

Abraham: Blessed to be a Blessing

Genesis 12:1-4

Hebrews 11:8-12

Taking a break from “The Bible Doesn’t Say That” series because I’d like to save the final 2 or 3 of those messages for later this summer—stay tuned! For the new few weeks I’d like to look at several of the characters from the Bible who were called by God to participate in the story of God’s redemptive, renewing, reconciling work in some way. The goal in this series is for us to find ourselves in here, both individually and even corporately as a church. Their stories are our stories and vice versa, and we all play a part in the larger Story of God’s renewing work on earth. I want us to see how wonderfully diverse these people were, and the people they represented, so we can see and appreciate our own diversity and how each of us is uniquely blessed, gifted, and called to participate in what God is doing in the world. We need encouragement and hope these days, don’t we? And we will see that all of these characters played their part in the midst of some difficult and daunting circumstances. These were real people who lived in real history.

We start with Abraham. Our second reading is from Hebrews 11:8-12.

Keep in mind the call of Abraham and the covenant promise of Gen. 12 that you just heard. This passage from Hebrews is the writer's commentary on that.

Hebrews 11:8-12

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

This is the word of the Lord.

You and I are blessed. All of us. Would you agree with that statement?

Let's take just a minute to think about that. We think of blessing or being blessed, we often think of material possessions, or finances—our house or our cars, our job, our investments, or luxury items or other possessions or income sources that contribute to our enjoyment of life. And, we may also think of people and relationships—we look around and see our family: spouse, children or

grandchildren, parents, sisters, brothers, aunts or uncles, close friends. And certainly these, too, are blessings that we are thankful for and cherish.

We are also blessed with *experiences* that have taught us, wisdom gained through tough times, and an education—formally or informally.

Not to mention the daily blessings easily take for granted, of food to eat and a place to lay our head down at night. We are blessed.

In addition to these let us also keep in mind the *spiritual* blessings that God has given us, and continues to give us—freely, and daily. When the Biblical writers talk about blessing, this is also what they have in mind—these spiritual blessings: of grace, of unconditional love, the gift of our faith and a community of people who walk with us on our journey.

If we are exercising faith in God, even just a little bit, we can say that we are blessed. In the apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he begins the letter with these words: “Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing ...” And then he goes on to explain what those blessings are. That is quite a statement: that we are blessed *with every spiritual blessing*. Not *some* blessings, or *partial* blessing. But blessed by God beyond measure.

As a reminder of these spiritual blessings this morning just look at this communion table and remember and reflect on God's abundance to each of us, spiritually, through Jesus Christ. That's what this table signifies to each of us—God's love for you, through Jesus Christ.

Those of you who have children: remember when your kids were small and you were just overwhelmed with love for them? For me it was when our kids were about age 1, give or take a few months—I just wanted to squeeze them. I was so awash with strong emotions and feelings of love for these kids, I'd weep sometimes. And not just when they were little, but even as they'd grow, I'd still get those strong feelings of love.

Remember that?? Remember those feelings? I know, we also remember how that feeling wore off when they did mischievous things! But right now, remember those feelings of absolute delight, and love? People, hear this: that's how God feels about you **all the time!!** The old saying holds true, that if God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. Receive that blessing. Take it on faith.

So, we are blessed—in an abundance of ways. But the blessing of God is not an end in itself. It's meant to be shared and given away.

We're looking at Abraham today. God promises blessing to him in Genesis 12. And the rest of the story from Genesis, and then in the New Testament, tells us that God fulfilled that promise and *did* bless him, in every way.

Why did God bless Abram? So he could live in ease and comfort? Of course not. God blessed Abraham so that he and his descendants would become a blessing. That's what God told Abraham as he made the covenant promise to him in Genesis 12. I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing.

From then on, the people who became the nation of Israel understood this as part of their identity and heritage and calling. That's why we read in places like the Psalms that the people expected, and asked for, blessing from God. Take, for example, the first two verses of Ps.67 (our opening prayer this morning): Psalm 67:1: "*May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make his face to shine upon us...*" (repeating the traditional priestly blessing and prayer). That's a natural thing to ask for. Sounds great; we want to be blessed, and it's a good thing to ask for. But that isn't the end of the sentence, because look at verse 2: ***so that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.***"

The blessing of God was not so they could keep it for themselves—but to give it away, so that God's ways would be made known.

Israel was blessed, in order to be a blessing to the nations. Now, in Christ, God's people have inherited this calling and identity. We are blessed to be a blessing. The blessing is meant to be passed on. We are not reservoirs of God's blessings, but channels of God's blessings. Maybe we build up some blessings in reservoir for time, but they are meant to flow out at some point.

Certainly this is true for each of us, as we count our *individual* or family blessings. But this applies also to Christ's church. As a church, we can say that we are blessed: with physical resources like this facility and property with space for worship and friendship; we are blessed with financial resources, and, we are blessed with... each other—a community of encouragement and support and instruction and prayer and mutual ministry—that is, a community of people who have skills and training and connections and time and so forth.

