***BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING***

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Texts: Genesis 12:1-9 and Romans 4:13-25

 Almost 30 years ago now I was in a Continuing Pastoral Education Program at St. Mary’s Hospital in Richmond as part of my preparation for ministry. I was assigned to a joint replacement unit – how appropriate was that! – and made daily visits to patients who were recovering with new hips or knees or shoulders. Back then it was more than an overnight stay, so I had a chance to visit with patients for several days. I remember speaking with an elderly woman who had been there three days and asking how she was doing in passing the time. She looked out the window at the bright summer day toward the new construction going on next door and said, “Honey, look out that window. As long as all those young men keep peeling off their shirts to work, I am doing just fine!”

 One day in making my rounds I stopped to visit two older men who were sharing a room. One was Jewish and the other was Muslim. In the ten weeks that I served in the program I do not recall any other Jewish or Muslim patients in that joint replacement unit, yet these two happened to share the same room. As I visited with them, one asked, “Would you say a prayer for us?” “Sure,” I responded. But where to begin? How is the Presbyterian chaplain in the Roman Catholic hospital supposed to begin a prayer for a Jewish patient and his Muslim roommate? And so I began at the root and intersection of all our faiths: “O God of Abraham…”

 It is Father Abraham who is the ancestral patriarch of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity alike, and it is his God who is our God. It is Abraham to whom God appeared and to whom God made this promise:

*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…In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

In later chapters God will expand upon that blessing to describe Abraham’s descendants as being “as numerous as stars in the heavens or sands at the seashore.” But here in the 12th chapter of Genesis, God’s first promise is no less grand and no less amazing for a man who seemingly comes out of nowhere, and being married to a barren wife with no children, seemingly has nowhere to go.

 This blessing of Abraham marks a radical change in the tone and trajectory of the Genesis story. In preceding chapters the perspective is epic in scope with a description of the creation of the cosmos, a story of the fall of humankind that introduced sin into the created order, an adaptation of well-known Mesopotamian flood stories to express God’s frustration with human sin and God’s rescue of the human project through Noah, and then an etymological account of the diversity of human languages through the lens of a divine response to the Tower of Babel. Those stories were never about individuals, but always about the broader human condition and God’s evolving relationship with those who were created in God’s image but reflected, at best, badly tarnished images.

 Then onto the stage of history steps Abraham, Abram as he is known at the time, and suddenly God’s relationship with humankind becomes very specific – as specific as one man in a particular place at a particular point in time with a particular blessing. We know very little about Abram prior to his encounter with Yahweh. We don’t know if he was tall or short, a skilled craftsman or green-thumbed farmer, particularly religious or exceptionally righteous or not. We are told he was the son of Terah who had intended to journey from Ur to Canaan, but stopped along the way and ended up settling in Haran – whether it was because it was so scenic or his feet just got sore, we aren’t told. We know that Abram is married to Sarai who is childless and barren. And that is where this story of Abram begins: out of the blue God tells Abram to pull up his tent pegs, leave his extended family in Haran, and journey to some unknown destination to which God would lead him. We are not told how that voice came to Abram, but we do know the incentive God offered: God’s promise, God’s blessing:

*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…In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

 What would you do were you standing there in Abram’s sandals with the voice of God ringing in your ears? Would you stay or would you go? Would you ask questions or make excuses or stall for time, or would you trust God so completely that without answers to all the questions buzzing in your brain, you would pack your bags, pull up your tent pegs, and say, “Lead on, Lord!”? What would you do?

 The reason that Abraham is the great patriarch of our faith is this, as recorded by the writer in Genesis: “So Abram went as the Lord had told him.” Without question, without excuse, he went. Not knowing where he was going, we went. Trusting God completely with his life, his family, and his future, he went. In so doing Abram became the shining example of faith and faithfulness across the ages and across all three religions that descended from him. As Paul tells it:

*Hoping against hope, Abraham believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said…No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what God promised.*

Abraham’s faith was trust put into action, trust that led him to leave Haran, trust that made him blessed by God and a blessing to all the families of the earth, trust in the God who had chosen him to be that blessing.

 Do you trust God that much? As those who are descendants in faith from Father Abraham we are called to follow his example: to walk in faith as he walked, to trust in God as he trusted, to be a blessing to the families of the earth as he was, for we too are blessed by God! In his book *Golfing with God*, Roland Merullo describes God telling him:

*I’ll say what I say to every soul: Go forth with my blessing, and do the work for which you and only you were created.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

That is what you and I are called to do – to go with God’s blessing in order that we may be a blessing to others by being the unique people God has called us to be, by doing what God calls us to do with whatever gifts God has blessed us in whatever situation we find ourselves, and to do so without complaint, without question, without excuse, as Abraham did! Such blessings are as varied as the people who bear them – some great and some small, some remarkable and some unremarkable, some offered in extraordinary moments and some in the most ordinary moments of life.

 The story is told of two men who were sharing a hospital room. One had his bed next to the window; the other was next to a wall. Each day the man by the window would describe for his roommate what he saw outside the window: children playing a game of tag, a family of ducks swimming on the lake, some adults riding colorful bikes by the water. So it continued, day after day, until one day the man by the window died. The other patient asked if he might be moved over by the window where his friend had been, and so he was. With great expectation, he propped himself up in his bed and looked out. To his surprise, he saw only the barren roof of the hospital. Each day the man by the window had created a scene from his own imagination to help his roommate pass the long days.[[2]](#endnote-2) We are blessed in order to be a blessing!

 In his book *The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion*, Martin Thielen tells of the Heartsong Church in Cordova, TN. A few years ago the church learned that a mosque was to be built next to the church property. Some of the members were angry, some fearful, most uncomfortable, but in discussing the situation and considering how Jesus might respond, the church decided that Jesus would tell them to love their neighbors. So they put up a big sign saying, “Heartsong Church Welcomes Memphis Islamic Center to the Neighborhood.” Later, when the church learned that the mosque construction would not be completed in time for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the church invited the Muslim group to use its sanctuary for worship and prayer. They posted greeters at the doors to the church to welcome their Muslim neighbors as they walked in. Friendships were formed. The Islamic community now refers to the Heartsong Church as their “Christian brothers and sisters.” When a local reporter asked the pastor of the church why his congregation responded as they did, the pastor said, “Because Jesus teaches us to love our neighbors.”[[3]](#endnote-3) In so doing, those children of Abraham became a blessing to other children of Abraham.

 Is there anyone who would describe themselves as so blessed by you? How might we – who have been so blessed by God and called by Christ to be a blessing to our brothers and sisters, to our neighbors, to the strangers who walk into our lives, to the world – how might we offer that blessing? How might we be that blessing? For we all are blessed for a purpose: in order that we might be a blessing to others. Amen

1. The Lord speaking to the author in *Golfing With God*, Roland Merullo, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill: Chapel Hill, 2005, p. 275 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. From Rev. Bill Mumaw in the *Center Church Newsletter*, Slippery Rock, PA, May 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Martin Thielen, *The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion*, Westminster John Knox Press:2014, pp.75-76 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)