

“A BLESSING FOR THE EARTH”

Genesis 12:1-9

Second Sunday in Lent (Series A)

March 12, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Old Testament lesson for this Second Sunday in Lent comes from Genesis, chapter 12, verses 1 through 9. It is on page 8 of the pew Bible.

Today we hop in our way back Old Testament machine and visit Father Abraham. And we go so far back, that Father Abraham is neither a father, nor Abraham yet. He had no children, and his name was still Abram. He didn't have the "ha" yet. The year is about 2100 BC.

So please stand as you are able for the Old Testament lesson. From Genesis 12, we begin reading at verse 1.

^{12:1} 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. ² And 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. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴ 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. ⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ 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. ⁸ From there he moved 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 called upon the name of the LORD. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

This Old Testament lesson, whether you realize it or not, is one of the most important passages in all the Old Testament, even in all of Scripture. I passed up John 3:16 to preach about Abram today. Why? Well, because we don't get to John 3:16, without going through Abram.

Before God gave his only Son as an act of love for the world (John 3:16), he first made the promise to do so. And he established a line from Adam to Jesus, and in the middle of that line, is a guy named Abram. And, for whatever reason, God chose Abram as a recipient of his promise to bless the entire world. This blessing finally came when God gave his Son to be our Savior.

Now, I suppose God could have just sent his Son as our Savior without telling anyone beforehand that he was going to do it. But he told people like Abram about it, so that they

“A BLESSING FOR THE EARTH” (Genesis 12:1-9)

would know what God was doing, and so that we, looking back on it, might know that this was always God’s plan for our salvation.

Sometimes when we look at really ancient Scriptures, we think, *How does this apply to me?* We want the Bible to be relevant. And so we’re tempted, especially with the Old Testament, to draw some kind of moral instruction out of these texts, as if the point of the Abram story is to give us an example to follow. But I would suggest exercising some caution in following Abram or any other Old Testament figure as an example. If you follow them too closely, there’s a good chance you might end up in prison. Generally speaking, the so-called “heroes” of the Old Testament are some rather unsavory folks. If anything, they are usually an example of what *not* to do (1 Cor. 10:6).

So instead of giving us heroes to follow, the primary purpose of the Old Testament, and we could say this with the New Testament too, is to show us what God did to accomplish the salvation of the world. That’s the theme of the Bible from beginning to end. Last week we heard about how Adam and Eve lost paradise for us. That’s how the Bible starts. And it ends in Revelation with God’s people being brought into the paradise of his new creation. And the whole narrative of the Bible is about what God did to restore fallen humanity to his perfect paradise. So this morning we consider how Abram fits in to this story of our salvation. And when we look at Abram this way, we see that these ancient Scriptures really are extremely relevant for us.

So let’s talk about Abram.

Before God made a covenant with him, Abram was a nobody. At the end of Genesis 11, he’s mentioned in a genealogy, along with several other people. But since he has no children and his wife is barren, he doesn’t look like anything more than a footnote. You can’t be a significant person in a genealogy if you don’t have children. That’s just the way it works.

Now, the point of the genealogy is to trace some kind of family line. This genealogy has been running from Adam to Noah, now down to Abram, and it’s going to keep going for quite a while. The point of the genealogy is to show the family line of someone important. If we skip ahead to the New Testament, where we find the end of the line, we see that the important person is Jesus (Matt. 1:1-14; Luke 3:23-38). But we don’t even have to skip to the end to see that. We can go back to the very beginning of the line. We go back to Adam and Eve and the promise God made to them.

You might remember this if you were here last week. When they were tempted by the serpent and fell into sin, even before God expelled them from the Garden of Eden, he promised to send a champion—an offspring, or a descendent of Eve who would crush the head of that serpent. This was God’s first promise of a Savior.

So we see from the very beginning that the whole point of the genealogies in the Old Testament, is to trace the line from Adam and Eve down to the promised offspring. And this, again, is really the primary point of the Old Testament. Whenever we read the Old Testament, we are seeing the development of God’s plan of salvation. So we should be paying attention to this line that runs from Adam and Eve, all the way down to Jesus. And Abram happens to make his way into that line as a very significant character.

