

## ***Blessed to Be a Blessing***

Genesis 12:1-9

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### **Genesis 12:1-9 (NRSV)**

12:1 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.

12:2 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.

12:3 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."

12:4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

12:5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan,

12:6 Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

12:7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

12:8 From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord.

12:9 And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

GO, said the Lord to Abraham, as if out of nowhere. No introductions, no small talk, no hey Abram what's going on my name is Yahweh what's yours. No, God's call upon Abraham, the first one of Israel, the one Muslims, Jews, and Christians together call "founding father," begins with a single imperative: "Go." Our religion, everything that we come here for week after week, all began with a call to Abraham to go, to journey somewhere.

God does not call Abraham to simply go, God specifies that he must go away. You've gotta leave some things behind to take this journey. Go away from your country, from your kindred, and from your father's house, says the Lord. You have to leave the borders you think surround you, and enclose you into thinking narrowly and locally. You have to leave your kin, the bloodline by which you define yourself and divide God's one family into many. You have to leave your home, the place that houses your past, and the place you look to for familiarity and comfort and strength. The beginning of the relationship between God and God's people through Abraham is an unsettling, a disruption, a disturbance of the ways we think of ourselves, and a call to go, do, and be something new. Let go of the things that hold you back, be they a sense of borders, the weight of family systems and old family wounds upon your life, or reverence for the past, these things can hold you back from the place God is calling you to. Go away, leave the world-led life behind, and go to the God-led life ahead.

The God-led life ahead is a place I will show you, because it is filled with my promises, says the Lord. The Lord utters not a word in advance about where he is calling Abraham, but describes it with promises. Not, yeah you know that place over the hills by the river, but rather, the place where I will do these things for you

and through you. I will make a great nation of you, and a great name for you. You will be secured by the borders of my promises to you, and by living inside the borders of my promises to you, you will be named my child, and you and your people will be made great.

And here God makes an extraordinary move. I will deliver these promises, says the Lord, make you great and mighty, by BLESSING you. I will bless you. The Hebrew word used in this text for “blessing” is *bārāk*. *Bārākāhnu*, I will bless you, says the Lord, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. It would seem from the story of Abram’s call that God BLESSES Abraham for the purpose of blessing all the families on the earth.

“Blessing” is a widely and ambiguously used term in the church and in our lives. The Hebrew word *bārāk* is a little more clear, and a little more instructive about the ways and purposes of God in calling a people. *Bārāk* means to make sacred or holy, to set apart as special, to recognize as containing a touch of the divine. The root *bārāk* also makes the word for kneel, so there is a connotation in *bārāk* that a blessing is a kneeling before in reverence.<sup>1</sup>

Leave behind who you think you are and come to the place I will show you, the place where I will raise you up as sacred in my eyes. You, your very being and very great name, will be a blessing, will uphold others as sacred and worthy beings. The world will become a blessing exchange, where I will impart blessing on those who hold you in the same regard that I do. And all the families of the earth shall receive my blessing, my reverence, my holiness, through you.

It is like, I think, the troubled monastery whose conflicts were paralyzing their ministry, so they turned to a neighbor Rabbi for advice. “The only thing I can tell you is that the messiah is among you.” The monks went away disheartened, knowing it isn’t possible that the messiah could be in such an angry and frustrated place. But the haunting of this line, the messiah is among you, broke into their prayers and meditations, but wait, could the messiah be here? What if it’s Mark, it couldn’t be Mark, could it? He does have a gifted presence, and a quiet courage that helps keep everyone around him. Or what about Jacob? He’s not very impressive, but at the bottom of it all he’s kind and intelligent and gifted with a beautiful voice. And the thinking went on and on, the possibility that the messiah was among them made these men transfixed on the divine and good qualities in each person. The monks received a Word from God through the Rabbi and God’s blessing upon them. Soon, the order was restored to harmony, all through the power of blessing, the reminder that God is here, in you, and her, and him.

It’s all about blessing for God, and it’s all about faith the people. God called, and Abraham went. There is no record of wrestling, or weighing pros and cons, just going. It was a ridiculous journey called out by a strange voice to an unknown place, and yet Abraham went in faith and trust.

A church minister serving in a dangerous part of town tells about a certain woman, member of his church, who seemed to have no fear about coming to meetings and services at the church at night, even though she had no car and would have to walk home through the dark and frightening streets. One night, after a prayer service at which this woman had been present, the minister was locking up the church, and he happened to see her walking from the church down the street toward her apartment. As she walked, she was holding her hand out, as if some unseen companion were walking with her and holding her hand, and as she walked, she was humming a familiar spiritual, “Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on. Hold my hand, lest I fall. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.”<sup>2</sup>

It is so hard to trust a journey into murky and unknown places ahead. And yet, time and again, this church has been like this woman holding out her hand in the night, because people like Jean Avery saw there was no Presbyterian church in Winnetka and did something about that, and because people could not sit still while poverty afflicts and oppresses, so they helped form Good News Partners and cooperative housing for

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<sup>1</sup> Bibleworks 7.0.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw, president of Austin Theological Seminary, for this illustration from a colleague of his.

the homeless, and later Family Promise, and Nurture. People here couldn't sit still when brothers and sisters all over the world suffer, in Kenya and Cuba and the Ukraine and El Salvador, so partnerships and mission trips were born. This church has been so sure and strong in its faith that two years ago today you voted to call an inexperienced pastor to walk with you. This blessed place has been on a faith journey for its whole life, going away from the old life and toward a new one that Yahweh would show us, just like Abraham.

When he and his family came to Canaan, God appeared again and said, THIS is the place. It was on the journey, after he set forth in faith, that Abraham discovered the place where he was going, and affirmed that Yahweh was there with him. The place, the destination, described in the beginning as bordered by BLESSING and honoring God's people, it would seem, is perhaps the journey itself.

And old pastor asked his rabbi friend what was his favorite Hebrew word for God. Perhaps he was expecting, as I would have, a word like "Yahweh" or "Elohim." Or maybe some descriptive phrase like "mighty warrior" or "jealous one." Craddock says the man thought for a minute, and then said simply: "My favorite word for God is a word that the Hebrews developed back during the Exile, back when they were a wandering people, a people on the move. The word HAMAKOM means literally, "The Place." The Place! His favorite word for God—the Place! A great word for God for people who see the faith as a pilgrimage.

We are called to a new place, a place defined by journey and blessing, a place where God lives and reigns and transforms and brings forth new life and a new world. Let's go!