

Trusting Promises

First in the Family of God Sermon Series

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

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Genesis 11:31-12:9

³¹Terah 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. ³²The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and Terah died in Haran.

12Now 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. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I 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."

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram 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,

⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷Then 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. ⁸From 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. ⁹And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Literary giant and Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, said: “All great literature is one of two stories: a person goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town.” It would appear that this story of Abraham being called by God contains both of these two elements of all great literature. As if a stranger, God seemingly appears out of nowhere and summons Abraham to go on a journey. “Go from your country and your home to the place I will show you,” and then – the only thing God gives him to go on is a five-fold promise.

Now, this is no small promise. The content of it includes well-being, security, prosperity, prominence, and God’s steady presence along the way. But it is just a promise – nonetheless – with no guaranteed outcomes in view. The amazing thing is that Abraham packed up his family, and got up and went – on nothing but the words of that promise. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann describes God’s call to Abraham as the second account of creation.

In the first creation account, by the power of the divine word, God created the cosmos: separating the darkness from light; parting the waters for the dry land to appear; filling the earth with vegetation and living things of every kind; breathing life into the human creatures and giving them a job to do – to be stewards of the earth and all its goodness. Then, here a second creation. The God who calls worlds into being speaks to a particular, historical person, in order to fashion an alternative community.¹

God calls a family, and in so doing creates a faith community to journey with God into the future for the sake of the whole creation. “I will go with you; I will bless you, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” The writers of this ancient text did not feel the need to tell us why – they trusted God’s promises; only that Abraham’s family got up and went in response to this initial call and people of faith have been journeying with God, trusting this promise ever since.

Now that I am back after four months away on sabbatical and vacation, you might think I spent at least some of that time plotting and planning what I would preach about upon my return: thinking about the usual rhythms of fall, the launch of new programs and opportunities for mission, stewardship season on the horizon, and the church being under construction this year. Frankly, I tried to push all thought of work aside, and filled my days with travel, adventures with family and

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation Commentary*.

friends, activities promoting good health, reflection, rest and renewal. I did not go looking for a sermon series idea for this fall. But I want to tell you something in all honesty. I believe it came looking for me. When I did turn my attention to what was going on in the world it was this refrain from Genesis which kept coming back to me.

When I saw a young Salvadoran father and his two year old daughter face down and drowned in the river at our border with Mexico – *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

When I read a long article about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen where millions of people are malnourished and starving, most of them children - *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

When I just happened to be in London in July making my way from the British Library's ancient manuscript collection to Westminster Abbey, and I passed Ten Downing Street on the very day Boris Johnson became prime minister on his ultra-nationalistic platform – *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

Then, after a full month abroad, back in the states in time to witness the horrors of the inexplicable mass shooting in Dayton, and the one in El Paso fueled by racism and hatred of immigrants – *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

This ancient, formative, divine promise began to feel like it was calling out to me anew. Calling us to think deeply about how to be a community of blessing amid in our current world of division and racial tension, of senseless violence, rising global warming and expressions of nationalism.

Brueggemann's commentary helps translate the text for our time: "The Abrahamic narrative sets itself against every world-view and ideology which regards the world as settled and fixed. It is ironic and troubling that the modern world which so celebrates freedom also tends to believe... that there is no genuine newness, no really independent gift yet to be given." He goes on: "Such ideologies either A) press us to inordinate pride which imagines the world has been completely entrusted to us and that we may construct our own future, or B) press us to deep despair which believes the present world of inequality and oppression is forever,

dependent only on human capacity for good or for ill, and there is no power in heaven or on earth that can make real change.”

Against such judgments, he concludes, “The Abraham narrative proposes an alternative reality which rescues us from pride and despair. The world has not been entrusted solely to humanity. In inscrutable graciousness, God has retained the amazing gift of life.”²

We at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church are generally bearers of the content of God’s promise: with relative well-being, security, prosperity and prominence. Blessed as we are – how are we going to live out this calling to be a people of blessing for all the families of the earth? That word *blessing* is repeated five times to convey the extent of this promise: I will bless you, God says repeatedly, so that you will be a blessing. The root of this Hebrew word, to bless, means *bending of the knee*.³ It suggests a posture for implementation. To bless someone or something is to kneel before it, to honor that person, for who they are or what they are doing. That is a stunning image evoked by this text.

In blessing the community of faith, God is kneeling before us and inviting us to join in the holy work of kneeling before others so that - in time – every child of God, the world over, will experience God’s blessing. Our Jewish spouses, our Muslim cousins, and our Christian communion - all - trace our lineage back to this promise – the divine call of a human family which generated a monotheistic belief in one God, a God who invites us human partners to journey forward in faith and kneel before others for the sake of all the families of the earth.

David Brook’s most recent book, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, takes an interesting turn in his development as a writer who has honed his career as a cultural and political commentator. He freely admits that his previous bestseller, *The Road to Character*, was too focused on how we as individuals develop as responsible moral agents in our own spheres of influence. He confesses that in the writing of that book he was still enclosed in “the prison of individualism.”

² *Ibid.*

³ Chandler Stokes, unpublished Moveable Feast preaching seminar paper.

So Brooks introduces *The Second Mountain* saying: “I no longer believe that character formation is mostly an individual task... achieved on a person-by-person basis... like going to the gym” and exercising to build up your honesty, courage, integrity and grit. I now think good character is a by-product of giving yourself away. You surrender to a community or cause, make promises to other people, build a thick jungle of loving attachments, lose yourself in the daily act of serving others...” And then, describing his own faith journey, Brooks talks about how the great Old Testament narratives – like this one about Abraham’s family - came to play a bigger role in his self-understanding as a person of faith and as we might seek to live a moral life. As a Jewish child who grew up attending a Christian school he writes, “I held these biblical stories at arm’s length... I was big, and the stories were small, just an old book in my hands... and I think what changed, in the most incremental, boring way possible, is that at some point I had the sensation that these stories are not fabricated tales happening to other, possibly fictional people: They are the underlying shape of reality. They are the renditions of the recurring patterns of life.”

These formative, ancient biblical stories – “provide, in their simple yet endlessly complex ways, a living script. They provide the horizon of meaning in which we live our lives – not just our individual lives, but our lives together. These stories describe a great moral drama, which is not an individual drama but a shared drama.” Brooks concludes: We are still a part of this drama... created and being created still.”⁴

Friends, when God broke into human history – with a summons, saying to Abraham, “Go... go from your country and your family home to the land that I will show you,” and Abraham went... He went on nothing but a promise, with no guarantee, which might seem to us like an impossible act to follow. But when you think about it, the most important commitments we ever make are just like that: all of us put our trust in promises without knowing how they will unfold. At baptism we ask, “Do you promise to live the Christian faith and teach that faith to your child?” At Confirmation, our youth give answer to this big question: “Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?” When two come together in marriage, they commit their love and faithfulness to nothing but a promise: in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live.”

⁴ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, p. xix, 211ff.

No one knows what life will look like on the far end of any of these promises, and we are often not very good at keeping them as we should, but we make them anyway. We trust them to unfold within the inscrutable graciousness of God, the greatest Promise-Maker of all.

Today, we have been reminded we are heirs to the most remarkable promise made at the very beginning of the world's monotheistic religious life. God created and called the faith community to begin a journey together – richly blessed – and this is the only thing we know about what the future holds: *all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

It is our time, and it is our calling to trust this promise so that – at least some measure of it will be fulfilled through us.

AMEN.