

Texts: Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 28:19-20

Subject: Call of Abraham

Theme: Being a Blessing

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 18, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Years ago, not long after I came back to the church after a long absence, and I was reading the Bible, and participating in ministries at church, and intentionally building prayer habits. These are some of the things that we might consider growing as a disciple or follower of Jesus. I was working in my job, but felt I was in need of change and that there was some other direction I should be going. I said the same prayer every night, asking God to lead me - to show me where I should go. Night after night, before I would go to sleep, I would pray that prayer, to say, "God, lead me and I'll follow, show me where I'm to go, and I will go." I did not know it would lead to hearing God's call to ministry in my life. I didn't know that it would lead my family and I to seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, or that we would find ourselves back in Las Vegas and serving in this congregation for the last eight years. I couldn't have known. I'm sure now that this calling was an answered prayer.

What is it that God wants us to do? It's a question I still ask myself often. I was talking to a man in line at the grocery store the other night, and we started talking about faith - he had a big gold face of Jesus hanging from a chain around his neck, and I had my cross necklace on, and we went from talking about the massive aisle of Halloween decorations up since early August, and how soon it would be Christmas decor and treats, and the difference between commerce and the meaning of Christmas. And he asked me what it is that Jesus commanded? (When you tell someone you're a pastor,

sometimes they want to quiz you.) He quoted Jesus saying, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' [and] 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Yes, off course, these we call the greatest commandments. I responded and I mentioned that this is Jesus reciting scripture He knew from childhood, from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. He was a little surprised by that, and I would have loved to continued the conversation, but the line was moving and my popsicles were melting. As we departed we shared blessings to one another. I thought about how later, before his death, Jesus would give his disciples a new commandment (was it really new?) - to "love one another as I have loved you." Today we hear Jesus after the resurrection, give more direction, we call it the great commission - to go and make disciples, to baptize them and to teach them.

If you never read the Hebrew Bible - the scriptures we often refer to as the Old Testament - you might think Jesus' instruction to the disciples was totally different, something new, and unknown to people. But as we hear this morning, God's commands and promises to Abram were a wonderful beginning of a the covenant with God's people - giving them direction, leading them, and showing them where to go.

I knew since I was little that Jesus loved me. I heard it from my Sunday school teacher, and from family members, my missionary great-grandmother, and my grandmother and mother, pastors, in the stories we would read, and at Trinity Lutheran school. But as I grew, I thought I could do everything on my own. That I could only trust myself, and that God was not real, or too distant to help me in any of my actual struggles. I think that's where a lot of people are these days, and it can be a hard reality

to break from. It is hard to know anything else is possible when we make our world so small as to think we're the only ones in it.

Abram couldn't possibly see how he could have a child, an heir, to continue his family line, and to be remembered after his life was over. His wife Sarai, is the first woman in scripture to be named as *barren*. She could not have a child. Abram must have been praying too, because the Lord showed up and spoke, telling him pretty clearly where to go, and why.

"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."

Abram is to *be a blessing*. Not to give or receive - though he will give and receive blessings too - but God's promise is that Abram himself will *be a blessing*.

When I think about this church, and the ones who have come before us, the saints who were here eight years ago, Marie, and Joann, Gail, Jerry and his mom Ilean, Herb & Adele, Warren, Simuel, Dennis, Ange, Jack & Cal, Bob and Betty, and more, I remember how you all have been a blessing to me. Something started here long before them, and before you or I got here, and it is not finished yet. To live and serve in ministry here with you has opened my eyes and heart to God's grace in new ways, and the Spirit of God in this place has transformed me and made us all into something else, so that we might continue to be a blessing to this community too.

Many of us throw around the word blessing pretty easily. Does it mean a gift? something that we can touch or see? We might say "God bless you!" after someone sneezes, which is as good of an occasion as any other I guess, but kind of arbitrary.

Sure, our children are blessings. To have food - our daily bread - is a blessing. To give our offerings and help where we can is a blessing, and we are blessed when we do it. But **we don't earn blessings**. We are not more blessed when we give more or do more, or speak well, or study harder, or smile a lot, or break our bodies for the sake of one task or another. We are blessed because God *chooses* to bless us.

Rolf Jacobsen, at Luther seminary says that the scandal of the New Testament is that "Jesus is the infinite God incarnate, and fully human, who dies on the cross." In the Old Testament the "astonishing" scandal is that God chose Abraham and Sarah's descendants to bless the world. Why them? They were human too. Faithful, yes, but they were not perfect. It can be a tough thing to be chosen, to be called for a purpose. We see so many throughout scripture try not to be. Noah's story ends with scandal. Moses asks God to choose anyone else but him. Isaiah wasn't worthy, Jeremiah was too young. Mary was not married. Judas was a traitor. Peter was thick headed. Yet God chose them.

The command to "go" had a promise attached, "promises" actually, that God would make Abram a great nation, and make his name great, and give them the land to which they were sent. The only thing we can say for sure about Abram is that he obeyed. God told him where to go, and he went. And when he arrived at a place he worshipped the Lord. He built an altar, a place to connect with the divine and to pray and to receive God's blessings. But the blessing wasn't just for Abram and Sarai - (they went through a name change too - how about that?) Abraham and Sarah would be the ones through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. *Being a blessing* was for the sake of others, for everyone who would follow.

Jesus gives clear direction to the ones who would follow Him: Keep going. Keep doing what your Lord has taught. Love one another, share the Word with each other. Baptize and forgive sins in Jesus' name. Keep showing up. You are here to *be a blessing*.

I tried to make good on my promise to God, too, and to go where God would send me. I went to Dubuque, and we got snowed in our first Christmas. I came here, not quite knowing what to expect, but to meet the people, to love them and share in God's Word, to proclaim forgiveness of sins in Christ's name, teach according to scripture and the confessions, and even got to baptize a few. We've had conflict, and worry, and grief at times. We have grown in many ways, in connection with our community, in relationship with one another, and in faith as we show up to hear good news in this place. You have shared God's blessings and been a blessing to me, to my family, and to our neighbors.

But we're not done yet.

Because still you are called. Even though you don't know what will come next, you have been chosen, in Christ to *be a blessing*. From Abraham and Sarah, and all the families of God, through the prophets, and every nation, the Word does what it says it will. You were marked with the sign of the cross. Jesus who died and is risen continues to call you, to invite you to be disciples. To learn and teach, to listen and pray, to worship and to go where you are sent. To hear the Gospel and to share it as **the heart of Christ in the heart of the city**. You have been welcomed so you can welcome others. You have been forgiven so you can tell people you meet that *they* are forgiven - in grocery lines and in community meetings, at school and work, downtown and on the strip, and in

all the places you go. And if you don't know what to say, just smile and say, "Jesus loves you," and "God be with you." Because that's a promise too - Jesus is here, and the spirit of the Lord will continue to be with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.

Thanks be to God.