Church consultant Reggie McNeal wrote a book 20 years ago titled "The Present Future," which I re-read recently. Even 20 years ago he saw trends emerging in society and in churches that have now come to fruition. It was a good re-read because he had a lot of foresight. One of the things he said in his book is that the role of the Church going into the future is simply this: to bless the

world. To go back to what God told Abraham and let that be our promise, and calling. Bless the world (after we count our blessings!).

It reminded me of one church I know that had as its mission statement: “We exist to bless God, and bless others.” It’s so simple! And not so huge and ethereal that it’s unattainable. And so, the congregation blessed others with various types of service to the community in coming alongside those in need, and they also did it verbally as each member would choose to bless people in their day-to-day lives with their words, within their sphere of activity and influence.

In fact, this church had a goal at one time of praying for and blessing every waitress and waiter in their town as folks ate at local restaurants. They had a simple approach: at some point during their time there, in conversing with their server they would say something like: “We want to express our gratitude for this good food and ask a blessing for it; we would like to include you as part of our gratitude and blessing; how can we ask God to bless you/can we pray for you?” Or something like that. With no strings attached or lectures given, telling people they need to go to church. Just asking how they could pray for them, or lift them up. It resulted in amazing conversations, and some would open up and share what was going on in their life. And, it needs to be said, that these people left

generous tips. Sometimes equal to the cost of the meal. People in the food service industry are often just making ends meet, so please tip generously! That's one easy way to bless them!

Or course, we need to be wise and sensitive to each situation and person, because not everyone wants to talk about how others can ask God to bless them, or pray for them. But I love the idea. Because people are hungry to be listened to.

And there is a funny story that one person from that church told: as they conversed with their server and asked if they could pray for them, the server said, "You're one of those blessing people, aren't you?" And that's when they learned that that had become their church's reputation in the community: the blessing people. What a great reputation. That's way better than being the grouchy people, don't you think?!

The role of the Church (of churches) is to bless the world around them. In doing this, the people of God reveal God's heart *for all people*. For all people. God didn't say to Abraham, I'm going to bless you *and people just like you* (*your* tribe and *your* family). No! God said, "I'm going to bless you *so that* you can be a blessing *to everyone else*. As you heard in the reading from Genesis: "so that *all the families of the world*" will be blessed.

Again, followers of Jesus Christ have inherited this blessing, meaning we are not only *free to* bless everyone, we are also *responsible for* blessing everyone. As with Abraham, this includes people like us, and people not like us. People we like and people we don't like. People who share our values, and people who don't.

In his book Reggie McNeal shares more helpful wisdom when he says, "Quit evangelizing, and start blessing." Don't come up with another evangelism strategy, but a *blessing* strategy in your community. Don't stress yourselves out on trying to attract new members and grow the church. That's God's job. Rather, *have fun* coming up with creative ideas to bless your community. And then let God take care of the results.

I love this. And I think he's right; we have a better alternative to evangelism strategies and church growth strategies, and that is to develop ways to be a blessing. Or at least have a blessing mindset. A blessing mindset means that we can look at what we're already doing as blessing our community. For example: we are already doing cool things here by supporting organizations in our community through the deacons fund, and welcoming many groups into our facility who are doing important work in our community. We can think of those, and others, as blessing our community. I know that those organizations and user

groups think of it that way already! That we are blessing them. So they, in turn, can also be a blessing as they serve people in our community.

We'll be talking about some of this during our conversation after worship today. I just wanted to prime the pump a bit!

What's cool about thinking of ourselves as the blessing people, is that anyone can do this: children, youth, adults of all ages, people of any background. In the stories of the Bible, all kinds of people are included in God's blessing the world, as we'll see. The more diverse, the better! It fuels creativity. Abraham and Sarah, we are told, were on the older end of the age spectrum. You can almost hear Abraham saying to God, "You realize, don't you, that I'm over the hill." God says, "No you're not!" There is no such thing. God can, and does, use all of us. We're going to see this as we go along in this series.

To practice the blessing life we will need to have faith and believe God, like Abraham. To have real trust, like Abraham. Like God's people in exile as we talked about last week, the people were called to trust, even though no specific plans were given except to seek the welfare/shalom of the place where God had placed them.

Similarly, Abraham wasn't given any specific instructions; he was just told to go. This required an enormous amount of trust. And the plans, if you will, would be revealed along the way. The author of Hebrews put it this way: "Abraham went, not knowing where he was going." That sounds like some people driving on the roads these days! Even though we have navigation tools. Abraham had none of that (obviously) except for a call from God, and his faith and trust that God would be with him along the way.

In our society, at this time, we may not know exactly where we are going, so we need to exercise faith, and trust. And as we exercise faith and trust, we know that we have at least two things: we have God, who is with us. And, we have each other. We need God, and we need each other too. To recognize that we are blessed; and to encourage each other to be a blessing to the world.

What an adventure! We could recoil in fear and pull in on ourselves; we could try to go back to what used to be out of a want of safety and comfort. Or, we can say, "This is gonna be fun! We have resources—physical resources, financial resources, human resources, spiritual resources, each-other-resources—we are blessed! So we dare to risk these for God, to be a blessing to those around us. And then see what God will do.

New song: Let Your Heart Be Broken. That sounds like a tall order! I don't want my heart to be broken like God's heart. It's simply a way of saying, let us open our hearts to becoming compassionate people, for a world in need. Blessed to be a blessing.