

Blessed to be a Blessing

TEXT: Genesis 12:1-5

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on June 11, 2023

Shortly we'll be celebrating our graduates. The Pentecost season is a great time to do that, because Pentecost was when Jesus' closest disciples graduated from being disciples—those who learn from a master—to being apostles—those who are sent out. That's what a graduation implies—you finish formalized training and are deployed into service in the world.

Some are deployed into a new, more specialized kind of training, and might have several graduations and deployments along the way—from high school to college; from college to graduate programs, from graduate programs to residencies and internships and the like. But the basic concept of graduation is that we move from training and education at one level to whatever next steps are necessary for the role of apostle—to be sent out into service in the world.

In the Bible, Jesus' disciples are not the first ones to graduate. They are the first ones to graduate from the Jesus school, but they are not the first to be sent out by God to serve the world. The very first person in the Bible to graduate in *that* sense was a 75-year-old man named Abram, and his story begins in the twelfth chapter of Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

Genesis 12 is a seminal passage in the Bible. Chapters 1-9 give us stories from pre-history: Stories about the creation of the world, the first people, early explanations for sin and suffering, and a devastating end to almost all of it with the story of Noah and the Great Flood. Noah's story is told in Genesis 6-9.

Apart from the Tower of Babel story, most of Genesis 10-11 is genealogies, which hits fast forward to bring us to the main event—the appearance of Abram in his native land of Ur, which sat on the left bank of the Euphrates River in what would be modern-day Iraq. The story of Abram and his descendants will be foundational to everything that comes later, which is why Genesis covers thousands of years in eleven chapters and then takes the final 38 chapters to give us an intimate look at just three generations of this one man's family.

The name Abram means, “exalted father,” which is something his parents no doubt hoped he would be. But when we meet him at age 75, Abram and his beloved wife, Sarai, have not been able to have even a single child. He's not even a father, let alone an exalted one. Later, God will change Abram's name to Abraham, which means “father of many,” which makes Sarah actually laugh because they still have no children, but that's a story for another day.

Here at the start of chapter 12, his name is still just Abram; the exalted father with no kids, who doesn't know that he will one day be acknowledged as the patriarch of three of the world's great religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

All three religions look to Abraham as the world's first monotheist, and claim the God of Abraham as their own. Over half of the world's 8 billion people affiliate with one of those three religions, so paying attention to the origin story of all three of them is not an idle task.

When Abram does finally start having children, the stories begin to diverge; but here, at the dawn of Genesis 12, we're all on the same page; with the same guy in the same place with the same message from God: Gather up your family and move to a new land and...here's the most important part... “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.**” And, ultimately, **“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”**

What that tells us is, God's blessings are not proprietary. They're not for some nations or peoples and not for others. They are not a reward for faithful living. Genesis 12 doesn't begin with God searching the streets of Ur for its most righteous citizen. God seems to just pick Abram out of a hat. The only precondition for receiving blessings appears to be the willingness to share them, a willingness Abram shows by doing what God asks—he leaves home and goes to the land God shows him.

I've had lots of people ask me why God picked Abram. I think it's entirely possible that God made the same offer to a lot of people and Abram got the job because he's the one who said, "yes." Or, even more to the point, Abram is the one who said yes early in the history of Israel and it's Israel's history we're reading.

God had blessings to spread across the earth and you have to start somewhere. "Hey, Abram, will you leave your home city and go somewhere else? If so, I'll bless you and you can bless others and eventually my blessings will flow throughout the world. Deal? Deal."

I think we get hung up on wondering why God picked Abram because we misunderstand what blessing is all about. We think it's about getting things when it's really about giving. And I blame that misunderstanding, at least in part, on a hymn. It's an old hymn called "Count Your Blessings," written in 1897 by a local pastor in the Methodist Episcopal Church named Johnson Oatman. I grew up singing it and maybe you did, too.

The theme of the hymn and each of its verses is that we should focus on what we have instead of on what we lack. God has blessed us all; and if we stop and actually count the blessings in our lives, we'll be surprised at how wealthy we truly are. And if we see people with great wealth where we have little, never mind because our true reward is in heaven and money can't buy that.

That's all true as far as it goes. But it's not what God told Abram—or anyone else as far as I can tell. I can't think of a single place in the Bible where we're encouraged to find comfort in counting our wealth—whether it be counting actual currency or counting blessings.

