

Scripture - Genesis 12:1-9

12 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. 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.

Sermon – Blessed to be a blessing

I don’t know how it happened, but at some point, in putting our children to bed each night, my family developed a particular pattern. When the kids are in their beds, and its time to turn out the light, somewhere in the mix, we went from saying “good night, I love you,” hug/kiss, and leaving the room, to doing all of those things...but with an added blessing.

I can’t name when it became our natural routine, but at some point, my husband started saying “God bless you and keep you,” and marking our kids with a little cross on their foreheads with his thumb. Almost immediately, our kids loved it, even before one of them could speak, and it became part of every night.

I admit, even as an ordained minister, my first thought was that it was...weird. Wasn’t that...well...“too church-y?” I wondered. Raising children as two pastors, I seek a “normal” life for our kids in every way possible. Blessing our kids at bedtime—well, I worried how it would look to an outsider—if someone in our extended families or friends, or even a babysitter saw us doing this, they’d think we were like “those” Christians.

But the blessing habit stuck. And over time, it’s become an integral part of saying goodnight to our kiddos. I need it just as much as its necessary for them to receive it and to bless us back.

You see, at some point, I realized that in blessing one another, something was happening. I started feeling that when we blessed one another, we were *doing* something *performative* upon one another. When our family blesses each other at bedtime, we are not declaring each other as “#blessed,” or reminding our kids that “they’re blessed!” We are *doing something*... as a sign of trust, connection, commitment, protection, and love. In blessing, we are saying, I love you and nothing can change that. I am *giving* you something, blanketing you, marking you with something *unseen* but *so real* it’s almost palpable. Maybe that seems like a lot, but I think that’s why our kids loved it from the beginning. They could feel that when they were being blessed those first nights that Jon instituted it with his thumb on their forehead.

Now, we’re not used to giving blessings these days, and the word blessing has become synonymous often with luck. In his book, *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner says that blessing more often in our society means a “pious formality” that “ministers are continually

being roped into giving at high school graduations,” and before meals at community events. Buechner notes that we aren’t likely to say “God bless you” to a person, unless they happen to have just sneezed, which makes blessing no more than “pious eccentricity.” But blessing is more than that. “If you give me your blessing,” Buechner says, in the Biblical sense, “you are irreversibly conveying into another’s life, “not just something of the...power and vitality of who you are but something also of the life-giving power of God in whose name the blessing is given.”^[1]

Now when God blesses Abram and Sarai (25 years later in their lives, their names will be changed by God into Abraham and Sarah, which is important, but something we can talk about another time). When God blesses Abram and Sarai, they are 75 and 65 years old. And up until now in the book of Genesis, the story of the creation and God has been from the 30,000 feet view. Up until Genesis 12, we have “what scholars call the ‘primeval history:’” creation, human rebellion, flood.

But as Pastor Todd talked about in his sermon last week regarding the flood stories, in our continuing travels through the first 12 chapters of Genesis, God has put down violence by putting a (rain)bow in the sky and needs a new tactic for how to interact with creation.

We are at a turning point in the book of Genesis! This is the part where God decides that if God is going to stick with creation, and have to continually deal with people’s greed, corruption, rebellion and fallibility, God needs a new approach. And the course of action is this: to go from flying at 30,000 feet, to getting personal. And instead of stories about cosmic beginnings, we zoom in on one particular, Mesopotamian couple, Abram and Sarai.^[2]

In our story today, God blesses them—performs a promise upon them—times three. God promises that Abram and Sarai will have 1. Descendants, which back then was the ultimate honor, (“I will make of you a great nation,” Genesis 12:2), 2. Have land, a place, space to be (“To your offspring I will give this land,” Genesis 12:7), and 3. Blessing, a giving of power, vitality and relationship (“I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing,” Genesis 12:2).

Those promises of blessing are powerful, but scholars have wondered—why Abram and Sarai? From what we know of them, there’s really nothing special about them. Some have surmised that they were chosen because they were stand-ins for the every-person. Some say that its *because* they were old, and couldn’t have children. You see, it would’ve meant they were in a desert land in their lives, because children were so integral to honor, inheritance and keeping the culture alive. That this was God’s way of doing the unexpected with unlikely people, in an unlikely place.

