam and Eve don't trust God's word about the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and end up ashamed of their nakedness and outside of the garden. Adam and Eve give birth to 2 sons; but there is tension and conflict around what offerings are acceptable and Cain kills Abel. After several generations, during the time of Noah, there is chaos again on earth as human beings follow their own desires, and so God sends the flood, preserving only Noah's family and 2 of every kind of creature.

Then, after the flood, when the population on earth had increased, and "the whole earth had one language and the same words", the people feared they would be scattered, so they built a tower to the heavens in order to make a name for themselves. Upon seeing this tower, God scatters the people, and creates many languages so that they could not understand each other anymore.

The genealogy follows this story, and ends on a note of despair. This world that God had created, this people whom God created for relationship--with God and with each other--is doomed to failure. There is no future, nothing but a barren family, an unfinished journey, and a dead father. (Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis*, BCBC, p. 98)

Depending on who you listen to, this is also the state of the church today. Participation in mainline churches is on the decline; the church no longer holds the stature in the community that it once did; many see the church as irrelevant to the world today, or out of touch, more interested in preserving itself for its own sake than for the sake of the world, or the gospel; many find the church to be a place of judgement, discrimination and abuse. And why wouldn't they, when the most visible, vocal voices for Christianity are TV evangelists and leaders who preach one message, but whose lives tell a story not in keeping with the words they speak. Or when the media publish stories of clergy sexual abuse that was covered up for years by the church hierarchy; or when we look at the amount of time and money that goes into maintaining the institution of the church.

Or if we go closer to home, who doesn't despair at the way in which our denomination and our conference are divided on the issue of same-sex marriage and inclusion. And by how consumed we are with this issue. My conversations with colleagues in this community are dominated by this--we voice our frustration, our despair and our hope for the future of the church. We probably hold equal amounts of despair and hope as a whole group, but individually, we hold them differently and in differing amounts. Some of us wonder how on earth we will ever

find our way through this, some of us despair that we ever will find our way through and some of us see this as an opportunity to find our way through that models a different way. In many ways, we too find ourselves at a place of barrenness, incompleteness and death, just as at the end of Genesis 11.

Into this despair, come the words of Genesis 12:1-3: Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

With these words, spoken into a situation of barrenness, God casts a huge vision for Abraham's life--he will become a great nation. In the midst of an incomplete journey, God says to Abraham, "Go". Into the hopelessness and despair of death, God's vision is one of blessing and promise. This is a vision for Abraham's life and for the life of all creation--I will bless you so that you will be a blessing. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Why did God call Abraham? Was he more righteous, more worthy than anyone else? Why, after investing so much into the whole of creation, does God now choose only one person or family to be the avenue for blessing?

The Biblical story does not answer this question, but it does tell us stories that illustrate that it wasn't Abraham's behaviour or character that was the reason, for he didn't always make the right decisions--he twice gave his wife Sarah to another man out of fear that he would be killed. That is not the action of a righteous man. And he condemns to almost certain death his son Ishmael and Sarah's maid Hagar, when he sends them away into the desert, in response to Sarah's jealousy. Again, not the actions of someone worthy of such a lofty call.

So it wasn't Abraham's worthiness or righteousness that qualified him for this blessing and promise. What qualified him was that God chose him--God chose him out of love for the world; God chose him because God loved him and loved the world and had a vision for the world. Over and over, God chooses and calls particular people to particular tasks. It is through particular people that God's vision of blessing for all people comes about. It is as God calls particular people to particular tasks that God touches the whole world.

God's vision is grand--that all the families of the earth will be blessed. God's vision is one of relationship and reconciliation. That has always been God's vision. And so, throughout the Bible, and continuing today, God calls particular people to embody that vision and mission of reconciliation in the world. God calls particular people in particular times to partner with God in that mission.

We may be uncomfortable with the specific nature of this call, and the fact that this promise of blessing was given to a particular people--how is it that God chooses and blesses only one individual or group? In this passage we see that the blessing for Abraham isn't for his own benefit and end. He is blessed, yes, and he will become a great nation, yes, but the reason is not so Abraham can become rich, famous and powerful, but so that he, and by extension the great nation that he will become, can be a blessing for others...for all the families of the earth. "Particularity, working through one for the good of many, is the way God operates." (Jacqueline E. Lapsley, workingpreacher.org) The blessing of one isn't for the sake of that one alone, but it is for the whole world.

The call of Abraham is a call for him to be a blessing to and for the world, and that is the call for the church as well. We are a called and sent people, blessed to be a blessing. This call, this promise, this blessing is a gift of love from God--God loves us and God loves our world.