Oatman's hymn is just another way of saying, "Measure your net worth and you'll feel better." But if the numbers don't add up when the rent is due, the hymn provides a different form of currency—blessings—to count instead for that needed boost.

Counting blessings has the advantage of making economic disparity less discouraging for the poor, while also adding a dark undercurrent of judgment on your character if you dare to complain about your actual wages, which is handy for those benefitting from the status quo. "Really, you should just be grateful for what you have. That's the Christian way. Our real reward is in heaven. Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain."

It's right there in verse three:

"When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold;
Count your many blessings, money cannot buy
Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high."

It's probably not an accident that "Count Your Blessings" was written right at the end of the Gilded Age in the United States. In fact, on Feb. 6, 1897, the year the hymn was written, a grand ball was held at the Waldorf Hotel in New York City. The cost of the event was enough to feed a thousand working families for an entire year. According to a PBS documentary, at the time the ball was held, the richest 4,000 families in the country had more wealth than the rest of the 11.6 million families combined.

What should the poor do? How did the church respond?

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God's call to Abram is clear that the purpose of God's blessings is not so that we can sit around and count them to distract ourselves from economic inequality. God blesses Abram so that he can then be a blessing to others who will do the same thing, always working toward the goal that "All the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God's blessings are to be shared, not counted; and God wants all families of the earth to benefit. Not just your family, your tribe, your nation, your religion. Not just the ones who someone decides deserves it. Every single person on the earth.

Another well-known hymn about blessings from the same period is "Showers of Blessing," written by D. W. Whittle in 1883. In this hymn, which I also grew up singing, the people are literally pleading for blessings that are in proportion to their need. The lyrics for the chorus are, "Showers of blessing, showers of blessing we need; Mercy drops round us are falling, but for the showers we plead." Please God, we see drops of mercy here and there, but we could really use full-on showers of blessing.

That was, and is, the prayer of millions around the world. But it's not God who has bottled up the blessings. God has sent heavy downpours of blessings, which those who are able have vacuumed up with power tools. Those blessings then have been duly counted, stored, and taken as a sign of God's favor; for which they are thankful. That is not what God told Abram.

In fact, what God tells Abram is not that he will receive any kind of blessings that he can count or measure either as mercy drops or showers. God promises to bless Abram as a person so that he, as a person, becomes a blessing to others.

So, we can talk about sharing resources as sharing blessings; and there is Scriptural support for seeing resources in that way. But this first call to Abram is one of transformation. Abram will be blessed and, as a result, he will become a blessing to others. It is through him that all the families of the earth will be blessed. He is graduating from receiving blessings to someone who becomes a blessing himself, making it possible for all those who enter his orbit in search of the blessings of God to find what they seek.

What is needed to begin to make the world into the beloved community the Bible envisioned, is exactly what God laid out to Abram. Do the hard thing; leave the comfortable place you've always known and follow God's leading into a new land. And then become a channel for God to bless others through you.

It doesn't matter if those blessings are thrown back in your face; I can tell you from experience that they frequently will be. And there will be times, I can also say from experience, when we have to swallow hard and become a blessing to someone that we really don't want to share in God's blessings. The whole book of Jonah in the Bible is about exactly that struggle.

I remember reading an anonymous devotion years ago that encouraged us to pray for God to bless our enemies. It noted that since God can only bless a faithful heart, we don't need to keep directing God to change people according to our perception of how they should think or behave. To pray for God to bless our enemies is to put any necessary change in God's hands. And who knows, the one who changes might turn out to be us.

At some point we have to graduate from absorbing teaching and blessings as disciples to scattering those blessings to the world as apostles, those who are sent out. We have to stop *counting* blessings and *become* a blessing so that no one on this earth—no human, no animal, no tree, no river, no living thing has to get by with mere drops of mercy while pleading for showers of blessing.

Once we actually *become* a blessing, we don't have to make decisions about who we bless and who we don't; blessing becomes the way we live our lives in the world. It becomes our nature and we become an unblocked channel for God's love to everything and everyone.

If enough of us do that, if you, graduates, commit yourselves to living your lives as a blessing in whatever field of endeavor you choose, God's promise to Abram will be fulfilled and *all* the families of the earth will be blessed. Amen.