

A Lent 2 3.5.23

Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

Focus Statement: God's vision is that all will be blessed.

We will eventually get to John 3:16, arguably the most well-known verse in all of scripture. And the compendium, just as important, and often forgotten John 3:17. But before we do, let's start with Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah so early, in fact, that they are still at this point Abram and Sarai. God hasn't even given them new names yet, hasn't made a covenant with them, hasn't told them their descendants will outnumber the stars. Genesis chapter twelve is our very first meeting of the two who will become the connection point of three of the major world religions. Right now, all we know of them is they are Abram and Sarai, the son and daughter-in-law of Terah, a descendant of Shem, son of Noah, who traveled with Terah to settle in Canaan.

It was from Canaan that God called Abram and Sarai to "go from [their] country and [their] kindred and [their] father's house to the land that [God would] show [them]." This, let's be clear, is a big ask. Leave behind everything you know, everything you've ever known. Leave your family, your home, your, if my math is correct, one-hundred and forty-five year old father and head out with no more conviction than the promise of God to a land as yet unknown. And Abram and Sarai aren't young either. This isn't newlyweds spreading their wings and heading out, they're seventy-five years old themselves. I did a fair amount of leaving behind everything I'd ever known as a young adult, but about the time I turned thirty I found having the storage space to own more than one towel to be more my speed. Now I have a room in the basement designated for things I haven't gotten around to getting

rid of, just like every other American homeowner. If God asked me to head out to a foreign land as yet unnamed, I don't know how keen I would be on accepting the invitation.

But Abram and Sarai went. And while our reading this morning ends there, we know how the rest of the story turned out. In the end, all God's promises to them came true. They were the ancestors of many nations and their descendants, a line that includes us, as well as our Muslim and Jewish siblings, maybe don't outnumber the stars, we've learned there are a lot more stars than Abram and Sarai could have known about, but there's a lot of us.

Abram and Sarai went, but we also know the journey was not easy. They faced all sorts of opposition along the way, foreign powers threatening them, familial strife, and a long, long, long wait for those long-promised descendants. When God told them they would be made "a great nation," they may not have had the same scope of time that God had in mind, or have understood just how many obstacles there would be along the way. It is, of course, also the case that some of the worst struggles they faced were self-imposed, caused by their own urgency, anxiety, or desire to speed up the process. But, even removing all the times they caused themselves problems, what God called them to do was never going to be an easy journey.

And what really caught my attention this week, and this time reading through this familiar story, was the reason why God sent them on this journey, the ultimate reason. Yes God sent them so that God could make of them a great nation and so that they would be blessed and their name made great, but there is one step even more than that. All of this was so that,

ultimately, they “will be a blessing... and in [them] all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” God sent Abram and Sarai so that through Abram and Sarai God could bless the whole world.

Abram and Sarai were sent to be blessed and to be a blessing. And isn't that what we all want, isn't that what any of us want, to be blessed and to be a blessing.

We jump from here to our Gospel reading for today, where Jesus said to Nicodemus, “for God so loved the world that he gave his own Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” And just to make sure Nicodemus didn't miss the point, Jesus went on, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” “In order that *the world* might be saved through him” does not sound all that different than “you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the world shall be blessed.”

Dear people of God, these two readings together tell us something huge about God, about how God works, about how God moves through the world. These two verses together tell us that God has always been about the whole world, all of it, and every single person in it. Jesus came to save the world, verse seventeen makes sure we cannot miss the purpose. And way back in the time of Abram and Sarai, where gods were gods for their individual nations only, God, being God, was already moving God's people beyond that limited understanding of who was included to lean towards the blessing of the whole world. God being for everyone isn't a new thing, it's been the plan since at least the twelfth chapter of

Genesis. And I would argue even before that. Since way back some thirteen point seven billion years ago, when in a flash or a bang or a whisper, the Spirit of God spoke over the primordial ooze of the universe, God has been committed to all which God called good, every atom and quark, every plant and animal, and each and every one of us. So great is God's love for the cosmos—there's your fun Greek fact for the day, this word translated as world in John 3, sixteen and seventeen is really better translated as cosmos, for God so loved the cosmos, that God sent God's only Son.

We've gotten kind of out of the scope of human understanding here, with thirteen point seven billion years of history and all of the cosmos, so let's bring it back to the level of Abram and Sarai, to the level of us. Because we too, like Abram and Sarai, are being called on a journey from all that we have ever known into a new and foreign land. We're being called that way as a church community—this is a preview of coming attractions, get ready for a presentation by Jeff at the annual meeting after worship, we're also being called that way as a nation and as individuals. The uncomfortable truth, dear people, is we are always called to change. It's part of being alive, it's part of being human. There's a poster from an artist collective I like that reads, "I finally got to exactly where I wanted to be, she said, so why won't all these growth experiences go away & leave me alone?" I connect with this poster, and I think Abram and Sarai probably did as well. And what we learn from Abram and Sarai is that God has plans, for us and for the world, that are bigger than our wildest imaginings. God called Abram and Sarai so that they would be blessed and be a blessing, and God calls us too. We know from watching Abram and Sarai that God's call is not an easy one, it does not promise smooth sailing. Just because we are moving towards being

blessed and being a blessing does not mean that journey is puppies and rainbows, Abram and Sarai went through some stuff. But we also know from their story that they often made the stuff they were going through worse by their own stubbornness—and I don't know about you, but I relate to that as well, and in those bouts of making things worse, God never gave up on them. At no point was God like, you know what, never mind, some other couple is going to get blessed and be a blessing, you two are too weird for this. No, God stuck with them. Stuck with them for thousands of years, through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus and on to us. That is how committed God is to all the families of the world, how committed God is to each and every one of us.

Which leads us, in our meandering journey, to our psalm for this morning, this powerful assurance of God's protection. The version the ELCA bulletin website thing had for the bulletin tried to make the wording less redundant which loses some of the point, so let me read you verses seven and eight from my study bible: "The LORD will keep you from all evil and will keep your life. / The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time forth forevermore." What I like about that translation is notice how many times the psalmist repeated the word "keep." Dear people of God, if you take nothing else from my sermon this morning, nothing else from these readings, take this. God is going to keep you. You and everyone else, everything else God has created, "from this time forth" from all times before, and "forevermore." Dear people of God, God thinks you're a keeper. Thanks be to God. Amen.