When he’s first mentioned, he looks like nothing more than a footnote. Since he has no children and his wife is barren, it looks like the genealogy will continue through one of his

“A BLESSING FOR THE EARTH” (Genesis 12:1-9)

brothers, and then, most likely, through his nephew Lot, going around Abram. No kids, no genealogy. That’s how it works.

But something interesting happens in Genesis 12. God doesn’t go around Abram. In this genealogy—this list of people and their children—God picks out an old man with no kids. He’s seventy-five years old. His wife is sixty-five and barren. But God decides he is going to keep the line going through Abram and his barren wife. The promise that was first given to Adam and Eve, is now given to Abram.

So let’s look at what God says to Abram. In Genesis 12 God established a covenant with Abram. This covenant consisted of seven promises. Some of them were big, and some of them were *really* big. We’ll look briefly at the first six and then spend a little more time on the seventh.

The first promise is, “I will make of you a great nation” (12:2). This is a pretty big promise to make, especially to a seventy-five year old man with no children and a sixty-five year old barren wife. But God made the promise, and if you keep reading through Genesis and into Exodus, you will see that God made it happen. An old man with no children and a barren wife became the father of a great nation. So God kept promise number one.

Second, God said, “I will bless you” (12:2). Maybe this means God will bless him financially, spiritually, or by giving him a family. Or maybe God means all of the above, because all of the above happened. If you keep reading through Genesis and look at the life of Abram, you will see that God did bless him in many ways. God kept promise number two.

Then God said, “I will make your name great” (12:2). That is, God promised to make Abram famous. Four thousand years later we are still talking about him and singing “Father Abraham.” So God did a pretty good job with this one. He kept promise number three.

Then the fourth promise begins to show, a little bit more, the reason God gave this covenant to Abram. God says he will do all these things, “so that you will *be* a blessing.” Here’s the thing: God loved Abram, and he blessed him, but God loves other people too. God blessed Abram so that he could bless other people through Abram. This happened in Abram’s day to his family and many of the people he came in contact with. But it also happens today. Abram is still a blessing to us. And we’ll talk more about that in promise number seven. So Abram became a blessing to many people. God kept promise number four.

The fifth and sixth promises go together: “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse” (12:3).

And this is a personal promise for Abram, not a political thing.

One of the places we see this fulfilled is in the story of a guy named Melchizedek, who blessed Abram and was very blessed himself (14:17-24).

And we see the curse side of it with Pharaoh (12:10-20) and a king by the name of Abimelech (20:1-18). Twice during Abram’s travels he came to places where he feared for his life. His wife Sarai—later named “Sarah”—was very beautiful. And Abram feared that someone would kill him and steal Sarai. So he deceived everyone and said she was his sister. So on two separate occasions both Pharaoh and Abimelech took Sarai and wanted to make her their wife. It was totally Abram’s fault, and he should have just been honest, but God cursed *Pharaoh* and *Abimelech* until they returned Sarai. God did this because he had big plans for Abram and Sarai.

“A BLESSING FOR THE EARTH” (Genesis 12:1-9)

It was part of God’s plan to keep them alive and together for a bit longer. God kept promises five and six because he had one more promise to keep.

So here’s the seventh promise: “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3). When we stop and think about this, we realize this is a really bold promise. Does the word *all* really mean “all”? Yes; it does. God is not exaggerating. God’s purpose for his covenant with Abram is to bless the entire world through him.

And notice again, this is not a political blessing. It is a spiritual thing. It’s not specifically the governments or nations of the world that receive the blessing, but the *families* or the *clans*. It’s all the people groups of the world. That’s what this word “families” means.

It’s “all the families of the earth.” Or a better translation might actually be, “all the families of the *ground*.” Now, I know that seems like kind of a fine distinction. What’s the difference between the earth and the ground? They’re kind of the same thing, right? But I want us to notice that this promise is specifically tied to the curse God pronounced on the ground when Adam and Eve fell into sin.

