

“Destination Unknown”
Rev. Curtis J. Preston

Lent 2a
Genesis 12:1-4a

[About 8 years ago] Danielle and I were sitting the deck of Houlihan’s Restaurant in Sausalito overlooking the San Francisco Bay on the day that the trajectory of our life together changed forever. Danielle had been offered a full-time position at a pretty good salary working for the Development Office of our alma mater, Pacific University outside Portland Oregon. I had applied and been accepted to the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley to pursue my Master’s in Divinity, and perhaps someday become a minister. We’d made good friends and had family in the Portland area. It was a difficult decision. Stay with known. Stay with the safe. Stay with the support network we’d developed, or move to a new city where we knew no one, where we had really no idea what would become of this calling to ministry. Obviously you know which decision we made, but sitting on that deck sipping a cup of coffee we really had no idea which way we should go. I imagine that all of us have moments like that, those moments and decisions where the forks in life’s road split so widely that we can never go back and can only imagine what might have been.

Today’s lesson details one such moment in the life of a pivotal biblical character. Additionally, this passage acts as a sort of hinge text within the book of Genesis. The first 11 and a half chapters in Genesis tell the story of God’s relationship with humanity on a kind of global level, which is why it is referred to as the universal history by some scholars. It is in these chapters that we get the creation narratives, the story of the garden of Eden, Cain’s murder of Abel, Noah and the flood, and then God’s covenant with Noah to never again destroy the earth, and the tower of Babel. If you stopped reading Genesis after the first 11 chapters, you’d have the distinct feeling that things weren’t really working out so great between God and the people God created. But at chapter twelve, the story turns to Abraham, or Abram as he is known at this point in the story. If you are familiar with Google earth, you can imagine the earth turning slowly on your screen as it then zooms in on a particular location. In this case, to a small town somewhere outside modern day Bagdad, hovering somewhere above the head of Abram. We know almost nothing about Abram, except for the names of his father, his brothers and their wives, and we learn that Abram’s wife Sarai is barren. We know nothing of his trade or his character, nothing of his faith or his actions up to this point. Abram is no one special. Joe Blow. John Doe. Anybody and nobody.

And then, chapter twelve begins, “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.’” It is from this point forward that history changes—forever. Not just the story of Abram and his descendants—though certainly that, not only the rest of the book of Genesis, though certainly that, not only the first five books of the Bible, but certainly that, but some would argue the entirety of both the Old and New Testaments get worked in response to what happens here in chapter twelve. Let’s take it a step further, if your willing. Abraham is the Great Patriarch, not only of Judaism and

there for Christianity, but he is also the father through Hagar, of Ishmael whose line eventually leads to Mohammed and the creation of Islam. Three of the world's biggest religions trace their roots back to Abram. Much of what we see happening today in Gaza and the West Bank can be traced back to this very moment in scripture. I once saw a Palestinian storyteller do a show called, "the land twice promised" in which she related the stories of modern day Israelis and modern day Palestinians back to this one moment. See what I mean about how this passage affects history forever.

So here we have this anybody/nobody named Abram, married to a barren woman named Sarai. And out of the blue God speaks to Abram and asks him to begin a new life. And not just a sort of new life, a completely new life. All previous attachments are to be severed—country, clan and home—all gone. As one married to a woman who cannot have children, Abram already understands himself to be a man without a future. So now, God is asking him to give up the entirety of his past as well, to abandon his identity, his rightful place as the first born male, he's supposed to give it all up. For what?

For blessing and for relationship with God. Specifically, God says to Abram, "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. I 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." Now if I'm Abram, I'd be wondering to myself, "how exactly are you going to pull this off. I don't know you. We don't have a relationship. Upon what basis should I trust you? You mean to tell me that if I leave everything I've ever known, all that which gives me identity and purpose—my country, my clan and my home, you will take me and my barren wife under your care and make of us a great nation? You don't mind if I ask for some indication of your past performance or check a few references do you?"

This of course, isn't what Abram says. In fact, Abram says nothing at all. If you break down this short passage a little bit, two words seem to get repeated an awful lot. "I" and "bless" Each show up five times in this short passage. I will show you, I will make of you, I will bless you so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those that bless you, those that curse you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. In short it sounds like "God blesses."

At the beginning of Lent this year, on Fat Tuesday, I made a decision this year that I was going to focus on two things this year for Lent: Gratitude and Trust. So often I think we get bogged down in thinking that Lent is about sin and suffering and denial. And it isn't that those things are relevant and important, but this year perhaps it was because I was just coming of my sabbatical, but I really wanted to make space in my life for gratitude and trust. I decided that all of my focus scriptures and all of my Lenten fasting would be focused on these two ideas. One of my minister friends said recently, "The good news of the Gospel is meant to free us, not just of our sin, but of all of our fears."—How many times to when reading scripture do we hear the words "do not be afraid?" and yet, how many of our decisions to we make based on fear?

God blesses. Amen? We've just had a baptism this morning. At the center of our understandings of baptism are the ideas of blessing, of gratitude and of trust. We give thanks to God for the gift of our children and for the gift of the Holy Spirit. We make promises and trust God to help us keep those promises. Baptism, which is so central to our faith as Christians is grounded in the blessings of God. Now if the text ended here, then our sermon could end here for in and of itself, this notion of God being a "blesser", first and foremost, that would make a nice sermon. But the text actually doesn't stop with God's promised blessing of Abram. No, just before Abram heads out, we hear God promise one last thing, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

It appears from this passage, if not from the beginning of Genesis, then at least since God's call to Abram, God's great endeavor it seems, is to form a people who will be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. To form a people who will be a blessing—a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. The promise is that all peoples, not just "these people" can share in the powers of blessing. As followers of Jesus, as inheritors of the promise which God made to Abram, we know blessings. We know such an abundance of blessings, here in our families, here in our church, here in this town, here in this country, we know so many blessings. Are we willing to carry those blessings to all the people earth? Not just the people who live near us, not just the people who look like us, not just the people who love like us, not just the people who live like us. I will bless you so that you will be a blessing, God tells Abram, in you all the earth shall be blessed. If God can take an anybody/nobody like Abram and turn him into to Abraham, the father of many great nations, what then can that same God do with us? Amen.