

WORSHIP

Sermon | 9.23.2018



Places of Welcome

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Genesis 12:1-4a

September 23, 2018

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.’

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

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Today we begin a new sermon series that is tied into our fall Stewardship theme of Welcome. Actually, the sermon series was to begin last Sunday. And due to Hurricane Florence I’ve got a sermon that is yet un-preached called “The Basics of Welcome.” It was a sermon on one of the parables that Jesus tells – this one about separating the sheep from the goats.

You remember that passage: it is judgment day – the king looks at the people and to the ones on his right (the sheep), he welcomes them into their eternal reward, because, he says, “when I was hungry you gave me something to eat, when I was thirsty you gave me something to drink, when I was a stranger you welcomed me, when I was in prison you visited me...”



To the ones the king's left (the goats), well, their reward was *different*...eternal fire, weeping, gnashing of teeth...you know, different. Their transgression was missing what was most obvious – that people who are hungry need to be fed, and people who are thirsty need something to drink, and people who are strangers need to be welcomed, and people who are in prison need to be visited.

The point, I think, in Jesus' parable is that we go wrong when we make distinctions – between who we care about and who we don't, between who deserves our help and who doesn't, between who is worth our time and who isn't. I know I have a habit of making these distinctions. I'm guessing you do, too. Christ calls us to something more – to be more welcoming, more faithful, more human. That's our invitation – that is our work.

So last week that sermon would have taken about 20 minutes.

Today we're going to talk about the place where welcome happens.

Namely, this place, on the corner of Church and Trade Streets.

Our second Scripture is from Genesis. This is where we first meet Abram and Sarai (or Abraham and Sarah). God calls them from the place they were, and sends them to the place they need to be in order that they might be a blessing.

Listen with me for the word of God.

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The building you are in has a little more than 104,000 square feet.

Within those square feet last year there were 6,395 unique events – some of them big, some of them small – which works out to about 17 events for each day of the year.

This year, we have budgeted \$804,000 to keep this place beautiful, open, clean, repaired, and hospitable. If we split that amount by the number of members our church has it would turn out to be \$381 a person. If we split that by the number of people or families who made a financial pledge to the church this year, that would be about \$1,600 per pledge.

That's a lot. But those dollars we spend on creating a place for ministry here in the center of the city are incredibly important to what it means for us to be the church. This morning I want us to reflect about why.

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In this morning's Scripture, we find ourselves at a pivotal moment in the story of God's creation.

To put it mildly, 11 chapters into the way Genesis tells it, things were not going well. The beauty and miracle of creation led immediately to the temptation, disobedience and fall of Adam and Eve who were then kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Once out of garden, Adam



and Eve's son, Cain, committed the first murder when he took his brother Abel's life. Generations passed until Noah was born. By the time Noah arrived, the Scripture says, God looked out on what humanity had become and it grieved God's heart. So God chose Noah to lead a new beginning – to build an ark that would carry creation through the waters of a flood. And after the flood waters subsided, the world filled back up with people who wanted make a name for themselves and who began to build a tower up to the heavens at Babel.

The first eleven chapters of the Bible do not only tell the story of creation, but they tell the story of rebellion. It's not exactly a strong start. By the time the curtain opens on today's passage from the 12th chapter of Genesis, it feels as if the world is at a tipping point; hanging in the balance; on the edge between sinfulness and salvation, between despair and hope.

If you want to get technical, today's Scripture is a bridge between that part of our faith story that tells about the origin of things – and the rest of the story about how God works through the particular to ensure that in those moments when things seem to hang in the balance, we can be assured that the scales tip toward salvation...that the story ends with hope.

When we meet Abram and Sarai, they were standing at that moment. The world was adrift. As a couple, Abram and Sarai were barren – unable to have children – which, in that culture meant that their future was clouded with hopelessness. Abram and Sarai were idolaters – worshipping other things besides the God of creation. They were imperfect people living in an uncertain time. And it was precisely there that God called those particular people to go to a particular place in order that “all the families of the earth should be blessed.”

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Nadia Bolz Webber is a Lutheran pastor. She is the founding pastor of a church called the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, Colorado that she led from 2008 until this past summer.

Bolz Weber tells the story of her decision to have “Rally Day” in the early days of her fledgling, start-up church. She imagined a cookout and cotton candy machine and finally breaking the 40-person attendance mark and everybody pitching in to cover the \$300 bucks she shelled out to buy the food. And you know what happens. Twenty-six people came to church that morning. They had way too much food and had to give away the burgers at a local park and no one pitched in a cent. And Nadia did all the work. And she was not happy.

But in truth, twenty-six people enjoyed being together and brought others joy as they handed out cotton candy in the street. Some hungry people at the local park got iron rich hamburgers for dinner. She writes, “Let's face it, [even our feeble, broken attempt at creating holy space] is God's favorite material to work with. Perhaps God looks upon that which we dismiss as nothing, insignificant, and worthless, and says “Ha! Now that I can do something with.”



Today, that church is a vibrant community of more than 500 – thriving with people of all kinds...but particularly those who had otherwise given up on church. Week after week, they gather in a holy space for worship, where they tell the story about a God who saves and welcomes all people – sinners and saints.

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God called Abram and Sarai – particular, imperfect people living in an uncertain and tenuous time – and told them to go and claim a place. And so they did. And when they arrived at the land where God sent them, Abram marked that place with two altars where he and generations after him would worship.

Over time, much time, that place became more significant.

It became a place that represented promise...represented home.

It became a place of memory.

A place of pilgrimage.

A place connected to identity.

A place that embodied faith.

On one level, it is just land.

It's just structures, buildings...material things that have to be maintained.

But it's more.

Today it is a concrete reminder of particular promise – that even in those moments where it feels like things hang in the balance – God can be trusted to tip us toward hope.

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We are a thousand generations removed from Abraham and Sarah – and the 104,000 square feet of space that we have on the corner of Trade and Church Streets has a lot less history (and is a lot less complicated) than what has come to be known as the Holy Land where Abram built those altars so long ago.

And yet through Christ, we are also connected to the story of that first couple who struck out from their home by faith so that they could build a place anchored in God's promise by which all the families of the earth would be blessed.

We, too, are heirs of that particular promise, and we have a particular call: to establish a place where God's presence can be visible and tangible in the midst of world that so desperately needs to see good news.

We are not perfect – and what we do a community of faith is not perfect – but since the beginning, God has been in the practice of looking at imperfect people living uncertain times



– and declaring, “now there is something I can work with!”

For 197 years, the imperfect yet faithful people who have sat in these pews have given of themselves in order that our corner in the heart this city would be a place that could remind people of what is most true: that in and in spite of struggle, or pain, or doubt, or worry about the future – God is present.

That in the many moments in our lives or in the life of our city and world when it felt like things were teetering on the edge – God can be counted on to be our shelter and strength...a very present help in trouble.

On one level it is just land.

It is just a building...a material thing that needs to be maintained.

But to all who come here...

To worship

To go to school

To pray

To learn

To get about the business of recovery...one day at a time

To connect with community

To catalyze change

To thirst for justice

To eat

To wrestle with the hard questions

To heal

To grieve

To hope

It's more.

It is worth a lot.

And it means a lot – not just to us, but to all those who God welcomes into this place.

A place that exists in order that all may be blessed.