Either way, God gets more personal for the first time, as a way of blessing the world—through people. Not because Abram and Sarai are special, or because God is playing favorites, but because they are stand ins the every-person. Because God’s new plan is to use them as a *funnel* for blessing. You see, the shift here is from God as a gigantic, removed actor—“God bless you all!”—to a God who chooses relationship over destruction.

In the flood, God chose destruction. But no more. God is doing something new. God draws near—and its “God bless you, _____, God bless you, _____, and so on. God isn’t just promising Abram and Sarai descendants, land, and blessing, God is making a significant choice for abiding with the people. And its different when it gets personal.

So God promises blessing to Abram and Sarai, not because they’ve done anything to deserve it, *and* not only for the sake of Abram and Sarai’s lives, either. God tells them, “I will

bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. They are blessed to be a blessing. For the sake of the world. They and their descendants—as many as the stars, God later says—are meant to be the *conduits* of blessing. Blessing that is performative—not tangible in how you carry it, necessarily, but palpable all the same. To do that kind of blessing—in the world and for the world.

And indeed, later on in the Hebrew Scriptures, we have examples of Abram and Sarai's descendants *being* the conduits of blessing for the world around them. “Joseph, Abraham and Sarah's great-grandson, will save Egypt and the nations surrounding it from famine (Genesis 45:5). Later, the [entire ancient nation of] Israel is called into *covenant* at Mount Sinai to...be witnesses to God in the world.”^[3] The blessings, the promises of blessing to Abram and Sarai have reverberations that continue throughout the scriptures. The ripples from one drop of blessing from God continue out through the people, through the world, through time. That is the power of blessing.

I see people blessing others here at First UCC all the time. I see it when I smell coffee coming from the Assembly Room before worship ends. I see blessing happening when people bring treats for funerals for people they may not know nor ever meet who will be at the funeral reception. I see it when people collaborate in the community for Isaiah. I see it when Connect groups welcome parents and young children, and then those children get to know and develop meaningful relationships with adults in the congregation who aren't their family. I see blessing every time someone visits with, or drives, or makes meals for those who need it. I see blessing when people share their gifts in any way. I see blessing happening when someone comes by my office and says, “I knew you needed these supplies, so I picked them up at Costco for you, I hope that's okay.” I see blessing when people invest in the renovation of the organ for its *next* 100 years, knowing that by its next renovation, an entirely different group of people will make up this congregation. I see blessing when volunteers pop out of the woodwork, hoping to help with those projects we need help with. Those are just *some* of the blessings I see, and I'm only one person. Imagine what else is happening here, just in and through this congregation that has *reverberations that will continue* through the people here, into the community and into the world. For God's sake.

But just in case you haven't seen or felt blessing, I want to invite us all into the practice of it. Yes, we're going to do it. Yes, it feels awkward. Yes, it feels like something those people from “other” churches do. But blessing is performative, and it's a means of grace some haven't felt enough in their lives. So turn to someone near you, and when they offer their forehead or hand, look into their eyes and say “God bless you and keep you.” Then take turns and receive a blessing. Everyone here may be blessed by and bless another person. When you do, feel the trust, connection, commitment, protection, grace. Feel God's love marking you, and know that nothing can change that. Know that you are being *given* something, that you have been marked with something *unseen* but *so real* it's almost palpable. [Congregation blesses one another.]

25 years after our story today when God first promises blessings, 25 years from then, when Abram was almost 100 and Sarai was 90, God takes Abram outside to view the night sky. “Look at that bright band of stars pulsing across the sky,” God says. “Do you see them? Try, just try, to count them. Your descendants will be more than these.” You, my friends, are the pulsing stars—the ones continuing the story of God blessing the world. You are the conduits; you are the funnels for God's grace. What happens when we continue that blessing? When we continue the blessing as a way of continuing God's care for the world, as was God's plan so long ago?

As we begin the Stewardship season, and think of all of the ways we might give, I invite us to consider what it would mean for us to be like our faith ancestors Abram and Sarai, trusting in the promises of God's blessing, and continuing that blessing for the sake of the world, even if we don't see the fruit of it, even if we know we might not be the ones to live into those blessings? How might we act? What could we do? ...Amen.

[1] Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, Harper San Francisco, 1993, p. 12-13.

[2] Kathryn Schifferdecker, Working Preacher, Commentary for September 16, 2018, accessed 11 October 2019, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3781

[3] Ibid.