I’ll teach you a couple Hebrew words. But don’t worry; they’re actually pretty easy, and you might already know at least one of them. I think I’ve taught some of you these words before. The first Hebrew word is אָדָם (*adam*). And, as you might be able to guess, it means “man.” So, yeah, the first man, his name was just *Man*—or in Hebrew *Adam*. So that’s the first word, and the second word is very similar—אֲדָמָה (*adamah*)—so just like *adam*, but with an “ah” at the end of it—*adamah*. And this word means “ground.” This is easy to remember because God made the *adam* from the *adamah*. So Genesis 2:7 would read something like, “Then the LORD God formed the *adam* of dust from the *adamah* and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the *adam* became a living creature.” So the point is that man came from the ground. Or, *adam* came from the *adamah*.

And then, when Adam and Eve fell into sin, God cursed the ground—that is, the *adamah*—because of the *adam*. So God said to Adam,

“Cursed is the *adamah* because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life” (3:17).

And,

“By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
Till you return to the *adamah*,
for out of it you were taken;
For you are dust,
and to dust you shall return” (3:19).

The curse of the ground—or the *adamah*—is that work now becomes difficult. In order to prolong his life, man has to toil and labor. Before the fall into sin, the perfection of God’s creation made it easy for man to live. But now the ground itself is cursed. It makes life difficult. And, as if that’s not enough, at the end of life, the ground swallows man up again. After a lifetime of hard labor, our reward is that we return to the *adamah* from which we came.

“A BLESSING FOR THE EARTH” (Genesis 12:1-9)

That’s the curse of the ground. Man was formed from the dust of the ground. Then man sinned and the ground was cursed because of him. So the ground makes life difficult for us, and when we die we just become the dust of the ground again. That’s the curse of the ground.

But in God’s covenant with Abram, he promises to reverse this curse. He says, “And in you all the families of the *adamah* shall be blessed.” That is, “All the families of that *cursed ground* will be blessed in you.”

Now I hope we all see how relevant God’s covenant with Abram is for us, for it’s not just a promise to bless Abram, but it is the promise to bless all of us who suffer under this curse of the ground. For all of us who toil through life, only to turn back into dust when it’s all over, God’s promise to Abram is for us. God promised that he would do something about this problem of a painful life that always ends in death.

This is a continuation of the first promise God made in the Garden of Eden, to send an offspring of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent (3:15). So in Genesis 12, even though a few thousand years have gone by since that first promise, God reminds Abram and all of humanity that he has not forgotten his promise. He wants us to keep watching that promised genealogy from Adam to Abram to David and, finally, to Jesus.

At precisely the right time, God will send the promised offspring—his only Son—into the world. And as we watch the unfolding of the promise in the Old Testament, we see God laying the groundwork for his Son’s work. And we see God reminding his people, *Yes; the Savior is coming. He is going to crush the serpent’s head, just like I promised.*

This happened at the cross, when the Son of God bore the sin of the world and suffered the wrath of God upon that sin. This atonement for sin took away all the serpent’s power. No longer can he accuse the children of the ground of sin. All their sin has been paid for.

And what does this mean for the children of Abram—that is, for all those who believe in the promised offspring? It means we no longer live under the curse. God has blessed all the families of the cursed ground through the offspring that came through Abram’s line. The curse of the ground will be reversed.

Even though we still toil through life, and even though we still die and return to the dust, God has promised that dust is not the end. Because dust was not the end of his Son. Dust was not the end for Adam and Abram’s promised offspring. Life is the end. And so Jesus gives life to all of Abram’s offspring—whatever nation or family they may belong to. The promise is that the cursed ground cannot hold you. Just as Jesus rose from the dead and lives and reigns for all eternity, so he will raise you—child of Abram—to live and reign with him in his blessed kingdom for all eternity, where the ground is not cursed.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.