

WORSHIP

Sermon | 6.21.2020



Privilege and Blessing

The Reverend Pen Peery

Genesis 11:27-12:9

Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.

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. And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.

+ + +

We're in the midst of a sermon series called Great is Thy Faithfulness. Each Sunday we are focusing on a different covenant – or promise – that God makes with God's people. Today we are exploring the promise God made to Abram and Sarai – who became Abraham and Sarah.

This morning's passage marks a very important pivot point in the Bible. The story of Abraham and Sarah is where God gets **particular** about whom God chooses. Scholars call the first eleven chapters of Genesis "pre-history" – stories that speak to the way God acted to bring creation out of what was once a "formless void." Beginning in the 12th chapter, God gets involved with a particular couple and points them to a particular place where they will become a particular people. We've moved from "pre-history" to "our history."

I'll be reading just before this pivot point I am describing – starting at the end of the 11th chapter of Genesis and continuing in the beginning of chapter 12. Listen with me for the word of the God...

+ + +



We started this sermon series on God's covenants focused on the promises God made to Adam and Eve at creation – a promise of freedom and partnership.

Last week, Lorenzo preached an excellent sermon on the promise that God made to Noah - a promise seen through a bow in the clouds that assures us that the storms of our lives will not last forever and that God can be trusted to be faithful.

Today – as we are introduced to Abraham and Sarah – what characterizes the promise that God makes is that it is a blessing.

I will bless you, God said.

I will make your name great so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you.

In you, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

“Blessing” is an interesting word.

It gets used in a lot of different ways – so much so that it can almost be confusing.

Sometimes it's a way to describe a feeling of fulfillment or contentment: “I'm blessed,” we say.

Other times, it's a way to acknowledge abundance...of material things, or good fortune. “I'm blessed beyond measure.”

In the south, we've even been known to use it as a subtle insult: “well, bless your heart.”

For Abraham and Sarah – it's important to recognize that God's promise to bless them comes freely (they did nothing to earn this blessing – it was God's own choice).

Also, when God blessed Abraham and Sarah we should also recognize that they were set apart – chosen – **privileged** – not just to enjoy their special relationship with God, but to be a part of the ways that God would bless others through them.



For Abraham and Sarah – blessing is tied to privilege and privilege is tied to blessing. Once God pronounces them blessed, the question becomes...

What will Abraham and Sarah do with their blessing?

What will they use it for?

Who will benefit from it?

And to be honest, these are all questions that the descendants of Abraham and Sarah are still asking and answering so many years later.

+ + +

Blessing and privilege. Privilege and blessing. As I've sat with the relationship of those words in the context of God's promise, I am aware that in the heaviness of these moments we're living in – as we navigate the pandemics of coronavirus and racism – it's complicated.

Just this week I have had conversations with white friends who are waking up to their white privilege – seeing how systemic racism has benefitted them in ways large and small – and honestly still struggling to square the narrative of being self-made with an awareness that they started on third-base.

I've had conversations with African-American friends who are wounded and discouraged to the point of questioning whether or not there is blessing to be found in the country of their birth.

And, I'll say, it grieves me... that as descendants of Abraham and Sarah...we, over many generations, have rendered the human family in such a way that some of us can be blind to our privilege and others question the presence of blessing.

As if our struggle against racial inequity wasn't enough, we are still in a protracted battle against the virus that ails us...and I sense that we have a hard time holding onto promises of blessing and privilege – as our mental and economic and physical health are being strained, and our patience wears thin.



In some ways, I think we feel overmatched...and overwhelmed...by these moments. I've had people tell me they feel helpless.

Maybe even wondering – as we consider the promise we highlight today - wondering how will God bless **us**...broken and bruised and inadequate as we are...how will God bless **us** to be a blessing to others?

Well...if I can channel my friend Lorenzo for a moment...Church, now is not the time to be discouraged. Church, now is not the time to feel overwhelmed or overmatched.

Because when we have the eyes of faith, we...the Church... remember that God has always been in the business of blessing the broken...and blessing the bruised...and seeing possibility in our very real, very human inadequacies.

God has a pattern of bringing life and speaking promise in the midst of barrenness and places that feel devoid of hope.

Just think about the Scripture we have heard the past few weeks.

Where God ordered the chaos into creation – and breathed life into the dust of the ground.

Remember...that when God saw that the world had become corrupt and evil, God chose to deliver Noah into newness.

And – today – when God saw Abram...already an old man with no demonstrable faith, and Sarai...barren with no hope for children...God declared that of **them** God would make a great nation.

It might feel like things are hard. Confusing. On edge. Hopeless. But it's in those kind of moments that God's promise often comes.

The Lutheran pastor and author, Nadia Bolz-Weber often writes about how the people of God fumble about – trying to navigate what it means to be sinners who haven't only been given the gift of redemption, but have also been asked to **participate** in the ways God continues to redeem the world.



In one of her books she writes, “Of course, even our best attempts at faithfulness will be feeble and broken. But perhaps, as we remember the pattern of Scripture, God looks upon that which we dismiss as nothing, insignificant, worthless, and beyond repair, and says “Ha! Now that I can do something with.”

+ + +

When the blessing came to Abram and Sarai, I wonder if the future felt tenuous.

I wonder if they felt worthy to receive God’s blessing.

I wonder if they struggled to navigate the privilege that came with being blessed.

I wonder if they stumbled along the way...sometimes exhibiting faithfulness and other times confirming their sinfulness.

I think the answer has to be yes.

That’s what it is to be human, after all.

What impresses me about this story of Abraham and Sarah isn’t that they turn out to be perfect people. It’s that they decide – in spite of all of these things they wondered about and struggled with – they decide to get up and go. To be about the blessing. To trust the faithfulness of the God who looked over the earth and chose them.

“Go,” God said, “from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed...

...and Abram went.”

Remarkable.

I know it can be confusing.

I know it can feel overwhelming.



I know we are bound to stumble along the way.

But I think now is the time for us to trust...not only that God has blessed us... but that God works through us to bless one another.

Have you ever had someone give you a blessing?

I don't mean someone saying you're blessed – or blessing your heart –

I mean someone taking the time to give you a blessing.

Maybe taking your hand in the midst of a trying moment

Pronouncing a blessing puts you as close to God as you can get. To learn to look with compassion on everything that is; to see past the terrifying demons outside to the bawling hearts within; to make the first move toward the other, however many times it takes to get close; to open your arms to what is instead of waiting until it is what it should be; to surrender the justice of your own cause for mercy; to surrender the priority of your own safety for love—this is to land in God's presence.