I've been pondering what it means to be blessed and what it means to be a blessing. What does it mean for each one of us to be blessed? What does it mean for each one of us to be a blessing? What does it mean for Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship to be blessed? What does it mean for us to be a blessing? What does it mean for our conference to be blessed and to be a blessing? Or our denomination? Or the Christian church around the world? What does it mean that all the families of the earth will be blessed through us? Or all the families in Goshen, or all the families on Berkey Avenue?

How do our words and actions and our very presence bring glory to God, and love and peace to others? How are we part of God's reconciling mission?

Why did Abraham follow this promise, and pick up and move to another country? Why are any of us drawn to this life of faith? Drawn toward a future we can't see? (workingpreacher.org, podcast, September 7, 2014) Perhaps, before anything else, Abraham knew himself to be blessed. Even in the midst of barrenness, an incomplete journey, and the death of his father, he knew himself to be blessed by God. In God's words, Abraham saw something beyond himself, something which

drew him, beckoned him to more than what he could see or imagine on his own. Having lived his life so far, he saw his story as part of a larger story; he saw himself as part of a larger vision, a vision that was not his own. And yet, in choosing to be part of this vision, he made it his own, and journeyed by stages into this new life laid out before him.

Perhaps we too, before we can be a blessing, need to know ourselves as blessed. In the midst of hardship and difficulty; in the midst of division and confusion; in the midst of uncertainty and loss, do we know ourselves to be blessed and loved by God?

It strikes me that in the Biblical story, it is at precisely the moments when there is trouble, impossibility, hopelessness and despair, that God calls someone anew, makes new promises, offers new possibilities and hope, casts a new vision. It is at precisely those times of hopelessness, that God creates a future where there was previously no future.

I've appreciated Phyllis Tickle, an author and scholar who has been paying attention to what is happening in church and culture today. She places the trends of the last 100 years into a pattern that she has noted has happened every 500 years or so. She says that every 500 years, Western culture has gone through a major transformation or upheaval, or what she calls a tsunami, "a time in which essentially every part of culture is reconfigured." (*Emergence Christianity*, p. 17) We are all familiar with the Great Reformation that happened 500 years ago. We have our spiritual roots in that time. One thousand years ago, in the 11th century, was the Great Schism, when East separated from West. And 1500 years ago, there was the Great Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. And 2000 years ago, was the Great Transformation, a time of such significant change that in the westernized world, we talk about time as "before the common era" and "the common era". (pp. 20-21) She calls this time that we are in today, the Great Emergence.

The changes we are currently experiencing in the culture around us and in the church have to do with the speed with which technology is changing and the way it is changing us and how we relate to each other and the world around us. These changes impact the life of faith and the life of the church. These changes offer challenges as well as new possibilities. These changes have brought about an upheaval of sorts.

It has been helpful to place all of these changes into a broader context, one rooted in 2000 years of history. It helps me place the church today into the same story

that is contained in our scriptures, the story of God and God's people. It is a helpful reminder that the church has survived for thousands of years, and because it has survived, it will continue to survive. And it reminds me that the church is not any one of us, or any one congregation, or any one denomination, but the church is the people of God gathered in worship. It is the body of Christ gathered in service. It is those who have been blessed by God to be a blessing for the world. The vision, the church and its mission are not ours, but God's, and that is good news.

It is good news, because none of us are worthy to be the bearers of this promise and blessing, and yet we are. It is good news, because we are the imperfect body of Christ, imperfectly serving one another and our world, imperfectly blessing those with whom we engage. It is good news because the future of the church is not in our hands, but in the hands of God, whose vision is bigger than ours, whose future extends beyond the decline in numbers, beyond divisive and consuming conversations, beyond the institution of the church, beyond each of us.

We can despair about the state of the church now, or the future of the church, when we think there appears to be no solution to the realities of culture, when we don't see options for a way through difficult conversations, when we think the church is dying. And yet, this is the time and place in which we find ourselves, for better or for worse. We are being invited to place our story next to this particular story, and ask how God is calling us today, how God wants to use us to bless the world. We can listen to hear the vision that God is casting, to which God is inviting us to join.

In her blog, "Practicing Reconciliation", Sara Wenger Shenk, president at AMBS, reflected last week on this call of Abraham. She said this call is personal--it is a particular call to each of us individually; and yet it is also has nothing to do with any of us. It's about me and us, and it's not about me or us. "It is about aligning our lives with the magnificent reconciling mission of God in the world."

And that is the vision I want to live into. The vision, the mission of God is both wonderful and messy, but it is a reconciling mission. It invites us into difficult conversations for which there are no apparent or easy solutions; it invites us into a future which, from our perspective, is uncertain; it invites us to place our trust in God for that future. For the church and its future are in God's hands; it is a future that God can see. Our job is to journey on, like Abraham, in stages toward that future, trusting in the God who promises and blesses. Thanks be to God. May it be so.